



## CRITICAL CREATIVE WRITING: AN EXPERIENCE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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### Resumen

Este estudio de caso analiza la experiencia vivida por nueve estudiantes de décimo grado con la escritura creativa crítica como recurso para explorar sus voces. Las actividades de escritura llevaron a los participantes a explorar sus experiencias “encuerpadas” como un intento por construir su identidad personal. En este estudio, la escritura fue una forma de expresar lo que hay en sus mentes, sus corazones, sus cuerpos y su mundo circundante. Este estudio está enfocado en qué representa la escritura creativa crítica acerca de la exploración de la identidad personal de los adolescentes basada en experiencias encuerpadas. Detalles de los escritos de los participantes se presentan a través de diarios, textos creativos y una entrevista semi-estructurada. Algunos de los principales hallazgos nos muestran que la escritura mejora la exploración y reconstrucción de la identidad personal adolescente cuando los

### Abstract

This case study analyses the experience lived by nine tenth graders with critical creative writing as a source to explore their voices. The writing activities led participants to explore their embodied experiences as an attempt to build their personal identity. In this study, writing was a way to express what is in their minds, hearts, bodies and surrounding world. Details of the participants' writing are presented through journals, creative texts and a semi-structured interview. Some of the main findings show us that writing enhances the exploration and reconstruction of adolescent personal identity when teenagers connect their inner world to a social world in a process mediated by the language.

### Key words:

Critical Creative Writing, personal identity, embodied experiences, adolescents.

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This paper explores an alternative to enhance FL students by means of personal identity construction. The article has been approved by the UPTC Master Program in 'FL Teaching' within its research field 'pedagogical innovations'.

jóvenes conectan su mundo interior a un mundo social en un proceso mediado por la lengua.

**Palabras clave:**

Escritura Creativa Crítica, Identidad Personal, Experiencias Encuerpadas, Adolescentes.

## **Introduction**

For a long time, the English language teaching has been considered just in its form; this means, grammar, structures and other aspects related to its correct use. Teachers have overlooked that it is basically a language and that for this same reason, it is communication. However, there are other deeper dimensions of the language that should be explored such as the social dimension. It refers to language when it becomes a means of social and personal construction that puts the individual in co-relation with himself and with others.

Writing as part of a language is assumed as a process based on personal experiences that provide students with sources to explore their voices. It contributes to grant meaning to aspects such as feelings, emotions, life experiences and reflections as individuals and as members of a society.

This article addresses how this vision of writing was used as a platform to construct an appropriate setting of language interaction and personal identity construction for tenth graders of a private school in Bogotá.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical support of this study is based on three main elements: personal identity, critical creative writing and embodiment theory.

### **Personal Identity**

The first element is personal identity. It is conceived as an unstable social interactional construction in which the recognition of my self in relationship with others is the principle that sustains personality. This principle involves language through dialogue (Bajtin, 1929). In this interaction, many psycho, socio, cultural and linguistics features are intertwined and language is manifested by written discourse as a mediator between embodied experiences and the world.

### **Critical Creative Writing**

The second element is known as critical creative writing. It is critical because it starts from reflection, comprehension and acknowledgment of the body as the physical receptor of experiences, perceptions and readings of the world that then is converted into knowledge and construction of the

reality belonging to every human being (Freire & Macedo 1989, Burgos, 1998).

Creative writing is associated with that kind of writing that permits everybody be in contact with feelings, imagination, creativity and spontaneity because of its narrative and subjective nature. This writing is a journey of self-discovery promoted from the exploration of stirring lived experiences, memories and ideas not ordinarily or so formally expressed. Students write about themselves because writing has its roots in life itself and in the searching of sense and meaning (Peña, 1997). It allows me to be separated from myself for a moment and observe the other person that is inside and in front of me (Cixous, 1975). Writing develops a consciousness about ourselves that is connected with the world through language.

### **Embodiment Theory**

Embodiment has to do with the rooting of our thoughts and feelings in the reality of our body (Silvers, 2004; Gilligan, 2002). It is a self-discovery of our own internal world that many times we forget. In adolescence, this is a common situation. Young people are under pressure of external agents such as mass media, fashion, friends, etc. which take them away from their real feelings.

The gap between individual and his/her voice implies being another one for the rest of the world. Gilligan (2002: page 210) claims that losing our voice means not to say what we know, not to trust what we see, feel and think. This scholar also mentions that our natural voice is guided by love, and that "males and females are inherently relational, responsive beings and that

emotions- felt in the body- facilitate and enhance rather than compromise intelligence and thought". This researcher explains how emotions are not far from intelligence; on the contrary they are complementary. This is one of the main principles of embodiment theory. It takes for granted that body is what makes us be present and alive in the world.

### **Instructional Design**

In this process of the instructional design construction and implementation, cognitive, linguistic and introspective skills were required. Task-based activities were designed in order to promote different communicative skills. The different tasks were interconnected trying to find a sequence from the more intimate to the more social aspects. I aimed at providing students with circumstances that let them enjoy, analyze and reflect about their self, body experiences and personal identity.

The objectives of the pedagogical intervention were focussed on the formation of an appropriate and profitable setting of work where the students could read, interpret, explore and create texts based on different materials such as games, short stories, films, self-biographies, poems and art activities. Through these tasks, I wanted to observe the use of the language to express personal aspects of every one of the participants which helped them to reflect about themselves and the daily situations that were part of their life and identity.

The tasks included individual and group work where a reflective and collaborative attitude was required. These tasks involved

the three stages proposed by Willis (1991) pre- task, task and post- task which were joined to the development of the other communicative skills. Topics such as self-descriptions, our body shape, clothes, favorite places and their roles in teenagers' lives were the focus.

The setting created was always focused on sensibilization, introspection, reflection and finally, the expression of their own experiences and interpretations. These different elements allowed me to observe how participants began to see themselves immersed in the same class as subjects of learning for themselves.

### **Research Design**

This study is based on the principles of qualitative interpretive case studies because these principles allow me to analyze and to understand the phenomena I found in my context. Thus, this study aims at describing, interpreting and understanding how the participants link the process of writing in a foreign language with the expression of their inner world in the stage of the adolescence, that is, how they make sense of their personal world and personal identity and exteriorize it through writing.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guides this study was: What does Critical Creative Writing portray about teenagers' exploration of their personal identity based on embodied experiences?

### **Setting and Participants**

The setting selected to achieve this study

was the private religious school Nuestra Señora del Rosario from Sogamoso. The philosophy of this institution is the integral formation of children through a project of life and christian values that help to build their identity in the personal, professional and scientific field as social, humanizing agents of change in the society. The population selected for this study is composed by nine tenth graders, eight girls and one boy. These nine students are about fourteen and sixteen years old.

### **Instruments and Procedures for Data Collection**

In order to collect the information needed to answer my research question, I considered the pertinence of using students' journals, students' artifacts and a semi-structured final interview. First, I applied the students' artifacts as part of the task based activities. Second, they wrote journals in order to reflect about the topic we approached during the task or the same development of the activities. Finally, I developed an interview in order to analyse students' final conclusions and personal visions about the whole achievement of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

As described in the following sections and after a long process of data analysis, it has revealed that critical creative writing is a profitable way to have access and to re-build the personal identity of one individual. Data analysis have also permitted to analyze how the process of personal identity formation involves different components that are strongly connected to language and to the social context.

Data analysis originated one main category called "A Route Of Self-Discovery". It was composed by three components that I named as building my thought, establishing connections with the world and valuing my world. These components helped me to answer the research question posed in this study. Next, each one of them will be described.

### **A Route Of Self-Discovery**

A route of self-discovery emerges in this study as the final result after reading, analyzing and organizing the information collected through the different instruments mentioned previously. The written texts evidenced how through writing different aspects of the personal identity were revealed. These aspects deal with self-recognition, self- image, the relationship self-world and the emergence or lack of one own voice among others. The analysis and connection of each one of them leads to the construction of a personal identity.

This route of discovery included a process of self-recognition that participants made of themselves, their lives, their social conditions, their values and what the most meaningful people thought about them. Then, a route of self-discovery became the main category of this study. Through this introspective process others observe, value and label our acting and interaction according to the context. We internalize those images others have as part of our personality. This determines the kind of person we are according to (Gee, 2000)

The texts written by the participants evidenced different kinds of performance.

It is usual to find how they describe themselves as friends, students or sons. This performance is a continuous inter-relation between the individual self-image and his/her collective exchange as members of a familiar, social or scholar group.

VC said:" my life is a daily routine of any adolescent because I am student, I am, I am sister and so I am friend.

In my house I am a great child because I'm very responsible and my parents are very understanding with me. My relation with my sister and my brother is really wonderful, although in some occasions we are very annoying because in all moment we are fighting"(student's sample, self-description)

During the first two tasks based activities, participants described themselves and described others. In these activities, they added more of their self-determination in order to know and understand who they were physically, emotionally and spiritually. They expressed some reflections about their bodies, their physical appearance, their weaknesses, fears, strengths, feelings, dreams, searches, and the opinions that other people had about them. Larrain (1949:3) points out that the identities come from outside in the sense that they are how the others recognize me but they come from inside in the sense that our self-recognition is one function of the recognition from the others that we have internalized.

Body is self-discovered as something that makes us be present in the world. The body, as it is, beautiful or not very beautiful, it is our source of existence; it is the umbilical cord that connects us with people and the environment. Body also converts every perception in

experience. Hence, embodiment means retaking the value of the body.

“y una enseñanza muy importante que me dio fue que así mis manos me parezcan feas, mis uñas no me gusten y muchas cosas más, tengo que agradecer por ser completa y aceptarme como soy, y que lo más importante es lo que soy por dentro” (journal # 1 self- description)

This path of self-discovery involves three main components observed through the reading of the data. All of them are influenced by self-recognition as a crucial element that affects all the process of identity construction.

### **Building my Thought**

The self- recognition adolescents manifested was born from the process of reflection that they constantly accomplished. This originated the first component of self-discovery called “building my thought”. This component relates to that part of our identity connected with our cognition system and the way it develops the process to understand and build our vision of the world.

This part deals with an important human process which is reflection. It involves and requires the interrelation between systems of beliefs, thought, interpretation and processes of cognition in order to form and frame our understanding of the world. Every human being combines these elements with others such as values, religious beliefs, ideologies and their relation with particular cultural contexts to give origin to their own way of thinking. Reflection implies an intellectual and effective activity in which a

person explores his/her experiences in order to reach a new understanding and appreciation.

Thought and reflection can be determined by beliefs, traditions, ideologies and cultural context; however, there is another factor that shades the way of thinking, the cognitive bias. Normally, prejudices and psychological affections help human beings to distort the reality, to form false ideas and to make erroneous decisions in relation with people and situations. In regard to this aspect, there are three different kinds of cognitive bias found in the data. A first one is stereotyping, which is the fact of expecting a member of a group to have certain traits a priori without having actual information about this individual; a second one is the bandwagon effect that consists on the tendency to do or to believe things because many other people do or believe the same; and a third one is projection that is as a tendency to unconsciously assume that others share the same or similar thoughts, beliefs, values and positions.

In the fourth task, related to clothes, PC wrote: *“el orden también se puede ver en la apariencia de cada quien, con tan solo ver como lleva puesta una camisa, si esta sucia, si esta arrugada; puede uno deducir que es alguien que no se quiere, que vive en un mundo lleno de pereza y desorden”*(journal, my clothes)

Reflecting about what happens daily and its effects in society lead us to be involved in a process of critical thinking that re-builds our identity starting from simple facts such as recognizing who we are and what we do in the world. Then, self- image and self-

recognition promote critical attitudes that consolidate our identity or that produce changes in our way of thinking or relating with the world. Think about the kind of clothes I wear and the reason to wear them, makes me re-think about who I am and I can discover myself.

### **Establishing Connection with the World**

In the way of constructing our personalities we need the others to form what is called Personal Identity. This is the second component that I named "establishing interactions with the world". This means, myself and the world in an individual but simultaneously collective reading and perception of the world. In that sense, interaction is a path of double via which lets us go to the others but, at the same time, it lets the others come to me. That interaction is what allows me to build my personality using language as the linking vehicle.

One of the main aspects related to this concern is the intervention of other's voices and their influence in our decisions. Another aspect is related with how power relationships are involved in the social interaction. In this sense, those relations contribute to shaping our attitudes, thoughts and self-image. Power is another relevant issue. It is executed by economical concerns, fashion or the same parents. Adolescents' identity is always going to be linked to the context they are immersed in and the co-relation with the others. Then, they may execute power or be objects of power. The equilibrium between these two parts depends on the way a person faces this power. It can be a total and unconscious subduing, or, it can be a rational, conscious or critical act.

With respect to this, EC said: *Cuando me encontraba en el anterior colegio las personas no se fijaban mucho en tu ropa sino que realmente veían tus sentimientos. Al comenzar mi año en este colegio me encuentre con la grata sorpresa que muchas de las personas con las cuales comparto este momento se fijan mucho en tu Apariencia sin ver realmente lo que tienes en tu alma y en tu ser. Esto te enseña que cuando tu quieres a una persona la quieres por su personalidad, valores y forma de tratarte y no porque usa ropa, cara, a la moda porque realmente hay personas que no tienen los suficientes recursos económicos para estar al gusto de los demás. ( Journal , my clothes)*

Love in adolescence is one of the most important factors of personality. At this age teenagers take distance from parents' love, which represents protection and they value more their affective bonds with friends. This affection provides them security, interaction, comfort, attachment, self- esteem, self-acceptance and belonging. Later, these aspects will help them to establish stronger affectional bonds (Bowlby 1980).

### **Valueing My World**

The third and no less important component is called "Valueing my world". This component is a continuation of establishing interaction with my world because it is related to the value that other people, situation and objects represent in my world, included myself. Valueing others is the result of gazing me and then establishing a connection with what others represent in my world. Valueing the others, would provide a sort of wider attitude that embraces at the same time recognition,

respect and comprehension for others, but based on active work and recognition of the self.

About body DF mentioned: *“The parts in my body what are very important are my arms, they are indispensable for my daily activities, my study, my obligations, my jobs in the house, for my vocabulary, and a better expression in my life.*

*I think that my hands are basics in a live survivor. I don't care if they are pretty or not, really are too important in the life”.* (student's sample, self-description).

At this point, these components integrate the route of self-discovery. They are integrated and constitute that hard process of building and discovering who we are, how the world looks at us and what our position in the world is or, what it means to interact and participate in the world in order for us to be democratic beings that act from the freedom of our body, our emotions and our thoughts.

## Conclusions

The amount of data collected by means of students' artifacts, students' journals and a semi-structured interview revealed that critical creative writing constituted a means to explore and build identity. This process enhanced students with aspects to connect their inner world with their current life state amidst a social world. Then, they dug inside their lived experiences, their self-image, the feelings stored, their reflections, their weaknesses and strengths, their dreams and the connections with others. Writing on connection with the body or writing about embodied experiences operates as a conducting thread that takes out and

expresses different traits of what we are and what others consider we are.

Writing and personal identity fuse to reveal who the individual is. To say that there is a singular human being behind a body and that every person needs a voice to be heard by himself and by the world but primarily by himself. A voice that lets a person identifies with and in spite of the existence of the other.

On the other hand, writing was another way for participants to express what they knew, felt and thought to express. It was a hard task. How to shape these ideas to the limitation of a word? How to use a language that does not match with their real daily world? How to use a language that maybe they do not like? These wonderings fed students and me as a researcher. We, both, were immersed in this uncomfortable situation. Maybe this is one of the first effects to face writing, putting us in conflict with ourselves, between what we feel and we do not feel, what we think or we do not think, what we are or we are not, what we know and we do not know, what we should show and what we should hide and finally what we believe and what we should believe in. The above questions lead us to the construction of ourselves in our role of students, writers and researchers.

Opening our minds, hearts and bodies and finding ourselves when writing was one of the most relevant findings of this study. Critical creative writing let teenagers talk by themselves without the restraints of the form and the objectivity of the discourse. Writing liberates the interior voice and puts us in contact with hidden parts of our personality that normally contains fears, pain, shames



and other feelings. They are part of every person and they are what limit us to establish a better relationship with the rest of the world. The exercise of writing allowed participants to open more that dark part to the other people and self-acknowledge as a being with his own identity. That other part is always hidden and it may become the cause of many conflicts with oneself or with the others. When one person is connected consciously with that part, one is able to reflect and to act upon that part. Then one is building oneself and building a community.

To conclude, writing provides us the opportunity to be free inside our texts, to define, to characterize and to criticize ourselves, to be honest with our weaknesses, strengths, fears and dreams. In a text a person is able to observe and rebuilt a new self in spite of what others say, in spite of their own beliefs. Writing is a way to make meaning of ourselves, it means our personal identity.

In the relationship language-writing, the English language became into something like a mask that protects and liberates them from critiques. The English language was used as a secret code, as one of those games of language where just the two people understand the message. However, that fact of liberating makes us vulnerable but at the same time it strengthens us to interact with the society around us. Here writing acquires the responsibility to prepare us to be open-minded to the world in a more human relationship. It is necessary for writing to have a more relevant social role and starts changing the teachers' instrumental conception of this manifestation of the language.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

The outcomes of this study allowed me to establish a connection between the inner world of the English language learners and the use of writing to externalize features of their identity. This is a wide field of research that could be approached further because identity is a vast area of inquiry that every time changes according to the evolving society, culture and context.

On the other hand, critical creative writing is a very profitable source that should be used along the process of teaching languages at schools. It allows the exploration of different interesting aspects of life, society, culture and so on. Additionally, it develops different mental and expressive skills that permit students to find a real application and meaning to what they are learning. Then school might become what Lerner (2001) calls a community of writers for whom writing represents knowing, discovering and reflecting about relevant topics that affect daily human life. This author says that it is necessary for students to produce their own texts in order to let their ideas be known. In other words, she claims that what is necessary is "to make of the school and environment where reading and writing are alive and vital practices; where reading and writing are powerful instruments which let rethinking the world and reorganize our own thought, where interpreting and producing texts are rights that are legitimate to execute and responsibilities that are necessary to tackle" (Page 26). If this conception is assumed by teachers and learners we will be constructing a new perspective of teaching and society.

Body experiences are an interesting topic that involves the psychological part of the students in their own learning. This links real life, school and language. This association causes motivation, interest, creativity and other sources useful to explore in the process of learning.

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