English Learning: Pedagogical Discourses, Challenges, and Prospectives

Adriana Carolina Torres Escobar

Faculty of Education, Universidad Santo Tomás, Bogotá, 110111, Colombia

Received November 29, 2021; Revised January 7, 2022; Accepted February 8, 2022

Abstract This research examined the discursive construction of pedagogical concepts of English teachers and the Ministry of Education in Colombia about the learning process of this language. The study addressed this issue by adopting a social and critical approach to the qualitative paradigm. It applied the Critical Discourse Analysis framework and revealed that the discourses do not promote an education that strengthens interculturality, critical thinking and diversity, which are pivotal components to attain social equity. On the contrary, the discourses divert the social role of education to a purely linguistic approach. In addition, the discourses portray culture's meaning as folkloric and tourist, not revealing the positive and negative realities that have impacted different social groups. Hence, this investigation suggests changing the concept of learning English from a rigid and traditional perspective to an enriching experience that opens students’ minds to linguistic aspects and cultures, social realities, and diversity. For this reason, it proposes English learning through a critical approach, connecting worldwide social realities with interculturality.

Keywords Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Thinking, Culture, Diversity, Interculturality, Social Realities

1. Introduction

Specifically, textbooks, lesson plans, and pedagogical approaches from education leaders are rich sources of information on how the learning process is conceived and practiced [1]. These components are a significant part of the curriculum and represent educators' aims. Additionally, curricula and lesson planning give teachers a direction that guides their actions in the classroom and has effects on the students [2]. The research made a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of documents of English teachers and Colombia’s Ministry of Education. These documents are crucial in educational research because they represent the planned, legitimate, and naturalized route to follow – according to those who exert power – located at the intersection between students and the macro forces of education, society, culture, and politics [3].

Furthermore, the discourses are not neutral: their content is controversial and reflects the asymmetries in power and the taken-for-granted beliefs of cultures [4]. Social actors use speeches to justify behavior patterns and legitimize social practices and cultural values. Consequently, they explain their arguments, defending their "authority" and "expertise" on the topic. They also employ explicit and implicit messages, emotions, rationality, facial expressions, and voice tones to influence, convince and control masses [5]. They intend to perpetuate, introduce or reaffirm ideologies and traditions within the social world. How languages have been shared, retained, or imposed in education has played an essential role in creating power inequalities in society. Students relate to the world and build relationships based on the models they have experienced in their interactions inside and outside the classroom [6].

The objective of this qualitative study consisted of evaluating through the CDA the treatment assigned to
diversity, interculturality, critical thinking, and social realities in the discourses produced by teachers and Colombia’s Ministry of Education about English learning. The research questions were: (a) how is English teaching conceptualized in educational discourse (by English teachers and the Ministry of Education)? (b) what is the approach of the discourses towards diversity, interculturality, critical thinking, and social realities? This article presents the methodology applied and the description of the documents on which the CDA was carried out. Next, it shows the results and their discussion, first, concerning the learning documents made by teachers of the official sector of Colombia; secondly, the analysis of two official documents: Teacher’s Guide 1 “Way to go,” and the text English, please. Teacher’s Guide 2, in third place. Finally, the paper proposes a pedagogical plan for teaching English and states the study’s conclusions.

2. Materials and Methods

The research applied a qualitative paradigm. Data were analyzed through description, explanation, and interpretation with a critical stance. The study made the CDA of official documents and teachers’ productions related to the teaching of English in Colombia. The CDA conceives that language is never value-free because it is a social and political practice [7] and the catalyst of asymmetric power relations [8]. Additionally, oral and written discourses reveal and reproduce social power abuse, dominance, racism, inequalities, and resistance [9].

The research analyzed discourses made by English teachers and the Ministry of Education regarding the teaching of this language. There were selected five learning documents from English teachers (Table 1). Concerning the official documents published by the Ministry of Education, the study examined Teacher’s Guide 1, “Way to go,” and the English, please. Teacher’s Guide 2 and online pedagogical resources suggested by this organism to sharpen students’ English language practice.

| Codification | Title | Kind of document |
|--------------|-------|------------------|
| DOC1         | Identifying classroom objects [10] | Activity plan |
| DOC2         | Describing People. [11] | Activity plan |
| DOC3         | Am I a healthy person? [12] | Activity plan |
| DOC4         | My people (people I admire). [13] | Lesson plan |
| DOC5         | Saving Water. [14] | Task plan |

The researcher filled three checklists to examine the explicit characteristics concerning the categories: interculturality, critical thinking, and diversity. They were designed taking into account the Fairclough framework to make the CDA [15]. Remarkably, the three-dimensional model of Flairclough [16] was adapted to analyze how the discourses dealt with the categories, including verbal and extralinguistic components. In order to enhance the reliability, three experts evaluated the materials through checklists that included the categories and their relation to textual, intertextual, and contextual dimensions. Once these elements were considered and the relevant data were collected, the information was coded on a computer using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version number 2.0. Finally, the data were tabulated according to the purposes of the study.

3. Discussion and Results

3.1. Learning Documents Made by English Teachers

Learning documents denote an asymmetric power relationship, in which students become receptive and passive beings. This is evidenced by the fact that the speeches do not incite critical thinking or inference processes. Instead, these discourses implicitly conceptualize that the students’ languages, cultures, and knowledge are not relevant in their learning process. For example, the speeches emphasize that students search the meaning of all unknown words of readings to which they are exposed since, if they do not do so, they could deprive themselves of understanding the texts. For this reason, DOC1 and DOC5 place great emphasis on vocabulary and ask students to use their dictionaries to review words they do not know instead of promoting inference and discovering the texts’ sense according to the context and situations.

On the other hand, DOC2 has “adjectives” as its core topic, and its main objective is to determine if students learn vocabulary related to classroom objects. Accordingly, students in DOC2 are asked to "be able to describe characteristics of people, animals or objects.” Thus, an essential assessment component requires students to design a crossword puzzle related to new words. Also, during the evaluation, in the same discourse, it is stated that "the teacher will ask the students to work in pairs and run fast to touch the object that is named aloud.”

On the other hand, the possibility for students to develop their creativity is restricted. There is no interest in preparing the documents’ objectives to help learners be analytical, creative, and proactive, which reduces their possibilities of learning and practicing strategies to exercising their freedom of thinking in social interactions. For instance, in DOC3, the exact words that students must learn at the end of class are explicitly determined, not allowing them to explore additional topics. Then, the opportunity to connect the lesson with current social issues is lost. Therefore, what is relevant for this document is that students memorize words, namely: "eat junk food, rest, sleep less than 6 hours, exercise, drink water, eat fruits and vegetables, skip breakfast, wear uncomfortable shoes,
drink soft drinks, eat late at night, drinking water, sedentary lifestyle”.

It is also identified that none of the documents develop issues related to culture and society. This fact denies the prospect for students to explore their realities and those of other individuals at the national and international levels. The documents do not stimulate that students receive training to live rationally, reasonably, and committed to social causes. It is a strategy to perpetuate the current social structure that favors some and is detrimental to traditionally "minority" communities with low economic and social power. This kind of education does not train students to make decisions through reflection, analysis, and argumentation. Hence, they develop weak problem-solving skills and are easily misled with false information and manipulation.

The ACD revealed that the learning activities from the discourses were planned exclusively for the classroom, and students cannot appreciate the English language in authentic contexts. Consequently, the activities place greater emphasis on grammatical correctness than on the social functions of the communication. In other words, the language activities in the texts make students learn grammar and spelling rules as it is in traditional language teaching approaches. They also promote grammatical correctness and retention of as many words as possible without boosting natural and meaningful communication. The activities do not enhance real-life language practice and learners’ interaction. In fact, group work, role-plays, and problem-solving tasks focus on using vocabulary and grammar in artificial situations but do not look for understanding and problematizing social issues.

In the education promoted by English teachers, students learn a specific command of the language through repetitive and rote exercises that do not expose them to the natural English language used in everyday life by native speakers. Instead, the English class focuses on the formal aspects of the language. Thus, its main activities consist of the students repeating words orally to achieve an "optimal" pronunciation and accurately using the verb tenses (Table 2).

**Table 2.** High emphasis on pronunciation and grammar in the learning documents made by English teachers

| Elements | Document excerpts on each topic |
|----------|---------------------------------|
| **Pronunciation** | Excerpts in DOC1: "The teacher repeats each word, and the students repeat the pronunciation. In addition, the teacher sometimes asks the students for the pronunciation of a word while the rest of the class pays attention and corrects mistakes when necessary". "The students practice the pronunciation of the objects in the classroom. They will do it in three moments". "The teacher helps students when they have trouble identifying the word that matches the proper pronunciation or correcting spelling mistakes." "I can identify the objects in the classroom with their precise pronunciation and written form." Excerpts in DOC3: "The teacher supervises the students’ work and helps them with pronunciation and grammar problems." "The teacher models and helps the students to pronounce the sentences correctly." |
| **Grammar** | Excerpts in DOC1: "I work on present simple and indefinite articles.” Excerpts in DOC2: "The teacher provides explanations and practices on the use and differences regarding the verbs” to be “and” to have.” "The evaluation takes place in pairs. (The students tell their classmates if they have made correct or incorrect sentences). Then, the teacher provides feedback on sentences, particularly on grammatical structure and spelling”. "Students work on adjectives and the verbs to be and have.” Excerpts in DOC3: "The teacher supervises the students’ work and helps them with pronunciation and grammar problems." "Present simple” Excerpt in DOC4: "Present simple.” Excerpt in DOC5: "Verb to be." |
As demonstrated, the discourses from English teachers focus on linguistic and lexical aspects. On the other hand, DOC3 and DOC5 partially open the possibility of working on issues that affect life within the social and cultural spheres. For example, even if in DOC3 students must reflect on healthy habits, its main objective is to use six phrases related to sports and gastronomic traditions. Apart from this, the activity does not require students to argue and learn more about other cultures, research healthy or unhealthy habits in different parts of the world, or discuss controversial medical treatments.

Alternatively, DOC5 develops relevant activities because it invites students to research, be creative and share ideas about current topics:

- Share ideas on saving water and taking care of the planet.
- Have a day in the school year to create a water-saving awareness campaign.
- Create many posters and hang them on the school walls to raise awareness about saving water and caring for the planet.
- Create sketches based on student posters and present them to parents at the end of the school year.
- Raise awareness among students and their families to save water, protect natural resources and preserve the planet.

However, no time is set aside for students to investigate, for instance, alternatives to protect the environment, the interest behind big industries that contaminate, the economic interests, and resources' scarcity, or the repercussions of the decisions of rich countries for the environment.

3.2. Curriculum by the Ministry of Education

The pedagogical approaches proposed by the Ministry of Education teach culture from a limited and traditional viewpoint. Implicitly, these actors define culture as a set of patterns of human behavior that include symbols, languages, traditions, beliefs, and values shared by members of a social group. Therefore, in these discourses, the way of referring to culture is done through cultural representations (music, parties, customs) without encouraging the study of other deeper social aspects. Similarly, in curricular guidelines designed by the Ministry of Education, it is common to find objectives that refer to the description of celebrations and parties, assigning culture a purely folkloric meaning. For instance: "identifying sentences and expressions related to the characteristics of people and celebrations" and "exchanging information about Colombian festivals" [17]. Again, this aspect segregates and shows bias against non-westernized communities.

3.3. Teacher's Guide 1 “Way to go” and English, Please. Teacher's Guide 2

On the other hand, the discursive strategy of "concealment" consists of hiding situations that are not convenient to show according to the interests of the dominant groups. This strategy sharpens the relationship between the powerful and the dominated; issues related to the social problems faced by the population in Colombia and other parts of the world are omitted as if they were not essential or the injustices they suffer were natural or biological. For this reason, neither the Teacher's Guide 1 “Way to go” nor the English, please. Teacher's Guide 2 in the photographs related to national and international territories show the global realities experienced by the diversity of populations that occupy these spaces, since culture's meaning, according to these discourses, solely have a tourist and gastronomic value. Then, marginalization and negative social situations are not shown in any images and are not described (Figure 1 and 2). Physical disabilities, injustices, and precarious socioeconomic levels are hidden and are not discussed in the discourses. Additionally, topics such as gender identities, religions, social inequalities, discrimination, violence, sexism, and racism are not included in the readings, videos, and tasks.
In the contemporary environment, which is diverse, cultural contact can generate a humanistic dialogue that could enrich all participants, which is essential in today’s globalized and plural world. Moreover, knowing another language fosters a greater awareness of cultural diversity because people with foreign language skills more easily appreciate the values and ways of other people’s life. Nevertheless, this is not a priority in the discourses analyzed since culture is also superficially defined from a state of continuous celebration as if culture were not related to historical, political, socioeconomic, and educational aspects.

Through the CDA, the research identified that the teaching of English often adopts a traditional focus. The Ministry of Education assigns a primarily grammatical and lexical approach to the students’ production and learning, not considering the humanistic dimension in education. As a result, it is common for students to be encouraged to develop the formal elements of the language without digging into its essences, cultures, and social realities. In fact, the Ministry of Education proposes learning lists of words so that students memorize them according to their level: beginner, intermediate, or advanced (Figure 3). This approach to learning vocabulary is decontextualized, as it adopts an isolated word practice. Indeed, memorizing long vocabulary lists without making sense of them within the interaction is an ineffective, mechanical, and tedious activity. Achieving the goal of learning hundreds of words does not guarantee that students understand their meanings, linguistic function, and social purpose. Without that mastery, students are not trained to build coherent and cohesive sentences to interact spontaneously and accurately with other people in the foreign language. In addition, centering learning in word lists slows down students’ learning because thinking and communicating in a foreign language is not accomplished by reciting single words, spelling-correct writing, or translation. Learning languages does not consist of memorizing sets of words. Instead, to be meaningful and practical, languages must fulfill communicative, critical, and transformative purposes.
On the other hand, the Ministry of Education recommends games to memorize words without expressing ideas (Figure 4). For example, games such as hangman, charades through pictures, and memory games. This type of learning is not worthy for students because they are not developing higher-order thinking skills even if they learn vocabulary. These games encourage students to learn as many words as possible in this foreign language without implying a process of discussing ideas. Indeed, isolated, closed, quantifiable, and explicit acquisitions are privileged. Confronting these exercises with Bloom's taxonomy, they only develop the lower stages of thought, which leads to neglecting the more complex skills that will serve them in life.

Conversely, grammar is conceived from a traditional approach. The Ministry of Education proposes web pages with activities such as filling in spaces that require students to choose the appropriate grammatical category to complete sentences [24]. Those tasks cannot be considered as language production because the students only have to apply the grammatical rules or know the meanings of words to complete sentences or texts that do not impact them and have no direct relationship with their life, context, country, and the world since they are artificial sentences explicitly made to practice the language. Instead of motivating students, these exercises get them stuck in the world of grammar sheets and train them to nitpick each grammar nuance even when they do not know the sense of the sentences or probably will not use them spontaneously when they communicate in English.

Thus, these games do not allow learners to see words in context to figure out how to use them and be nimble while using the language in everyday communication. In short, these games do not train students to understand the gist of conversations, readings, and videos. On the contrary, they make learners dependent on looking for the exact meaning of words to understand the messages.

The Ministry of Education implicitly defines English learning as the reproduction of lists of fragmented words or as a mere memory exercise. Words constitute a building block of language, and they must be learned. Nonetheless, if students learn words by rote, they quickly get stuck in word lists that hinder them from unlocking their social abilities and their potential to be creative with language, taking into account pragmatic and sociolinguistic elements.

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3.4. Research's Pedagogical Proposal: Bringing the Real World to the English class

Table 3. Advantages of Authentic Learning Activities

| Authentic Learning Activities: bringing the real world to the classroom | Artificial Learning Activities: based on the structure and functionality of the language |
|---|---|
| Teachers share real social problems with authentic oral or written documents, previously selected according to the age and language level of the students. | Students do not discuss social problems and do not engage with them. Instead, the emphasis of the class is on grammar and vocabulary. |
| The readings, videos, documents, and exercises have a direct relationship with the social reality of the students and the world. As a result, learning and solving problems impact their social sphere and real life. | The core of the class is to strengthen structures. Hence, they have low relevance for the contexts of the students and the world. |
| Students learn individually and in groups. They use language to socialize their ideas, knowledge about the world, and feasible solutions to solve social problems. | Students learn alone. If they solve exercises with their classmates, the purpose is to identify mistakes in their peers' writing or oral production, but not on the interaction and socialization of ideas and arguments. |

Native speakers do not complete texts or memorize lists of words to communicate in their mother language in everyday life. Besides, they do not read or watch videos to answer referential questions. Instead, they are exposed to oral or written texts to interact with others, gather information in multiple areas of interest, delve into different topics, update, entertain, share ideas, listen to others or solve problems in various contexts such as their workplace, social interactions, or academic scenarios. As a result, this pedagogical proposal recommends choosing authentic texts and relevant social activities for students since their advantages outweigh the weaknesses of documents and activities far removed from social contexts (Table 3).

When performing the CDA of the activities suggested by the Ministry of Education, the current investigation identified drawbacks of proposing artificial and repetitive exercises in the learning process. Through these exercises, English classes' purposes become oblivious to the students' interests and needs in contexts outside the classroom and unhelpful to endure multiple situations exercising their citizenship. For this reason, the research recommends bringing the real world to the lessons. Students should have the opportunity to learn languages while strengthening their critical thinking skills, communicating ideas, getting closer to other cultures, and accessing the authentic use of English (Figure 5). This way, they would learn English integrally from a critical, dialogical, and contextualized outlook.

Atomistic viewpoints reproduce the concept that teaching English consists of presenting detailed grammatical structures, memorizing vocabulary, and repeating sound patterns. In contrast, this research proposal
is holistic and comprehensive because students learn the formal elements of the English language while learning meaningful content through authentic texts. It intends that their learning process is motivating, engaging, realistic, and valuable for their lives. At the same time, students merge with language doing research, taking notes, summarizing information, listening for the gist and details while enriching elementary and complex elements of grammar and vocabulary. In this kind of learning, they can also improve their listening skills -through the exposure of audios and videos-, strengthen their reading skills -when they do research or entertain with a topic-, practice their writing skills -presenting their reactions through comments or essays-, and practice oral skills, pronunciation, and fluency -when they ask questions or share points of view and arguments-. As a result, students have extended opportunities to learn and use English in different scenarios.

This research proposes that the Ministry of Education and the English teachers that participated in the research define languages as structures and words that must be memorized through repetition and text filling. They also have a narrow concept of culture, referring to it and treating it as free days, celebrations, gastronomy, and traditional clothing.

Language and culture are directly attached to human life because they regulate human interaction in society. Hence, while learning languages, it is crucial to examine their relationships and recognize that they are not stable, limited, and homogeneous. Therefore, language learners must become participants in the ongoing processes of cultural change as they learn how to communicate and constructively criticize other voices to build a more equitable society.

This research intends to demystify the fossilized conception given to culture. It can be done by exposing students to authentic texts, that is to say, materials not written for academic purposes such as series, debates, interviews, magazines, news, and newspapers. Moreover, teachers should guide students to problematize the topics and link them with real-life and different world situations. That way, it is intended that students have the opportunity to open their minds, explore the world, and express freely and creatively on worldwide issues. Thus, they will not only pursue the goal of dominating a language linguistically, but they will be able to use languages to learn and reflect about real life and social issues, increase their awareness about the worlds' problematics and use it inside and outside the classroom from a mature, realistic and critical stance.

This study recommends that the main aim of English teaching be that students use the language to deepen their knowledge of different cultures and social realities, not remaining in the stage of understanding texts and sounds but going beyond that until reaching a level of analysis evaluation and creation. It is paramount that English classes are chances for students to open up to the world, eliminate stereotypes against cultures and communities, build their own opinions, share their points of view, and solve different problems. This research conceives that languages are social and they should not be learned or taught in isolation; instead, classes should pursue to engage students with reality in order to apply their knowledge and skills for achieving fair and critical communication and a more unprejudiced and peaceful society, which are some of the ultimate goals of learning a language.

In this same sense, the research proposes that the definition of learning a language changes from a limited conception of repeating lexemes and phonemes to an education that makes students step outside their comfort zone and open to multiple cultures from a critical and social posture. Thus, learning languages can be an experience in which learners communicate with the real world. Therefore, the Ministry of Education, schools, and teachers should employ a sociocritical approach to English learning. That way, students develop communicative and linguistic competencies and simultaneously nurture a solid position about their lives and others' realities. Through that, they minimize prejudices against others, create a more open-mindedness, and become agents of change, socializing with people around them with diverse perspectives, arguments, and realities about social problematics.

Furthermore, it is worthy to assist students in developing cognitive skills demanded by their social life as citizens. Introducing critical thinking in the English class is essential to helping students analyze crises from different angles, make reasonable decisions, understand others, respect differences, and solve problems. The research advises that English classes favor that students use the knowledge of their mother tongue and culture - and others they know - to establish relationships between them and the English language and related cultures. The dialogue of linguistic, social, and cultural reflections seeks to be a strategy that does not force students to give up their knowledge or identities. On the contrary, it makes them active in their learning process and opens spaces to communicate, establish relationships, and extrapolate to other languages, cultures, contexts, realities, and social
relations. In this way, students improve their understanding, interpretation, and analytical skills, strengthening their autonomy. Exclusively concentrating on linguistic issues hamper mutual understanding. In contrast, English teaching should promote a flexible education while students connect their base language and sociocultural knowledge with foreign languages, lifestyles, and cultures. Learning other languages should be a reciprocal understanding process in which people are willing to negotiate meanings, understand others, and respectfully share their opinions, arguments, cultures, and cosmovisions.

The strategies mentioned in this research seek to foster the ability of students to become citizens able to communicate with the world's diversity and expand the possibilities to participate in reciprocal cooperation. Despite the linguistic and sociocultural differences, languages share linguistic and cultural characteristics. Then, students get receptive to learning when they discover the convergences and divergences from a reflective and critical position. Besides, differences or discoveries are no barriers to communication but opportunities to learn and understand other ways of life and develop social empathy. Learning languages should be a path for students to become more responsible and aware individuals who do not easily manipulate or judge people without arguments.

4. Conclusions

After gauging the discourses produced by English Teachers and Colombia's Ministry of Education, the research concludes that both impose an education with little connection to the students, the local and global realities. Their proposals relegate language learning to merely formal aspects because, according to these actors, the main goal is to train students to communicate accurately and understand the language. Indeed, there is a predominant semantic and grammatical emphasis in the practice of the English language. The discourses do not defend the importance of helping students achieve superior thinking levels to analyze beyond the superficiality of the messages, build coherent arguments, and provide sound reasoning. On the other hand, language's social and intercultural aspects are ignored or studied shallowly.

There is the preeminence of traditional teaching methods in the discourses. Consequently, there is a lack of active learning and critical approaches to analyzing cultures, identities, and social problems. Moreover, this kind of education does not prepare students to use English to defend opinions, advocate for social justice, or unmask biases using facts and solid arguments.

This research suggests that learning languages effectively should connect their linguistic elements with diverse realities and contexts locally and worldwide because languages are paramount in constructing societies. The purpose is that students have a productive and significant experience that helps them develop as citizens who actively and rationally contribute to the solution of social problems through their knowledge about the world, relatable ideas, and critical thinking skills.

Accordingly, this study recommends that students meaningfully enrich their vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, not limiting the language to its formal aspects. In pursuing this objective, educators should teach languages thoughtfully from an analytical and critical outlook because languages carry deep meanings and references related to the diversity of people, cultures, ideologies, and social situations. This process is crucial to make students learn languages exposing them to multiple standpoints to boost their interest and skills to play transformative roles in combating inequalities and sociocultural stigmas.

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