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# Critical Pedagogy and L2 Education in the Global South

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Colombia, as other Latin American countries, has not been indifferent to the power of English as the language of business, international communication and academia. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a great push in the country to promote the teaching of English: language policies have been formulated, ideal levels of proficiency have been established (based on a framework initially designed for European countries), and a national English curriculum for all grade levels has been distributed among schools. The status English has gained competes with that of other foreign languages and more evidently with heritage languages.

The field of L2 education in Colombia is experiencing a tension between neoliberal interests of L2 education to support social mobility and the nation's economic growth and political power (with a focus on linguistic and communicative competence), and alternative academic agendas grounded on the analysis of the influence of social, cultural, and economic factors on L2 teaching and learning, and on learners' identities.

In this article, I use the example of an analysis of L2 education, from a critical pedagogy standpoint, using a Latin American university as a context to depict such a contrast. This University is a place where there is confluence of diverse languages that have different social statuses: English as *lingua franca*, European and Asian foreign languages, and heritage languages. I argue that critical pedagogy, partly inspired in the work from intellectuals from the Hemispheric South, serves as a framework to guide analyses of power in the relationship between these languages and L1, and the effect of such relations of power on learners' identities. Also, I contend that by using critical pedagogy in this context, it becomes transformed, nurtured, as it overlaps and dialogues with other knowledges developed in the Hemispheric South.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the middle of protests in 2019 in Colombia, my country, an undergraduate student from my university wearing a mask died with the explosion of domestic bombs he was carrying in his backpack when he accidentally fell on his back. This terrible incident was caught on video with a passerby's cell phone camera right in front of the university's main entrance and went viral. There were all kinds of reactions in the media and the community ranging from "he deserved it" to "the government is to blame for his death." To some, he became a martyr in the student movement that defends public higher education; certainly, within the university's community, there has been no agreement on whether his and her fellow masked companions' actions should be condemned or glorified. One certainty is that this terrible incident should not happen in educational settings; it also reminds us that educational institutions and educators should be doing more to foster a critical and political consciousness that engenders actions in favor of education and the community's wellbeing for social and political transformation.

During a student and teacher meeting in the School of Languages where I work, we discussed the events that had recently taken place on our campus and around the country. Thousands of Colombians had taken to the streets as part of a collective dissatisfaction with the

current government and its take on inequality, pensions, and funding of higher education as well as President Duque's slow implementation of the Peace Agreements signed during the administration of the previous President Santos administration. There were marches, curfews, tear gas, and suspension of academic activities in the main campus. I asked what we could do in the current state of political discontent. It was amazing to see the students' response: some student leaders mentioned that they expected their teachers to participate in the rallies and other activities to express their views, sentiments, and positions. They also asked them to engage in dialogue with students about what was going on in our country and the continent, and the reasons why people were protesting on the streets, as part of course content. I also encouraged my colleagues to not remain indifferent in face of the current social and political climate: language education is the perfect context to foster critical consciousness around current topics that ideally leads to praxis. In the current state of affairs, today more than ever, we language educators and language teacher educators need to aim to for the betterment of our societies through critical action. In this enterprise, I believe critical pedagogy is an essential framework to use as a starting point.

This paper views critical pedagogy as a lens to read the world, to problematize the school as a site of both struggle and resistance; it is a pedagogy that provides a set of theoretical tools to empower educators to unveil the power relations that take place in schools and society at large and is a pedagogy of possibility and hope (Giroux, 2011). In this article I discuss the currency and relevance of critical pedagogy in second language (L2) education. I place this discussion in the particular context of an "expanding circle" country like Colombia (see Kachru, 1985): Colombia is a very socially and politically complex context where educational policies that promote bilingualism prevail in spite of the country's great cultural and linguistic diversity. I argue that, in this context, critical pedagogy is still a tool to *empower* educators, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, *a site of struggle*, as this framework is constantly nourished and contested by other perspectives.

To do so, I will first briefly discuss the context of language teaching and critical pedagogy in Colombia. Then, I will review central concepts and arguments within critical pedagogy that are relevant to this discussion, and I will review critiques that I find can expand and continue the dialogue among critical pedagogy scholars.

## CONTEXT

Colombia, as other Latin American countries, has not been indifferent to the power of English as the language of business, international communication and academia. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a great push in the country to promote the teaching of English as a strategy to enhance the growth of national economic and political development (Gómez-Sará, 2017). The Ministerio de Educación Nacional has formulated language policies, established ideal levels of proficiency based on the European Framework of Reference for Languages, formerly designed for European countries (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006), and *suggested* and distributed a national English curriculum for all grade levels among schools (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016). Thus, the status English has gained at "University A" (UA), the name I will use to for the institution that serves as the context of my discussion, competes with that of other foreign languages and more prominently, with heritage languages.

The *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo*, or National Bilingualism Program (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2018), is the current name of the bilingualism policy put forth by the government for decades now (with names that have changed over time), which has been

implemented through various initiatives; the different versions of the program include curriculum guidelines, proficiency standards, professional development programs for in-service teachers, a native-English volunteer program, among others. Numerous Colombian scholars (e.g. Bonilla-Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Correa & Usma-Wilches, 2013; Correa & González, 2016; Guerrero-Nieto, 2008; Truscot-de-Mejía, 2011; Usma-Wilches, 2009; just to name a few) have been very critical of this program and the discourses that position English as the key for equity in the country.

Recently, the implementation of the National Bilingualism Program has coincided with great advances in the negotiations between the government and several subversive groups to achieve a “stable and lasting peace” (Hurie, 2018, p. 335). The United States has financed military efforts and participated in political issues as an effort to expand its access to the Colombian markets and give ground to political interests. Hurie (2018) argues that the interference of the United States along with other English as L1-speaking European countries is not limited to the political-military sphere; English education constitutes one of the multiple battlefields. Giroux (2011) acknowledged the power of neoliberal discourses and practices in education when he stated “it is not surprising that education in many parts of the world is held hostage to political and economic forces that wish to convert educational institutions into corporate establishments defined by a profit-oriented identity and mission” (p.12).

Hurie (2018) argues that the discourses of English as an instrument to build peace align with the socio-historical moment of the country. He calls this discourse “English for peace”, which he describes as the official speech that tries to justify the teaching of English for its supposed “pacifying” role. I concur with Hurie in that there is no direct relationship between the marketing of English teaching and peace-building; rather, it works as a strategy of cultural domination. I argue, however, that L2 education inspired in critical pedagogies may serve as a pedagogical tool to contribute to a formative culture of peace.

For more than a decade, critical pedagogies have been at the heart of my work as a teacher and researcher; it is a way of life. Curiously enough, even though critical pedagogies were inspired in the work of South American intellectuals like Paulo Freire, I did not become familiar with his literature or the framework of critical pedagogy until I was a graduate student in the United States. I identified many of my concerns as I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and did not struggle understanding it as other American classmates, most of them middle class and White, did. I recognized the history of class struggle in his words, the same one I witnessed growing up in Medellín, Colombia as a member of a working-class family, in a neighborhood where there was violence during the harsh ‘90s when Pablo Escobar was king.

Even though I had not read about critical pedagogy or Paulo Freire before, I recognized the discourse of critique to hegemonic social institutions that perpetuate problematic relations of power and engender social inequity. These are the discourses I grew up with throughout my undergraduate education in a public university, well known for being one of the most important ones in the country, and for its social activism. This university, UA, is the second largest university in Colombia, with over 30,000 students. The majority of undergraduate students are classified as low income, and many of them are first-generation college graduates in their families. For many poor young people, entering this university may be the only chance they can get to access higher education.

I learned about critical discourses of class struggle, social transformation and empowerment during student meetings (or assemblies, as we call them) and student protests. As a foreign language teaching major, I was not presented with these ideas, and this is no surprise given that foreign language course content focuses greatly on language structures and language teaching models, as opposed to sociocultural critique. As Pennycook (1990) claimed in his

ground-breaking article on critical pedagogy, second language education has historically focused on the teaching and learning of a language as a transmission of language structures and distanced itself from broader educational theories and social issues. Even though I had some courses on pedagogical theory, what was common at the time was to focus, on the one hand, on the teaching and learning of language structures and communicative functions, and, on the other, on foreign language teaching methods, using the theories imported from English speaking countries. We did not analyze, for instance, examples of how issues of power and ideology were embedded in language education. My dear professors are not necessarily to blame for this, as this practice was commonsense at the time, not only in Colombia but in the world, even to this day.

Later on, as a graduate student in the United States, I felt the need to distance myself from applied linguistics that informed language education and rather focused on the social foundations of education; that is how I encountered critical pedagogy. My personal history, my avid curiosity, and my interest on social issues in language education constituted the perfect soil for critical pedagogies.

Today I am a professor at UA and hold a leadership position where I have had the opportunity to continue applying and learning about critical pedagogies in language education. I have used critical pedagogies as “a theoretical resource and as a productive practice” (Giroux, 2011, p. 4) rather than an a priori method for EFL teaching. As such, they have been my resource while analyzing or designing new curricula, in the preparation of my English classes, in research, in the relationships I establish with colleagues and students, in the analyses of national language policies, and in the design of new language policies and language education initiatives within the institution, the city or the state.

At present, the School of Languages, where I am based, is responsible for L2 education. Not only do we prepare professionals at the undergraduate and graduate levels in foreign language teaching (English and French) and in translation (English, French and Spanish), but we also provide L2 education to the institution’s community (administrative and teaching staff as well as students). That is, we offer an English program, which is compulsory for all majors (in alignment with educational policies established by the Ministry of Education) and a program that offers diverse foreign languages (French, Portuguese, Italian, German, Mandarin, and Japanese) as well as heritage languages. The latter program is not compulsory. Taking into account that being able to speak a foreign language is a marker of class and privilege due to its associated costs, the fact that our undergraduate students learn other languages for free is a great contribution to their professional education.

In my current leadership role, we have tried to promote a formative institutional culture that values all languages. We offer activities to the university community intended to foster intercultural dialogue in various languages as an effort to contrast the effects of the national bilingualism English-Spanish agenda that had predominated in recent years. But for obvious reasons, the status of English as the dominant L2 (in the institution and Colombian society at large) has not been rivaled by any other language.

Although for years after my graduation as a Doctor of Education I continued to draw on North American critical pedagogy scholars, not until recently have I turned to Latin American scholars whose work inspires or complements critical pedagogy debates from the North. At this point it is worth saying that while it is common to read North American critical pedagogy scholars here, in the Hemispheric South, I did not encounter South American scholars in my graduate courses with the exception of Paulo Freire. Perhaps this means that even within the critical pedagogy realm, certain forms of knowledge are privileged and may become hegemonic. In fact, some colleagues at UA have commented that critical pedagogy is White, male, and hegemonic, and that instead of looking for answers to the issues we face in education elsewhere,

Latin American scholars should look within (for example, in popular education literature, indigenous thought and wisdom, etc.).

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES IN THE HEMISPHERIC NORTH AND SOUTH

Cabaluz-Ducasse (2016) makes the case for Latin American critical pedagogies that reflect the region's reality. They are characterized by principles that are common to those of critical pedagogy as known and developed in North America:

- A recognition of the ethical, political, and ideological nature of education, and the importance of political-pedagogic praxis to engender social transformation;
- The identification of alienating and dehumanizing factors in culture and thus, education should be understood as a process of conscientization;
- The need to create educational spaces “with” and “from” the oppressed;
- Dialogical praxis as a means to recognize the popular knowledge of the Other, whose knowledge would otherwise be subordinate;
- The conviction that pedagogic praxis should develop all human capacities (p. 78, my translation).

In her discussion of the impact of the South American tradition on critical pedagogies in the North, Peñuela (2010) explains that the Anglo-Saxon readership appropriates Freire's and other authors' (of the Global South) pedagogical thought and nourishes it. This appropriation of critical pedagogy from the South “puts it to work more clearly in school contexts, in contemporary discussions about the curriculum as an ideology and cultural studies in relation to pedagogy; positions the teacher as an intellectual of education and, at the same time, takes up all the discussions about postmodernism and postcoloniality” (p. 185).

There is one principle that I find more persistently in Latin American literature and that is the recognition of the North-South conflict, and the issues of colonialism and eurocentrism that are present in pedagogy. Freire and Faundez (2018) argue that in the North-South relationship, the North usually has the answer to issues in the South; experts come without asking if we already have answers or solutions to our problems—this happens because, as they explain, “Third World” people are considered incompetent. This position engenders resistance to answers from abroad.

Central to an understanding of critical pedagogy in Northern and Southern discourses is the role of schools to reproduce and / or challenge the status quo. In addition, the following concepts are present across different perspectives. One is **context**: on the one hand, the social, cultural, cognitive, economic, and political contexts that surround and influence education. On the other hand, the contexts that shape student identity as well (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 7). Another important concept is **ideology**: a “starting point for asking how the culture of the dominant class becomes embedded in the hidden curriculum” (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, 2009, p. 12). And **hegemony**, to understand the pervasiveness of asymmetrical power relations and how they sustain the interests of the ruling class (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, 2009, p. 12).

Perhaps one of the ideas that is present in critical pedagogies developed in the Global North and South and that is markedly common in the work of Latin American scholars is the political nature of education. As explained by Giroux (2011), “politics is central to any notion of pedagogy that takes as its primary project the necessity to provide conditions that expand the capacities of students to think critically and teach them how to take risks, act in a socially

responsible way, and connect private issues with larger public considerations” (p. 6). For Freire and Faundez (2018), education is social action and any social action, at least in Latin America, is political action.

Freire & Faundez (2018) also insist on establishing a difference between the Latin American and the European context, in that unlike the European context, education is inextricably linked to social transformation, to making political decisions, and to political struggle. This idea reflects my experience at UA, both as a student and as a professor. Politics is a central part of academic life in the institution, at least as reflected in decisions made by the teacher and student body, numerous publications, conversations in the hallways, etc., although we need to make a better effort at including this in the official curriculum.

Nonetheless, I believe that critical pedagogies in the South have focused mostly on the issue of class, neglecting discussions on issues of power that affect the marginalized in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and ability. There is much we could still learn from the work done by colleagues around the globe. Today, maybe more than ever before, I see the relevance of a critical pedagogy as Colombians try to build stable and durable peace, after so many years at war. We are a country that needs to heal and address the affective and emotional wounds left by armed conflict, in a way that “connects students to people in groups and as individuals” (Kincheloe, 2005, p.11). If we are agents of history, then we have the chance to create a different history for ourselves and the future generations without forgetting what we have been through, and, as an exercise of collective memory reconstruction, examine our past and present as part of school’s curriculum: this is political action.

## **THE CHALLENGES BEHIND ENACTING CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES**

I have used the above discussed principles to guide my pedagogic action; however, I need to say that it has not been an easy task. For example, taking into account that language teachers come from a tradition of prescribed methods for language teaching, understanding critical pedagogy as a philosophy of teaching rather than a set of procedures is an idea that some colleagues reject from the outset. Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2009) explain that one of the critiques to critical pedagogy from policy makers and administrators (and here I include some pre- and in-service teachers) is that it is only about politics; that critical pedagogy is futile and lacks practical value. To enact a critical pedagogy entails developing a theoretical base and a critical attitude that, grounded on what Freire calls epistemic curiosity, leads to ethical and social action—praxis. As Echeverri-Sucerquia and Pérez-Restrepo (2014) claim, this does not happen overnight and does not occur only through teacher training; It is a continuous quest for knowledge.

Unfortunately, many publications on critical pedagogy are written in a complex language, and, therefore, they are perceived as inaccessible and elitist (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). This hinders the access of those educators interested in social action to its theoretical base. Lack of understanding or clarity about what constitutes critical pedagogical action, especially among experienced teachers, increases feelings of insecurity and turns them into disdain. In addition, considering the leading recognized scholars considered to have most influenced the development of critical theory and critical pedagogy have all been men (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009), many of whom are White, this poses the question of the legitimacy of their claims and their ability to “forthrightly” address questions of gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity.

Because critical L2 pedagogy is about understanding social issues present in students’ lives in connection to larger social issues, I have heard criticisms from colleagues and students stating

that the language class is not a social studies class; therefore, it is not a place to discuss social issues but to learn the language. On the other hand, I have often had to remind my Master's students that they are language teachers since they end up focusing on teaching about current social issues and forget to teach language. Alternatively, I have heard colleagues and students saying that they do not have the time to address social issues in the language class because, if they do, they will not be able to cover the content in the prescribed curriculum.

An important backlash I have dealt with in the enactment of a critical pedagogy is the political nature of education and the students' and teachers' emotions in response to a political agenda. In a country where it has been dangerous to publicly express an opinion, many people prefer to remain silent about their positions. Words like hegemony, resistance, liberation, and political and social struggle remind people of those who have suffered or died, even within the university. These words are often related to guerrilla discourses and, therefore, are marked as negative from the start. In such cases, I have tried to turn the discussion around a dialogue of hope and critical action to build a new country and our social responsibility as educators.

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES IN ACTION

Concerning the scope of action in critical pedagogies, I have found in my experience that there is no consensus. In our foreign language programs as well as in our foreign language teacher education programs, critical consciousness about issues of power in language is critical action. While for others, there is no action (social and political action) until there is social transformation. This is perceived by many to be a monumental task and, consequently, conclude that critical pedagogy is impossible to develop. In a way, these two understandings of action reflect the two different perspectives of what critical means as explained by Luke (2004): "as an intellectual, deconstructive, textual, and cognitive analytic task and as a form or (of) embodied political anger, alienation and alterity" (p. 26).

Moving beyond L2 education and language awareness towards critical language awareness implies that educators and students move into action. It needs to start with critical consciousness, but should move to critical action in students' lives and contexts: literacy education should be about the understanding of one's own reality and daily life, and this is an enterprise we should undertake together, as a people (Freire & Faundez, 2018). We need "politically engaged critiques of power in everyday life, communities, and institutions" to develop critical pedagogies in language education (Morgan, 2004, as cited in Norton and Toohey, 2004, p. 1), to foster awareness of our own identities and what shapes them; of our actions and how they transform the world, and then move on to praxis.

Because of its social and political orientation, critical pedagogies should pay attention to the formative culture (Giroux, 2011) that takes place outside the walls of a classroom or schools, which includes media. As Giroux (2011) argued, "The growing prevalence of a variety of media—from traditional screen and print cultures to the digital world of the new media—necessitated a new language for understanding popular culture as a teaching machine, rather than simply as a source of entertainment or a place that objectively disseminates information" (p. 7). Here I want to insist on the need for developing a critical pedagogy agenda in L2 education that uses social media as a site for learning and also a space for both social reproduction and disruption of the status quo as our children and youth's identities are constantly shaped by these media, and because they use media to produce problematic and / or counter hegemonic texts.

The L2 classroom should be a site of struggle and disruption, in the sense of deconstructing beliefs, attitudes and actions that reproduce problematic relations of power. For



example, the language classroom is usually a place where cultural stereotypes and problematic ideas about self and others are reproduced. Through problem posing education (Freire, 2000), it is possible to transform the conversation into one where students critically reflect about their reality, name the problematic relations taking place there, and move toward a change of attitude (e.g., towards oneself, others, language, language learning, etc.). This may engender critical actions in their lives. As this does not happen automatically, I believe it is necessary to build a process of scaffolding as part of conscientization (Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). To do so, using a common language, the one provided in the critical pedagogy base is useful; core concepts like power, hegemony, ideology, -isms, etc. may be helpful, though it is necessary to illustrate them with examples from students' daily lives. I have found the analysis of cultural artifacts using these concepts to be particularly helpful.

A critical consciousness and praxis influence all aspects of one's life. In the current sociopolitical turmoil (taking place not only in Latin America, but other countries around the world as well), my expectation is that students are curious about what is going on, that they inform themselves, create their own spaces for deliberation and critical dialogue and create forms of participation. But this is not easy due to the danger associated with participation, at least in my context. Critical pedagogy calls for resistance and dissent, but in the current climate of political instability in my country, while there are some manifestations of resistance that are peaceful, there are violent ones, too; as a result, many social scientists, activists and community leaders have died. I believe my country has seen enough violence for decades and consequently, non-violent forms of resistance should be encouraged, forms that cultivate the intellect, dialogue and deliberation in the name of social justice and coexistence.

Among fellow colleagues who do critical work there is a recurrent question, and no consensus, about what exactly constitutes social change in our context. Some defend the idea that critical consciousness alone is enough while others insist that social action is necessary. As mentioned earlier, in the history traced by Latin American critical pedagogies, social action is political action. Freire & Faundez (2018) claim that in this context, intellectual work that is an invitation to transforming reality prevails. As students in Latin American universities, they used philosophy to appropriate certain concepts and a critical capacity to understand their reality in the Latin American context: this endeavor, Freire & Faundez argue, helped them to understand how ideas are embedded in daily personal and political actions.

In the context of L2 education, we navigate culture every day, moving within the values, norms, and ways of being in the world that are bound to the cultures with which we interact or belong. This becomes easier with technology and access to resources in the media. In other times, language learning was associated to learning the native speakers' culture in order to blend in, facilitate intercultural dialogue. In the context of Kachru's (1985) expanding circle, what/whose culture do we learn today? Whose culture is at play in the spaces that children and youth explore (social media, video games, etc.) as they interact with others in a language that is not their mother tongue with speakers of a language they are not necessarily native? These changes in language use, including the intricate and hybrid identities that language users bring with them into interaction and dialogue, have important implications for language teaching and learning, which critical educators should not neglect. Critical educators should understand, deconstruct and challenge the power relations and the colonizing power embedded in language teaching as well as the cultural representations and positions that result from classroom culture, language instruction, and teaching materials.

The critical language educator cannot forget that language education has been a site of colonization. When addressing the question of what exactly is the compelling reason for second language education to engage with the critical, Luke (2004) reminds us that traditional student

bodies of TESOL programs have historically been objects of colonial and imperial power or diasporic subjects living at the economic margins of Western and Northern cultures and economies. That the work of L2 and especially TESOL was once a mixture of missionary work (in Latin America we already lived this with Spanish and Portuguese) and now a transnational service industry in the production of skilled human resources for economic globalization. Similar to the history of TESOL, Latin America has been a space of epistemic confluence of diverse traditions, most notably, with a powerful influence of Eurocentric knowledge: As mentioned earlier in this article, in the Global South we are active consumers of knowledge produced in the North.

We, language educators and language teacher educators, need to build our own theories of language learning and build a theoretical TESOL and L2 knowledge base starting with southern epistemologies that have historically countered economic, political and cultural hegemony: we need to be active producers of knowledge. We also need to establish collaborative—not subordinate— North-South relations, where scholars in the South recognize the value of knowledge produced locally and, in our case, in other Latin American countries, and not only in relation to L2 education, but also from other disciplines. Often, we may contribute to the prevalence of Eurocentric knowledge: Freire & Faundez (2018) argue that “when the colonizer is expelled, when he leaves the colonized geographic context, he stays in the cultural and ideological context like a ‘shadow,’ interiorized by the colonized” (p.158), so the desire to depend on dominant forms of knowledge constantly lingers in our collective memory, shaping our construction of the world. Still, I believe a critical dialogue across diverse epistemes in the field of L2 education, as opposed to epistemic colonialization, is possible.

Language learners, particularly English, should be aware of this as they enter their learning process, while also recognizing the value of the Other and their own identity. Critical language education should entail a critical consciousness about the values reproduced through cultural hegemony in language education as it embeds particular ways of being and acting in and upon the world. In spite of the historic colonizing condition that characterizes L2, most notably TESOL, and considering that speaking English is socially considered an asset— which students in most of Colombian private universities have since high school while students at UA don’t— the predominance of English as the L2 will not end soon. I have participated in discussions in my university about whether English should be the mandatory L2 in our undergraduate programs or if students should choose whatever L2 they want, or even none. My position has been that, given the status of English in Colombia, its learning should be encouraged along with the learning of other foreign languages or heritage languages. I insist on the idea that English learners and L2 professionals (i.e., teachers, translators, etc.) should be educated about the pervasive power of ELT and the ideologies that underlie it. Also, they should use the learning of L2 to learn about their own culture.

I believe this is possible by using a problem-posing pedagogy, like the one used by Freire (2000) in his literacy projects. Such a pedagogy uses students’ lives as the content of the language curriculum and connects them to larger issues. Instead of imported textbooks, the class should use materials from the sources of information they find in their daily lives (in media, for example). Question posing is at the center of the education Freire and Faundez (2018) advocate for. But they mean genuine questions that come out of students’ curiosity; not questions with already-known answers. A pedagogy of question-posing, they claim, is that which acknowledges that failure leads to knowledge. This is the opposite of an education based on standards, in which students are trained to give preestablished answers, in the name of efficiency and productivity. Kincheloe (2005) calls it “going beyond the facts”: the curriculum in part should be shaped by problems that teachers and students face in their struggle to live just and ethical lives (p. 16).

Mejía-Jiménez and Manjarrés (2011) explain that a question becomes a mediation that starts the learning process. In turn, as students make the question, they express their interests in problematizing the world. It is there where the teacher or mentor must pay attention to the type of questions they ask, to determine interests and organize the discussion in the group, allowing the different questions to be presented and challenged, that is, to give room for students to be critical and self-critical. It is important to build rules of participation as a criterion of democracy, by means of which the question brainstorming exercise and the criterion to select them will be developed. The collective agreement and the respect given to it are key in the construction of norms, as well as their place in the construction of autonomy as an ability in the children's culture.

In a scaffolding process, the teacher helps students frame the problematizing questions within larger social, cultural, and political context in order to solve them (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 19). As Giroux (2011) explains, such a process “opens up a space of translation between the private and the public while changing the forms of self- and social recognition” (p. 14). Mejía-Jiménez and Manjarrés (2011) assert that, as the students research answers to their questions, they perform an action on the world as they share the new knowledge and thus become an interlocutor between his family environment and the adult world, as they make connections between the local and national/international issues, showing their empowerment.

To aid students in scaffolding their conscientization, it is essential that educators “understand the social construction of student consciousness, focusing on motives, values, and emotions” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 20); they should acknowledge the students' identities and the contexts that shape them. Kincheloe (2005) maintains that teachers should use this knowledge “not to ‘save’ marginalized students, but to provide a safe space for them and to learn with them about personal empowerment, the cultivation of the intellect and the larger pursuit of social justice” (p. 2).

In Colombia's national English curriculum, in a document called Suggested curriculum for English for grades 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> (Colombia Bilingüe, 2016), the group of experts proposes a curriculum that introduces a novelty to the standards based national curriculum based on the Common European Framework for foreign languages. Content is organized in thematic modules that are consistent across grade levels: democracy and peace, health, sustainability, and globalization. While this inclusion seems to be an effort to contextualize the curriculum and enhances its interdisciplinarity, a deeper look into it shows that it is still focused on the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and communicative functions. This adds to the already existing strategies developed by the government with the guidance and support of American and British agencies—as I mentioned earlier, what Hurie (2018) calls ‘English for peace’.

In the face of current language policies and curriculum reform, numerous Colombian scholars in the field of L2 education have written about initiatives, reflections, and proposals that are inspired in critical pedagogies. Among them is Agray-Vargas' (2010), whose account of a critical and participatory curriculum construction uses Carr and Kemmis' critical theory of education and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a baseline. Curriculum was assumed from these perspectives because they were considered to be the most consistent with the humanistic training to which the school aspired. Umbarila-Gómez (2011) reports a qualitative study carried out with ninth grade students at a public school. Her goal was to engage students in critical pedagogy practices that inform their construction of sense of the Other. Students used critical pedagogy to ask questions about aspects of the dominant culture. Samacá-Bohórquez (2012) shares in her article some reflections on the importance that both critical pedagogy and awareness-raising practices have in education today, especially in language teacher preparation programs, and how they provide a new opportunity for pre-service teachers to re-think their pedagogical experiences

for social transformation. She (2012) puts forth that “‘critical’ is particularly significant for language teachers because the subject matter we teach— language—mediates how learners might construct their identity as well as the cultural and social relationships in the world surrounding them” (p. 198). Echeverri-Sucerquia and Pérez-Restrepo (2014) report the experience of a study group on critical pedagogy, particularly their process of meaning making as they try to understand its theoretical basis. They discuss the impact that participating in the study group and learning about critical education had on their personal and professional lives.

The above mentioned are only a few of the educators and scholars who are writing and doing critical language education in the Colombian context. Even though the number of publications within this perspective is increasing as is the number of candidates for our Master’s program who want to do critical research, I consider that we should publish more; there are experiences of educators whose pedagogical action struggles to alleviate the suffering and recognize the voices of marginalized students. There should be more publications by female scholars in the Hemispheric South, and more publications about critical pedagogy and issues of ethnicity, gender, and ability. University scholars, in a collaborative partnership, should support school teachers to research and write about the work they do. Also, as we write, we should make a greater effort to use language that is accessible to a wider audience and make connections to other bodies of knowledge whose agendas overlap critical pedagogies—such is the case of critical intercultural education. As Cabaluz-Ducasse (2016) argued, “all those theoretical, ethical-political and methodological approaches that allow problematizing Eurocentric, colonialist, capitalist, patriarchal positions, racists, etc., must be able to interweave with Latin American Critical Pedagogies” (p. 70, my translation).

Developing conscientization is key to action in critical pedagogy. As I mentioned earlier, teacher training alone does not “perform miracles”, so it should be a collaborative effort and a result of collegial dialogue. Sustained strategies, like study groups, continuous research by teachers and reflective practice may be strategies that aid in scaffolding conscientization with a longer-lasting effect. But we can definitely move from critical consciousness to praxis by means of a critical curriculum: a curriculum that uses student life as content and examines it within larger schemes of power. Kincheloe (2005) claims that “the more of these contexts with which teachers are familiar with, the more rigorous and critical education becomes” (p. 32).

In making the case of the relevance of critical pedagogy in Colombia, Ortega-Valencia (2010) claims that critical pedagogy, a pedagogy of the us (in Spanish, *Nos-otros*, referring to the Us in the Other), “is the presence of Freire in its symbolic, pedagogical, political and ethical power, which calls us to think of this country of uncertainty and restlessness, in order to resist so much hopelessness together and build a ‘we’ from more receptive and welcoming performances”. (p. 171)

## CLOSING REMARKS

The writing of the last few words of this article caught me in the confinement of my home as the world faces a pandemic due to the COVID-19 virus. This situation has engendered a series of challenges for all of us, including Colombian educators, who tried in just a few weeks to prepare to teach from home using the technology at hand— to many, technological tools and internet connection is indeed very scarce. Our students and many of our faculty were resistant to teach via videoconferencing and digital platforms, arguing that these were not an option, considering the lack of teacher preparation and many students’ lack of basic resources, like a computer. During meetings I had with students, to discuss how this situation was affecting their

lives (as a way to identify and procure solutions so that they continue to engage in academic activities), only a few students participated in the conversation; some of them evidenced lack of information or having only partial information (often *fake* information that circulates in social media) about the pandemic. I expressed my concern about this situation to the two student representatives we have in our directive council, and proposed to create a space of *critical* dialogue, held regularly, where through the practice of problem posing they can both express their concerns and opinions while developing a critical, more conscientious view of their world and their reality. I wondered how pertinent this would be, given the circumstances, and I was glad to hear from them that precisely because this was a time of uncertainty, there was a need to develop and use a critical attitude towards life, develop their own stance, and better inform their decisions. They agreed with me in that a critical pedagogy would be the starting point to initiate those conversations. So, I am hopeful about the future.

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