Beliefs, attitudes, and reflections of EFL pre-service teachers while exploring critical literacy theories to prepare and implement critical lessons

Creencias, actitudes y reflexiones de profesores de inglés en formación, durante la exploración de teorías críticas para la preparación e implementación de planes de clase críticos

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching and learning is an issue of high relevance nowadays in Colombia. Unfortunately, language teaching has often been reduced to the mastery of language structures, disregarding the vast number of possibilities that language teaching provides to involve students in the discussion and analysis of issues that affect their everyday life. Shifting language teaching toward this goal, however, has to be emphasized more in language teacher preparation programs. To gain a better understanding of the implication of this shift, this study explored the beliefs, attitudes, and reflections of three student-teachers from a foreign language teaching program at a public university towards the exploration of Critical Literacy theories, and the design and implementation of critical lessons. In this exploratory case study, data collected included audio-recordings of class discussions and individual interviews with the three participants, their reflections during different stages, and class observations of their lesson implementation. Results from this study suggest that exposing future EFL teachers to Critical Literacy approaches to language teaching can have various effects on their perspectives towards education and their teaching practice. Thus, those effects might be influenced by factors such as their teaching experience, their backgrounds, and their prior beliefs.

Keywords: Critical Literacies, language teacher preparation programs, pre-service EFL teachers, teachers' beliefs, teaching practicum

Resumen

La enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras es un tema de alta relevancia actualmente en Colombia. Desafortunadamente, la enseñanza de idiomas se ha reducido frecuentemente al dominio de estructuras lingüísticas, ignorando las numerosas posibilidades que brindan estos para involucrar a los estudiantes en la discusión y análisis de situaciones que afectan su vida diaria. Sin embargo, esta transformación en la enseñanza de lenguas debe comenzar

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en los programas de formación de maestros. Con el objetivo de comprender las implicaciones de esta transformación, este estudio exploró las creencias, actitudes y reflexiones de tres docentes de lenguas extranjeras en formación, en su fase de práctica docente, pertenecientes a una universidad pública, frente a la exploración de teorías críticas y el diseño e implementación de planes de clase que involucraran dichas teorías. Los datos del estudio fueron recogidos mediante grupos focales, entrevistas, reflexiones escritas, planes de clase y observaciones. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que exponer futuros docentes de inglés a teorías críticas para la enseñanza de idiomas puede tener diferentes efectos en su percepción hacia la educación y su práctica docente. Además, dichos efectos pueden estar influenciados por factores como su experiencia de enseñanza precia, sus experiencias de vida y creencias previas.

Palabras clave: Literacidades Críticas, programas de formación de docentes de idiomas, profesores de inglés en formación, creencias de los profesores, práctica de enseñanza

Introduction

This paper draws on the premise that "schools are places where students can learn to transform society" (Gainer, 2010, p. 364). Such a premise gains even more relevance considering that a study conducted by the United Nations in 2005 revealed that Colombia has one of the highest rates of violence in the world, and social injustice and inequalities are present in people's everyday lives (UNHCR, 2012). Given this situation, there is no doubt that schools should become places where students can explore those issues while gaining access to content, literacy, and a critical sense of citizenship (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). They should also be social and cultural spaces where education bridges the gap between the classroom and the outside world (Pennycook, 2001), encouraging learners to reflect on their context and to commit to the achievement of a more just society (Freire, 1970).

However, to achieve this, teachers would need to go beyond the teaching of academic concepts to provide learners with the means by which they can critically analyze and understand their reality, so that they become part of the transformation of society (Freire, 1970). They would need to move from focusing on mere skill development to focusing on using education as a social practice (Luke, 2000). Furthermore, they would need to break the reproductive role that school has traditionally played, for it has not allowed learners to understand, critique, and commit to the social transformation that is needed in today's world (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Besides, teachers would need to find ways to connect the curriculum to the students'

realities and experiences in a particular context, and adapt their teaching strategies to match the social needs of those students (Giroux, 1994). Language teachers cannot be the exception in this shift in education and attaining this transformation in language teaching cannot be regarded as an easy task. Thus, this research study focused on how pre-service EFL teachers responded to the exploration of Critical Literacy theories and how their beliefs about language teaching played a role in their design and implementation of critical lessons, which would start this transformation from the classroom.

Literature Review

Critical Literacy education is an approach that focuses on academic skill development while engaging students in the analysis of social issues to seek their transformation (Luke, 2000). Through time, Critical Literacy (CL) has been regarded as a tool in the processes of identity formation, cultural engagement, and all forms of human expressions (Luke & Woods, 2009). It has also been conceptualized as "a theory for practice" (Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000, p. 124) or as "a theoretical and practical attitude" (Luke, 2000, p. 454), which means that it goes beyond a theory that influences practice, to become a theory that involves taking a position in and about the world and striving for social transformation (Freire, 1970; Luke, 2000; Morrell, 2002; UNESCO, as cited in Morrell, 2002).

Contrary to traditional education which has focused on transmitting standard knowledge, CL attempts to bring meaningful real-world issues to the classroom and encourages learners to read not

only words but the world behind the construction of texts (Freire, 1970). This reading of the world helps learners to understand how language shapes who we are as part of a larger culture (Shor, 1999). CL also allows learners to resist dominant mainstream ideologies which are marginalizing (Luke & Woods, 2009) and to identify the connection between language and power relationships (Behrman, 2006). Moreover, it provides learners with the knowledge to challenge the *status quo* and search for new alternatives for their development and the promotion of justice (Shor, 1999).

Critical scholars have agreed on the fact that there is no formula for fostering CL (Luke, 2000) and the approach is continually being redefined in the classroom (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001). However, scholars such as Cowhey (2006), Comber, Thomson, and Wells (2001), McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004), Morrell (2002), and Vasquez (1998) have provided useful insight into how to carry out CL in a classroom. These instances were the ones the participants in this study analyzed and talked over during several class discussions, allowing them to envision the great challenge they had at hand if they attempted to move away from language teaching as a transmission of grammar rules, and moved towards a more critical approach to language teaching. This challenge entailed first, deconstructing and understanding their critical role as language teachers and defying their beliefs about language teaching and learning. Second, this entailed understanding that English lessons cannot be approached from a critical perspective if teachers themselves are not critical. Third, this meant selecting and adapting themes and materials relevant to their students and their context.

Nonetheless, this challenge is not theirs' alone; language teacher education has constantly been challenged to respond to the needs faced by society. Teaching from a more critical stance is clearly one of these needs. Accordingly, responding to this need, and carrying out the above mentioned activities in the classroom requires rigorous preparation on the part of teachers. For Nieto (2004), this preparation has to start during the teacher preparation program and needs to go beyond providing knowledge about the specific subject matter. That is to say, these

programs need to prepare future teachers not only to teach the structures of a language, but to bring and discuss social issues in the classroom so that as teachers they assume language teaching from a critical stance and become critical of their practice.

For authors such as Pennycook (2001), this preparation aims for teachers' understanding that everything we teach—the way we teach, the materials we use, the way we carry out assessment, and the way we respond to students—is political and has social implications that go beyond the classroom. Moreover, for authors such as Freire (1970), Morrell (2002), and Vavrus and Archibald (as cited in Kincheloe, 2008, p. 5), teacher preparation needs to be based on the premise that issues of justice are fundamental to the field of language teaching. If this premise is ignored, teachers would simply use their practice to unconsciously reproduce the *status quo*, without validating students' cultures and identities, as noted by Bartolomé (2004).

Furthermore, Johnson (1994) makes a case for the importance of considering teachers' beliefs as they play a fundamental role in teacher education. Beliefs have been defined as the assumptions that teachers hold about their students, classroom, subject matter, and school context (Kagan, as cited in Yuan & Lee, 2014). Likewise, Borg (2003) uses the term teacher cognition to refer to what teachers know, believe, and think, which are the dimensions that influence their teaching practice. For this reason, the curricula of language teacher preparation programs needs to take into account the beliefs pre-service teachers bring to such programs which are rooted in their prior experiences in the classroom. Kennedy (1999) asserts that based on their past experiences as students, most pre-service teachers enter a program with preconceived ideas about education. These beliefs play a significant role in how pre-service teachers understand and evaluate new theories about teaching, causing them to challenge or simply dismiss them if they do not fit in their pre-existing idea of what is right. Accordingly, Williams and Burden (1997) assert that teacher's beliefs can be stronger than knowledge in determining how teachers will behave in the classroom, since these beliefs are rooted in our culture; they start to form early in life, and they are resistant to change.

Therefore, prior beliefs will influence how pre-service teachers interpret and respond to certain theories and situations and will undoubtedly guide their future teaching practices (Bailey et al., 1996; Johnson, 1994) unless they are altered during pre-service teacher education. That is to say, one of the roles of pre-service teacher education is to uncover teachers' beliefs and promote a shift in students' thinking to influence their future impact in the classroom to respond to the needs of society.

Nonetheless, studying teachers' beliefs is a challenge, not only because they are not observable, but because teachers may not be completely aware of them (Borg, 2006). Moreover, Borg affirms that teachers may show some contrast between abstract and contextual beliefs, meaning that teachers may express something based on theory, but act differently in the classroom.

Considering all the above, Zeichner (1996) and Darling-Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn, and Fideler (1999) insist on the need of having practicum experiences in which pre-service teachers gain a wider perspective of education and have the opportunity to try different ideas that broaden their view of teaching and learning. Similarly, Crookes (2003) insists on the importance of EFL teachers to "articulate their view and values concerning their practice" (p.45). In the case of prospective teachers, the teaching practicum may provide them with an invaluable opportunity to explore, acknowledge, and reflect upon these views. In fact, the teaching practicum is seen as an opportunity to witness how pre-service teachers' principles and theoretical knowledge about teaching influence their practice or, on the contrary, how their practice alters their beliefs and allows them to verify theory (Batra, 2009).

Likewise, the teaching practicum allows teacher educators to gain insight into how pre-service teachers understand and appropriate different theories, such as the critical ones, their beliefs and attitudes toward approaches to language teaching and their responses and reflections when taking these approaches to action in their classrooms. Gaining this understanding might allow language teacher preparation programs to foresee and address the challenges that shifts in education could pose for both the program and for future language teachers.

Bearing in mind the high relevance of the teaching practicum, the need to have more critical language teachers and to understand what this process entails, the study proposed here intended to explore the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and reflections on the exploration of Critical Literacy theories to design and implement critical lessons. This study was conducted at a language teacher preparation program practicum in Medellin by having three pre-service teachers first explore different CL approaches to language teaching and how these have been incorporated in other contexts. Second, the participants attempted to design Critical Literacy oriented lessons for their particular teaching context, and reflected on the process of lesson design and implementation of those critical lessons.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were three pre-service teachers from a language teacher preparation program at a public university in Medellin. David was a 26-year-old student, with three years of teaching experience at a private university. Carolina was a 25 year-old student. She comes from a family of teachers and so teaching became her passion. At the moment that the study was carried out, she had been teaching for two years at a private language institute, and, at the same time, at an outreach English program for youth in a public university. Camilo was a 24-year-old student with no previous experience in teaching. They were all very committed students with fairly strong yet different opinions that enriched our class discussions. Although they were close in age, their teaching experience significantly varied and this factor also brought a variety of perspectives to the seminar.

Concerning their beliefs about English, Carolina, Camilo, and David considered that it would either allow students to learn about other cultures, have

better job opportunities, or seek other opportunities in another country. Regarding their role as language teachers, the three participants had a very different view. While David felt he should be a positive role model for students, Carolina felt she should create a link between her students' own culture and cultures from elsewhere, and Camilo considered his role was to transmit all his knowledge about English. Conversely, Camilo, Carolina, and David coincided in expressing that English as a school subject offered endless possibilities to bring all kinds of knowledge to the classroom.

I was the practicum advisor/teacher as well as the researcher. As the practicum teacher, my role was to guide the students into reflecting upon their teaching practice and into designing lesson plans that reflected their understanding of their students' needs. As the researcher, my purpose was to provide the participants with the space to explore Critical Literacies and to reflect upon the possibilities of teaching English from a more critical stance, analyzing how participants responded to the theories and how their beliefs about language teaching influenced the process of lesson design and implementation.

Context

This project was divided into three phases over a four-month period. The first phase consisted of the exploration of Critical Literacy approaches to education and participants were exposed to texts that portrayed the ways different scholars have taken Critical Literacy to the classroom. This exposure allowed the participants to identify some principles behind this approach, a variety of strategies that could be used, and the different scopes that each scholar had intended for their lessons. Also, participants could analyze the possibilities of having a more critical approach to language teaching in their specific school contexts, their possibilities, benefits and limitations.

During the second phase, pre-service teachers prepared Critical Literacy oriented lessons, taking into account their specific contexts and school curricula. This stage allowed me to understand the participants' reflection on the process of lesson design, and how those lessons reflected their understanding of CL theories. In the final phase, participants implemented

their lessons, which I observed, and this allowed me to understand their struggles, successes, and reflections.

Data Collection and Analysis

The process of data collection began in February, 2013 when I first met my participants to formally inform them of the research project and give them a consent form to obtain their permission to collect data from both class discussions and class observations. Participants' names were changed to protect their identity and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences.

This research is an exploratory case study by nature. Bearing in mind that the topic of this study has not been sufficiently explored in Colombia, as well as the fact that multiple factors could influence the participants' responses to a more critical view of language teaching, Grounded Theory was the approach used to analyze data.

Accordingly, four data collection techniques were used for this study. The first consisted of 12 audio recordings of class discussions which led participants to become aware of their own standpoints. Second, the participants wrote reflections after class discussions and designed lesson plans which mirrored their understanding of the theories. The third technique included interviews in which participants reflected on their process of lesson design and implementation. Finally, I conducted unstructured class observations which aimed at determining whether further questions were necessary for the next class discussions.

I followed a simultaneous process of data collection and analysis which contributed to enriching the analysis in different stages and to adjust the process of data collection as stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Subsequently, I employed a close coding in which new data was checked and compared to see if it fit existing codes or, on the contrary, new codes emerged from it. During this process of comparison, memo-writing was fundamental because it allowed me to recognize the properties of each category, challenge my first assumptions towards the data, and identify the way participants responded during the different phases of the study.

Results

The process of data analysis allowed me to see that the participants' reflections and responses in the stages of this study were significantly different and, for this reason, each participant will be presented separately, allowing the reader to see the process of self-transformations, struggles, contradictions, and successes of each actor in this study.

David: An Impossible Shift from Discourse to Action

During the stage of exploration and discussion of Critical Literacy theories, David often expressed how relevant it was to shift from traditional education into a more reflective one in order to educate critical thinkers capable of understanding and transforming their realities. Nonetheless, in a reflection written after a class discussion, he acknowledged the challenges that changing our education system would pose and recognized how hard it would be to change the system. Both an excerpt of the class discussion and reflection are included in the following:

> […] Well, there is a system that, that precedes us, and it's been there for a long, I mean a long time. […] it's our comfort zone too, if it's the way it's been done, you get used to it, it's easier, changing is difficult […] (David, class discussion 3, February 15, 2013)

> Qualified education is probably the only way for emancipation in an unfair society like ours […]. (David, reflection 1, March 11, 2013)

Besides this, he was concerned about parents' reaction towards the topics brought into and discussed in his classes when trying to raise students' awareness towards social issues related to politics or sexual identity:

> […] Nor would we like to have parents come to us and complain about the fact that in our class their child came to the conclusion that Gay marriage should be allowed in our country. (David, reflection 2, March 18, 2013)

In spite of this concern, David felt optimistic towards the possibility of having this transformation and expressed how it was part of teachers' responsibility to encourage students to become critically literate and reflective about the world around them: "[…] As teachers, we have the huge responsibility of guiding students towards expanding their reasoning and looking at issues from different perspectives" (David, reflection 1, March 11, 2013).

Nonetheless, when David came to the point in which he designed the lessons for his high school students in the public school where he was carrying out his supervised student teaching, his perspective towards Critical Literacy theories drastically changed. At first, David considered that by bringing sentences or strategies students were not used to seeing in class, he would make his lessons critical as he felt he was transforming what was traditionally done in his context:

> I wanted to transcend from common daily routines like "I take a shower" or "I go to school," and instead, I presented examples like "I read the newspaper" or "I laugh with my best friend." My unit also reflects critical pedagogy by giving students new alternatives to learn and produce in the target language, applying strategies such as collaborative work and oral improvisation. (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

Later on, David acknowledged that he was facing many limitations in his context that prevented him from designing critical lessons. On the one hand, he struggled to connect the mandated curriculum to a theme that was relevant to his students' reality. On the other hand, he affirmed that his students' low language proficiency had kept him away from trying to promote critical reflections in his class.

> (…) looking from different perspectives a situation, a problem, an issue, and not only analyzing but acting on it, I think that's out of my reach in this context because I want them to be able to say, for example, in past perfect, "When I got back from school, my mom had already prepared my food" I mean, if I can actually get them to produce something like that

I would be like "Yes! I got it!" (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

(…) But in this school I'm teaching something that is way too advanced, my main objective now cannot be critical thinking. (David, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

To summarize, David's beliefs towards the possibility of having a more critical approach to language teaching drastically changed during this phase and his optimism regarding the implementation of critical lessons with beginners vanished. Therefore, he did not design critical lessons as he felt his school context did not allow it due to the students' low language proficiency level, and the contents given in the mandated curriculum. Consequently, David could not report his experience implementing a critical lesson in his school since his objective became leading students to master language structures and, as he admitted, Critical Literacy was not his priority at this point.

Carolina: Negotiating her Beliefs with new Evidence

While exploring the possibility of having a critical education system, Carolina felt it was necessary to pave the way for it since her school curriculum and consequently her students themselves were not accustomed to this type of education:

They [schools] don't have a connection between being critical and teaching something. […] Like in the class I observe, when there is an issue or a discussion, the teacher stops it because he thinks it's going to ruin the class. Or the purpose of the class is not to discuss about that, the purpose of my class is to do this. (Carolina, class discussion 8, April 5, 2013)

Like David, Carolina acknowledged that shifting education towards having critical students who cared about the world was important. She felt there is a need of teaching values to students and to help them "become aware of the world that is around them" (Carolina, class discussion 4, February 22, 2013), especially because in many cases students spent more time at school and with teachers than with their parents.

Although Carolina and David had not taught from a critical perspective, both of them believed they would encounter some limitations when trying to take this approach to their classrooms, such as students' age and parental pressure.

I was thinking that "what age is better to start using this approach?" but I think 11 is OK. I would do it with children but not too much. (Carolina, class discussion 4, February 22, 2013)

We need to follow a curriculum, a syllabus. Some activities or topics may be approached that way (through critical discussions) but some others I don't know because some parents want proofs, they want to see what the students are doing, and sometimes when they have time in classes to just talk, they [parents] might see it as a problem. (Carolina, class discussion 7, March 22, 2013)

Furthermore, as we analyzed how teachers encouraged students to take actions to improve situations in their classrooms, schools, or communities, it was evident that Carolina and David felt that it was not worth the effort as they were sure no one would answer or listen to them. The following excerpt gives an account of this belief:

(…) because we think it is worthless. We think we're not gonna get a response. If I think, "I'm gonna write a letter to the mayor" I won't do it. Not because I don't have problems to tell, but because I don't think he's gonna answer. I don't think they really listen to you or to any other people. So, it's not worth it. I'm not gonna waste my time. That's how I feel. (Carolina, class discussion 7, March 22, 2013)

Finally, as part of Carolina's perceived challenges to promote more critical education, she asserted that "people who are more critical are less happy because you start seeing the world so wrong" (Carolina, class discussion 4, February 22, 2013).

However, contrary to David's process in the stage of lesson design, Carolina started to feel very optimistic and her attitude towards planning her class was one of even excitement:

Planning a lesson with critical approach, although it is more challenging, it is more interesting because you, as a teacher, feel more involved while doing it, you really want students to be part of it and it enables you as a teacher to know your students better. (Carolina, reflection 2, March 18, 2013)

In spite of her optimism, Carolina acknowledged that planning with this approach was more time consuming than usual as she faced some challenges trying to connect the grammar stated by the school curriculum to lessons that actually led her students to reflect.

Therefore, unlike David, Carolina succeeded at designing and implementing her critical lessons and student engagement in class significantly increased. This engagement led them to use the language in a meaningful way (Class observation 2, May 24, 2013)

Some girls that usually don't participate were doing it which was impressive. They are very motivated. I needed to assign turns because everybody was saying things so I needed to control their participation. (Carolina, interview 2, May 17, 2013)

I felt I was knowing them [students] better, because as I said before, I never saw those students to talk about their personal interests, only fake sentences and fake things. This time they tried to share their personal beliefs. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

As well, Carolina reported that as her lessons progressed, students' answers showed a higher level of reflection. Besides, she felt that she was able to take advantage of their interaction to reinforce the language structures she wanted them to use:

(…) Their answers were more reflective. (…) I was also writing words when they mispronounced, when they didn't say it grammatically correct. (…) I wrote them on the board or I asked the students to tell me what he missed. The grammar came along with the content. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

Class observations reinforced this factor. Furthermore, they showed that once the whole-class discussions were over, students who were working in groups were still discussing the issues raised in class. However, Carolina often felt afraid of going deeper in the discussions that aroused students' curiosity and passion and of deviating from the script of her lesson plans.

When I asked a question about a specific topic many other topics came to discussion and I could not spend a lot of time discussing on those issues because I was running out of time and I had activities to cover. (Carolina, reflection 3, May 15, 2013)

I tried to go deeper but not deep enough. (…) When do you know you have reached the limit? Because a discussion can go forever. (Carolina, interview 2, May 17, 2013)

It is interesting because it's not only students who are engaged but I was also engaged. I felt I was doing more than what teachers are doing. I was teaching grammar, but I was teaching values too. (Carolina, interview 3, May 24, 2013)

At this stage, Carolina's process shows a completely different development from that of David's. She believed that not only was it possible to lead students into analyzing issues and reflecting on them in class, but that language learning could also be enhanced in that process. As well, she felt more accomplished as a teacher, even though planning and teaching from this approach posed a greater challenge to her.

Camilo: A Journey of Skepticism, Optimism, and Struggles

Starting this process, Camilo was skeptical of the possibilities he had to carry out critical lessons in his context. To start with, he was convinced that young students were not ready to engage in discussions that led them to reflect or that they would not be interested in having those discussions, as evidenced in the following quote: "I'm kind of skeptical because of the age of the students because I think they are too young to be critical. So I don't know I can bring CL to the class" (Camilo, class discussion 4, February 22, 2013).

Moreover, he felt uncertain about how to negotiate the mandated curriculum at his practicum site, which was focused on grammar, with a different approach to teaching, as he expressed it during a class discussion: "(…) as a teacher how much should we defy what the institution or curricula request from us?" (Camilo, class discussion 4, February 22, 2013).

In spite of his skepticism, Camilo, as well as David and Carolina, believed that Critical Literacy would certainly bring advantages to his classes "with critical pedagogy you take students more into account than in traditional approaches, and you can think of engaging students in the topics" (Camilo, class discussion 4, February 22, 2013). As well, he acknowledged the relevance this type of education had for students in our context:

> We do really need this theory, (…) because we are in a society in which people is (sic) easily manipulated by others, some end up acting just because someone told them to do it and not because they really have a well-formed opinion about any situation. (Camilo, reflection 1, March 11, 2013)

Like David and Carolina, and despite his lack of teaching experience, Camilo perceived some limitations in teaching from a critical perspective. He mentions the following: "Of course, there are some limitations. I think it is necessary to be careful with the level of tolerance and respect that exist for those

with different opinions or preferences." (Camilo, Reflection 1, March 11, 2013). Furthermore, just like David and Carolina, Camilo felt it was pointless to act on issues he disagreed with, either in his school or community, because he felt his actions would be ignored by people in power. Therefore, he concluded that it was not a good idea to encourage students to propose any actions either: "I don't see people writing letters; you are by yourself" (Camilo, class discussion 7, March 22, 2013).

However, in the phase of lesson design, Camilo's perspective had an enormous transformation. After observing some of his students' presentations at his practicum site, he was amazed by how aware students were of the world around them. Therefore, he decided to change his original idea for the lessons (sports) and turn them into an opportunity to listen to his students' opinions on social matters.

> I got help from a task students presented about injustice in our country and it convinced me that they could deal with critical lessons. (…) today I saw that they are aware of injustice and they have potential. They came up with something very interesting that was corruption, taxes. They gave examples like "If Colombia were without corruption, we would be billionaires" They are conscious about the problems, so I'm thinking that I can introduce a topic that can make them think more critically. (Camilo, interview 1, April 27, 2013)

This new evidence pushed Camilo to move away from his belief that young students are not ready to reflect and encouraged him to design a new lesson on animal cruelty which was a theme his seventh graders were interested in. After this, his lesson planning included not only raising awareness on this matter, but encouraging students to take the issue outside the classroom so that other people in their school could be informed.

After having implemented his lessons, Camilo reported that it was a positive experience, not only for him as a teacher, but also for his students, who were engaged in the lessons and whose behavior improved throughout classes. Likewise, students showed a high level of reflection when designing

posters to raise awareness on animal cruelty in their schools.

> (…) they participated a lot; they were at some point interacting between them. Regarding the behaviors, after each session they were misbehaving less frequently. At the end they could be very reflective with their opinions and the posters they presented to the class. (Camilo, reflection 3, May 25, 2013)

However, according to Camilo, students struggled to express their opinions in the target language: "The problem is that, at that level, when it is too interesting, they [students] want to talk a lot and they don't have the tools to speak in English" (Camilo, interview 3, May 31, 2013).

In addition, Camilo felt that trying to connect the grammar notions stated by the curriculum to content that led students to reflect was a challenge. He concurred with David and Carolina, expressing that planning this way also increased his workload:

> […] I think not all of the classes that we plan need to be making them reflect and participate aloud (…) because it would be thinking about more things to do: I have to explain *(sic)* them the form but then how I make it reflective or interesting. I consider that it is more job to do. (Camilo, interview 2, May 17, 2013)

He claimed that the large amount of students (41) was difficult to handle, and agreed with David, asserting that this public school context represented a challenge when trying to promote critical discussions with students:

> I consider that the amount of students was a difficulty as many of them wanted to participate and share opinions, which is good; however, because of the fact that there were about 40 people wanting to say something the noise increased and it caused some discipline difficulties […] (Camilo, reflection 3, May 25, 2013)
> What I saw interesting about this unit is that

I realized that the context is important. It is not the same a class at X (private language institute), fewer students, than in a public school. You need to make them quiet all the time to try to do a slow progress so that they produce an outcome in the target language. (Camilo, interview 3, May 31, 2013)

Finally, Camilo and Carolina encountered the same difficulty, feeling that their lesson plans should be covered strictly. This feeling made them uncertain as to whether to allow students to go deeper in some class discussions or to stop those discussions to continue with the next point in their lesson plan (Class observations 1 & 2).

> Teaching that class was hard because I was more into covering the questions. I was trying to stick to the script that I had. I wasn't really convinced about the fact that it is important to listen to each answer and I didn't think about further questions. (Camilo, interview 3, May 31, 2013)

Camilo also considered that a critical approach to teaching could only be done in the students' first language: "I'm not sure about implementing critical pedagogy in the future; I feel it is something you do in L1" (Camilo, reflection 3, May 25, 2013).

To sum up, there were remarkable transformations in the participants as they moved from phase to phase in the study: optimism turned into resistance, pessimism and skepticism turned into optimism and excitement, and later into resistance and uncertainty. Thus, at the end of this process, only Carolina who worked at a private high school felt committed to continuing to teach critically and did so during the following semester, while David and Camilo felt the context of their public schools deterred the possibility of teaching from a critical stance.

Discussion

Data suggest that David, Carolina, and Camilo's beliefs, attitudes, and reflections ranged within a spectrum of discouragement, skepticism, optimism,

resistance, struggle, contradictions, and success in different phases, but these feelings were not static throughout the study. On the contrary, they were continuously transformed as the participants faced different stages of this research. In this respect, Shor (1999) asserts that the road to CL is not easy and it is unpredictable, full of struggles, oppositions, advances, and so forth, which usually cannot be addressed in a single semester.

Beliefs tend to shape teachers' practice (Johnson, 1992; Morrell, 2002; Woods, as cited in Kuzborska, 2011). Moreover, this influence of the participants' beliefs in their practice reinforces what Bartolomé (2004) stresses, regarding the importance of "examining teachers' own assumptions, values, and beliefs and how this ideological posture informs, often unconsciously, their perceptions and actions" (p. 97). Similarly, Kettle and Sellars (1996) and (Weinstein as cited in Borg, 2003) suggest that there is evidence that programs which ignore pre-service teachers' prior beliefs might not be as effective in having an impact on them.

It is difficult to determine whether the beliefs that participants expressed at the beginning of this study were present at the moment they entered this teaching program, or if they were influenced and shaped throughout the years of preparation to become language teachers as suggested by Johnson (1994). Regardless of this factor, it is evident that the three participants, who belonged to the same teaching program, seemed, at first, unaware of the social role language teaching should play. This situation coincides with the findings presented by Cárdenas (2009) indicating that teacher preparation programs are still promoting a view of language teaching focused on skill development as opposed to a view of it as a social and cultural practice (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003).

A clear example of how beliefs influence teaching was found in this study, in which the three participants believed it was pointless to take any actions to improve the unfair situations they encountered. Hence, when planning their lessons, participants decided to go as far as raising awareness in students, but not to the point of encouraging them to take action. This finding indicates that teachers'

beliefs and perceptions about the mechanisms of power in society undoubtedly shape their teaching practice and, in this case, also prevent them from encouraging students to become an active part of the transformation of their realities as advocated by Freire (1970).

Additionally, the stage of lesson design and implementation made evident that, when moving from theory to practice, the participants' reflections and attitudes were significantly transformed and did not necessarily reflect their discourse. In David's case, his vehement discourse making a case for a more critical approach to language teaching to transform society, shifted to resistance towards planning or implementing a lesson from a critical stance. In this respect, Borg (2003) states that all of the factors that converge in classroom practices may become conflicting for teachers in the light of their beliefs, which exert a powerful influence on the decisions they make. Thus, teacher's practices might not necessarily reflect their stated beliefs or teaching principles.

It is not possible to deny that helping students to achieve the linguistic ability to cope with reflective discussions in class is a process that requires more work than providing them with grammar rules to memorize. This may be one of the factors that caused the gap between David's initial reflections and practice, preventing him from reaching what Freire called *praxis,* the articulation of theory and practice that turns into action and social change. This may have happened because his teaching experience and beliefs about language teaching and learning were probably permeated by traditional approaches to teaching and not really by the discussions and reflections held in the seminar, despite having adopted a critical discourse in this process. In this regard, Hawkins and Norton (2009) state that students who have grown as part of specific schooling systems and ideologies may show resistance when challenging their beliefs. Similarly, Bailey et al. (1996) argue that when pre-service teachers are faced with difficult situations in the classroom, they are likely to return to teaching the way they had previously been taught. Therefore, it would take some time for pre-service and in-service language teachers to reflect and challenge

themselves to move away from the traditional view of education that they have been exposed to. Moreover, the conditions of the context where David carried out his practicum, namely, the large class and curricular demands, may have affected David's possibility to match his beliefs with his practice. In this respect, Borg (1999, 2006) insists that it is paramount to consider the specific context in which teachers are, since it plays a crucial role when studying the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practice, particularly, because the context very often hinders teachers' possibilities to reflect their beliefs in what they do in the classroom. In the same vein, Morrell (2002) asserts that certain factors such as a prescriptive syllabus or difficult conditions in a classroom prevent students from experimenting with new approaches to teaching, and this also may have caused David's resistance to move to a more critical approach to language teaching. Therefore, contrary to Borg's (2006, 2009) assertion that beliefs do change during the teaching practicum, this was not reflected in David who, having acquired some teaching experience prior to his practicum, kept focusing his practice on teaching grammar rules from the beginning to the end. In this case, the "dialogic mediation" proposed by Johnson (2009, p. 63) and established through class discussions and advisory for lesson planning, did not seem to have any effect on David. Hence, it might be the case that the more teaching experience teachers have, the harder it is for them to transform their beliefs, and to see this transformation reflected in their practice.

Conversely, although Carolina acknowledged that planning was more demanding, her experience in this phase revealed that it was possible to connect language and critical reflections in her lessons, even though she was teaching a large class and her students' language proficiency level was not very high. Nonetheless, Carolina's struggle to decide on the length and depth of class discussions, coincides with that faced by the participants in a similar study reported by Pessoa and Urzêda -Freitas (2012), in which language teachers at a university also expressed uncertainty about how much time they should stay focused on an issue when teaching through critical themes.

In Camilo's case, his beliefs and attitudes

towards having a more critical approach to teaching languages sustained a significant transformation, from skepticism to optimism. Although this transformation came from observing young students who were not only aware of their realities, but also interested in expressing their opinions about those matters and proposing solutions to them, his lack of teaching experience may have facilitated the appropriation of new approaches to teaching, allowing class readings and discussions to permeate his beliefs more easily. However, since research on critical language practices is not very common (Pessoa & Urzêda -Freitas, 2012), there is not much evidence to speculate whether inexperienced teachers would be more likely to adopt critical theories than experienced ones.

However, Camilo's process was one of struggle during the last phase. Despite having evidence of his students' engagement and capacity to reflect on social issues, he asserted that teaching from a critical stance was not possible in a context where classes were large or students did not have a high language proficiency level. It is undeniable that large classes pose a challenge for teachers to be able to give each student a voice. However, this factor cannot become an excuse to continue disregarding the political role language teachers have, and it raises the issue of how to overcome it so that students from public schools, who are generally less favored by educational policies, engage in critical discussions that lead them to re-think and shape their future and the future of their communities (Luke, 2000).

Finally, it is important to consider that there are several factors that might have affected the way participants responded to the exposure to critical theories and the transformations in their beliefs, attitudes, and reflections: their social and school backgrounds, the context of their practicum sites, their teaching experience or lack of it, as well as the limited time they had to explore and reflect on critical approaches to teaching, to design their lessons, and to implement them. Additionally, it might be possible that David did not find in critical literacy a feasible approach to language teaching which resulted in his resistance towards designing and implementing critical lessons.

Conclusions

This study was set out to understand how pre-service teachers responded to the exploration of Critical Literacy theories, their beliefs and reflections while designing and implementing critical-literacy based lessons. The findings of this study suggest that: a) the three participants acknowledged the need of having a more critical approach to education in Colombia, but also the challenges of shifting education in that direction. b) They struggled when moving from theory to practice as was reflected in their resistance, contradictions, successes, and back slides in this process. c) Participants' beliefs, attitudes, and reflections were transformed throughout the study, making it evident that there is a long road to traverse with pre-service teachers until acknowledgment of the relevance of CL theories mirrors their teaching practice.

This evidence has implications for language teaching programs that would need to understand "how language is socially constructed and how it produces change and is changed in human life" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 21). This understanding would lead language teaching programs to educate teachers who are aware of their students' realities but most important who care and are committed to allowing students to transform those realities. Additionally, teacher education programs would need to acknowledge that reflecting on the importance of language teaching as a social practice cannot be relegated to a single course. Hence, although the practicum stage is a fundamental component of language teacher preparation programs, at this point it might be too late to incorporate a different frame of reference for teaching for pre-service teachers whose views of education are already rooted in many years of experience as students or members of this society.

There is, however, a need for more studies at the local level to allow further understanding of this subject and on the implications a shift in language education would carry.

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192

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