

Language as Power: Verbal Aggression Seen Through the Lens of Critical Applied Linguistics

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*To restore the human subject at the center –the suffering,
afflicted, fighting human subject- we must deepen a case
history to a narrative or tale: only when do we have a
“who” as well as a “what” -a real person”.*

Dr. Oliver Sacks.

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Este Artículo es de reflexión.

Abstract

This article shares a language classroom experience, in which language was used as a form of exercising aggression. A real example is used for describing the experience and then, the situation is analyzed from the perspective of critical applied linguistics discipline. In the classroom, language adopts different forms

and purposes and the language teacher plays a very relevant role as mediator for creating tolerant environments where the respect for the human dignity takes place. In this scenery (these arenas) critical pedagogy, its theory and practice, is an alternative to help language teachers to reflect and to take actions about the use and impact of the language in the school context. From a critical applied linguistics



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approach, language class more than a linguistic fact is a humanistic act that turns the classroom into a social practice.

Key Words: Critical Applied Linguistics, Verbal Aggression, Language as a Linguistic Fact, Classroom as Social Practice.

Resumen

Se comparte una experiencia del salón de clase, en la cual el lenguaje fue usado como forma de ejercer agresión. Un ejemplo real es usado para describir la experiencia, y luego la situación es analizada desde la perspectiva de la disciplina de la lingüística crítica aplicada. En el salón de clase, el lenguaje adopta diferentes formas y

propósitos y el profesor juega un papel importante como mediador para crear ambientes tolerantes donde el respeto por la dignidad humana tome lugar. En este escenario la lingüística aplicada crítica, su teoría y práctica, es una alternativa para ayudar a los profesores a reflexionar sobre el uso e impacto del lenguaje en el contexto escolar. Desde el enfoque de la lingüística crítica aplicada, la clase de lenguaje, más que un hecho lingüístico, es una práctica humanística que convierte el salón de clase en un hecho social.

Palabras clave: Lingüística Crítica Aplicada, Agresión Verbal, Lenguaje como hecho lingüístico, Salón de clase como práctica social.

Introduction



This paper aims at sharing a language classroom experience in which language was used as a form verbal aggression, its implications and the pedagogical actions that were necessary to implement in order to alleviate the aggression. A real example about a situation lived by a student in a public school, permitted me to visualize the power of language and to reflect about the role of the language teacher as mediators in the integral formation of our students. It is true that language is a powerful tool for constructing but at the same time, as Matsuda (1993) asserts, “Words, like sticks and stones, can assault; they can injure; they can exclude”. This is why this article presents a set of reflections about how critical applied linguistics, its theory and practice, is an alternative to help language teachers to create pedagogical environments in the classroom friendly to the tolerance and the respect among students.

Verbal aggression in this paper is considered as “the words that are used as weapons to ambush, wound, humiliate, and degrade” (Matsuda, 1993: 1). From my own experience as language teacher in different school settings, I have observed that verbal aggression is a common social practice exercised among students. The result of this practice is frustration and pain. The verbal violence exercised against Andres is a clear example about the power of language that sometimes causes negative consequences. This particular case has awoken my interest because it allowed me to reflect about the necessity of promoting, in the classroom, the use of

language in a way that favors the human dignity of our students.

Critical applied linguistics in this paper is considered from the concept given by (Pennycook, 2001) as “that continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action sometimes referred as praxis”. From my own understanding critical applied linguistics is a discipline that allows language teachers, first, to establish the integration among theory and practice of our pedagogical routines. Second, it permits reflection and action about those practices. An aspect that has called my attention about critical applied linguistics is the consideration of language from a social dimension. Through this perspective, the classroom becomes a social practice produced by the use of language. It is clear that language is used not only for acquiring academic knowledge but for constructing other social connections.

The current article includes first, the justification of the paper presented at the introduction section. Second, a real example in which a student was affected by verbal aggression in the classroom is described. Third, some reflections from the critical applied linguistics perspective are exposed including the pedagogical intervention that was necessary to implement for alleviating the case of the student. Finally, some pedagogical implications that help us, language teachers, to reflect about our daily pedagogical practice, are discussed.

To conclude, it is important to clarify to the reader that this paper does not represent a research study with a systematic



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intervention. The reflections presented here are the product first, of the theory provided and the academic discussions maintained along the different seminars of the MA program I took part. Second, they are product of the real experiences lived by my students while the teaching and learning process is carried out. So, the objective of this paper is to describe a real case of verbal violence seen through the lens of critical applied linguistics discipline.

A Case of Verbal Aggression in the Language Classroom

The following real story is an example in which language was used for exercising power through verbal aggression. I would like to point out that this situation could be familiar to my language colleagues because it is not the only case in which language is used for hurting.



Andrés is a student of ninth grade of a public school. He is a very intelligent and kind student. He began to be rejected because his classmates thought him homosexual. They make this consideration because Andrés uses a respectful vocabulary and because he is not strong as the other male students. At the beginning his classmates gave insults for discriminating and hurting him. Little by little, the student was being rejected and, at the end Andrés felt isolated and sad. One day he wrote a letter where he expressed all his feelings, all his pain. He wrote about the words that were hurting him. Andrés felt depressed because the frequent verbal aggression and one day, he drank a toxic substance. He was carried to the hospital. When he was asked about his behavior, he repeated that he is not a homosexual and that the words used by his classmates were

enough motives for acting in the way he did.

In the following section, the reader is going to know the result with the case presented. This result was the product of reflection about the situation exposed and the actions that were necessary to implement in the language classroom.

Critical Applied Linguistics for Reflection and Action

The first reflection that emerges from Andrés' experience is that verbal violence is not an isolated case where language is used for hurting and discriminating inside the classroom. Certainly, in the classroom language is used simultaneously for acquiring academic knowledge and for establishing other social relations. Consequently, in the classroom, through language students love and hate, share and reject, include and discriminate. In short, the classroom is a social practice because the social relations constructed by the students when using language, allow them to interact as social human beings. About the last consideration, Samacá asserts to say:

... our classrooms are the real representation of our society, where friendship, love, responsibility, loyalty, as well as violence, arguments, conflicts, sadness come to pass. It is because our students are showing who they are, what they have learned in their families and therefore, in the society they are involved in (2005: 130)

The last argument is relevant for my paper because it reinforces on one hand, the consideration that the classroom is a social

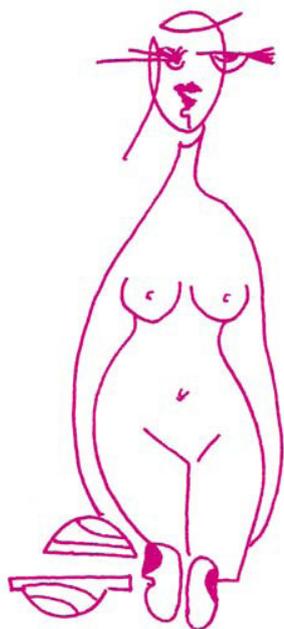
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practice. On the other, it clarifies that the classroom is a mirror of the social context where the learners interact. Otherwise, this point of view remarks the social perspective of language.

From the last perspective, a second reflection about the role of the language teacher, arises.

Some language teachers believe that for conducting an effective language teaching process it is necessary to provide students with the proper grammar structures to understand a language. Others emphasize on improving methodologies and strategies that favor the learning process. When language teachers address the process in this way, they have a clear conception that language is a linguistic fact.

But, to conceive the teaching process in this way is correct but not enough for contributing in the integral formation of our students. So, the role of the language teachers needs to go beyond the merely



act of transferring academic knowledge and to consider the process of teaching as a humanistic practice. In this practice it is necessary to identify those weaknesses that are affecting students in their human dimension. In doing it, we teachers need to reflect and re-think our pedagogical practices in order they really fit with the necessities and conflicts of the learners. It implies as Wink argues “seeing beyond, looking within and without and seeing more deeply the complexities of teaching and learning” (2000: 30).

In order to argue that critical applied linguistics is a discipline that allows us, language teachers to integrate teaching, reflection and action, two points of view were discussed. The following paragraphs explain some actions that were implemented in order to alleviate the verbal aggression mentioned previously.

It is well known that critical theory is a tenet of critical applied linguistics. Poster (1989, as cited by Pennycook, 2001) points that “critical theory springs from an assumption that we live amid a world of pain, that much can be done to alleviate the pain, and that critical theory has a crucial role to play in that process”. As it was said when describing Andrés’ case, the verbal aggression was exercised by the classmates against the student and it caused pain, frustration and hate on him. Consequently, it was necessary to implement actions for alleviating not only the particular situation of the student but for impacting the whole language classroom.

Hence, through some activities, a reflection was promoted and students began to practice values such as tolerance,



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respect and friendship. The first action was the creation of a cooperative team with other colleagues in order to raise the social sensibility on the students about the power of the words. By means of different workshops, students had the chance to reflect about the words they use for hurting. One activity consisted in writing a list of those words and then lots of antonyms were assigned to each one of these words. Then, students were encouraged to write creative cards using only positive adjectives and each student received a card as a gift. Fortunately, Andrés was surprised with more than one card.



The second action was a video forum based on the movie "Blind Love".

The second action was a video forum based on the movie "Blind Love". After watching the film, students were encouraged to reflect about tolerance and they conclude that a real human being is more than his or her physical appearance. At the end of the activity students designed beautiful posters with creative messages for decorating the classroom.

Finally, the students of ninth grade asked permission to the principal of the school and they painted a beautiful mural named "PALABRAS PARA CONSTRUIR MI

MUNDO" ("WORDS TO BUILD MY WORLD"). On this wall, students wrote messages for expressing their feelings and expectations. They expressed love, pain, happiness and solitude. The mural was the platform for students to express their life realities through language. To conclude, it is important to say first that Andrés was an active actor during all the activities. He shared and enjoyed written his messages. Second, the language classroom environment began to change favoring tolerance and respect.

Pedagogical Implications

I have focused this reflection on the importance of critical applied linguistics as a humanistic possibility for conducting the teaching language process. I want to address three pedagogical implications which are an invitation to language teachers to reflect about our daily practice.

The first deals with the role of teachers from a critical perspective. Certainly, teachers are expected to be facilitators for helping students to construct their learning process, but it implies that teachers have to go beyond the merely act of transferring knowledge. We have to reflect about the different social problems our students have and ask for solutions to these problems. When reflection and action take place in the language classroom, teachers become both, critical thinkers and critical workers, two relevant ingredients for participating in a real social change.

The second deals with the role of the teachers from the consideration that language is power. I agree with Pennycook (2001) when he states that "language is

power” but we, language teachers, have in our hands the possibility to control this power. Certainly, we have not only the possibility but the responsibility of being active guiders for conducting a humanistic teaching process where the words do not have the power of hurting but the power of sharing and loving.

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