



## Exploring Critical Literacy Skills in a Literature and Culture Class

---

**María Teresa Esteban Núñez**

Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia

aireste@yahoo.es

Received: June 20th, 2014

Accepted: September 15th, 2014

### **Abstract**

Critical literacy is a concept that has gained a substantial meaning in literacy fields. It offers a rich field to explore since it goes beyond the simple perception of ability or a skill. In that sense, this paper aims to present the results of a research study based on identifying and describing how critical literacy skills emerged as students of the course in Literature and Culture of English-speaking countries, reflected, questioned and inquired on culture and identity issues that are involved in different literary texts. As conclusion, it was possible to establish that Dialectical notebooks or double entry journals are useful to guide students into more reflective and analytical reading processes where they are able to confront their own realities with the texts they read.

**Key words:** critical literacy, literary texts, dialectical notebooks.

### **Resumen**

La literacidad crítica es un concepto que ha ganado un significado relevante en el área de literacidad. En este sentido, este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de investigación que buscaba identificar y describir cómo las habilidades de literacidad crítica emergían mientras los estudiantes del curso en Literatura y Cultura de países de habla inglesa reflexionaban, cuestionaban e interrogaban aspectos culturales y de identidad que se presentan o están inmersos en diferentes textos literarios. Como conclusión, se pudo establecer que los cuadernos de diálogo o diarios de doble entrada son útiles para guiar a los estudiantes a procesos de lectura más reflectivos y analíticos donde ellos pueden confrontar la realidad con los textos que ellos leen.

**Palabras clave:** literacidad crítica, textos literarios, cuadernos de diálogo.

## Introduction

Talking about critical literacy involves the understanding of many processes that have been implicit in different academic institutions and that teachers have approached in several ways. When a teacher asks her/his students to read a text and to answer some questions based on the text, this teacher is working with critical literacy; the process of asking questions (content or reflective) is part of critical literacy. When a teacher presents students a picture and asks for a description of the picture, this teacher is also working with critical literacy. When a teacher asks his/her students to write a reflective essay about a piece of paper or a movie watched during the class, this teacher is also working with critical literacy. Critical literacy implies all the processes teachers follow or design to involve students in reading. There are endless activities that teachers do with critical literacy because critical literacy provides infinite possibilities to work with.

In this paper, I account for a research study conducted in the seminar of Literature and Culture of English Speaking Countries. During this seminar I asked students to read different literary texts in order to reflect about some quotations or excerpts taken from those texts. I asked them to write or discuss about what intrigued, confused or touched them in their lives. This was evidenced in the quotations or excerpts they selected for their dialectical notebooks or for the reflective essays they wrote along the course.

Thus the study involved the use of some North American literary texts and the introduction of a new tool in the classroom

which was a dialectical notebook or a double-entry journal. This was the first time, the students involved in the study were asked to follow a dialectical notebook in order to reflect about some excerpts or quotations taken from different literary texts. Those literary texts were selected by the teacher with the intention of pushing students to reflect upon some North American Culture and identity issues while reflecting about their own concepts of their own Colombian and Boyacense culture and identity. Those concepts will be explained along this document.

## Statement of the Problem

Much of what we are is the result of a constant struggle in the process of identifying who we are. That is not an easy process; it involves different scenarios and diverse backgrounds that should be analyzed in a deeper way.

In the literature and culture course I realized about some students' beliefs regarding culture and identity. When I asked those students to talk or to express their ideas about some literary texts written by "native people", they expressed their opinions as if they were not talking about their own roots. Expressions or words as "**they**", "**those people**", "**the natives**" "**the indians**" were used frequently by students as if they were talking about aliens, people who live(d) in a dissimilar place where the students are living currently, people totally different from them.

Some of the students seemed to have forgotten their own history, their own background. On the one hand when my students talked about "**they**", it seems as if

that “**they**” was not yours. It was not part of what we are as the result of a constant mixture of races and of course of cultures.

On the other hand, the literature course was based on the conception of moving students into different processes to critically explore the literature and culture of English speaking countries as well as several practices of literature in action. Most students took the course because they liked literature and they wanted to learn more about it, but some of them were in the class because it was a requirement for their studies.

Those observations led me to rethink the type of reading my students did or were used to do. Some of them provided literal meanings or their answers did not show a deepen reflection about the reading assigned. I could identify that they answered because they had to and not because they had connected the reading with their prior knowledge or with their personal experiences as members of a society or a culture.

Regarding the aspects mentioned before I questioned myself about my role as a language teacher. It is true that we, language teachers, are called to teach the language but we are also called to open minds to become reflective and critical about the world in which we are living in. In that sense, it is necessary to go beyond the simple training of proficient English speakers and to explore fields in which future teachers and teachers are transformed into educators. Educators able to think and propose different alternatives to help learners to discover the potential they have as active members of a society.

Based on my concerns, as educator, I stated the following question to focus my research study:

What Critical literacy skills emerge while EFL undergraduate students keep a dialectical notebook or double entry journal?

### **From Literacy to Critical Literacy**

Literacy is a concept that has been defined in multiple and varied forms. For some authors as Ferreiro (2003) literacy deals with the abilities people should perform in order to read what is printed. However, this concept does not account for more expanded processes that are carried out by the performers. When people write or read, people negotiate meaning, people exchange ideas, and people produce new knowledge. In that sense, reading and writing cannot be perceived as mechanical processes. Reading and writing should be considerate as processes in which individuals play active roles and where critical positions about social and cultural issues, among others, are stood out.

Leaving literacy in its simple definition is limiting the wide field that EFL teachers or EFL teacher researchers have to explore. It is necessary to start thinking about the multiple options teachers and researchers have to approach their classes in more complex processes in which literacy is transformed into Critical literacy, or more generally critical language awareness.

Literacy conceived as simply reading and writing, as a tool, a set of skills, or a technology, or as some kind of psychological process does not make sense of the

previous literacy experience that readers (or writers) have with them while reading a text. Reading (or writing) is always reading something in particular with understanding. This understanding goes beyond the mere practice of reading or the skillful a person is to recognize sounds and words in a text.

For EFL teachers or for language educators it is imperative to recognize that dealing with a language involves political, social and cultural issues that go beyond the simple appreciation of a language as a system, in this sense, Kumaravadivelu (2006, p. 70.) states “in language teaching, critical practice is about connecting the word with the world. It is about recognizing language as ideology, not just system. It is about extending the educational space to social, cultural, and political dynamics of language”. It is about recognizing the existence of a code as a means to transmit messages with political and social implications.

### **Defining Critical Literacy**

Nowadays many EFL teachers and language educators around the world are interested in the role they are playing as activists of a language. When teaching a language, it is necessary to take into account that teachers are transmitting also other type of discourses that require a great sense of responsibility to deal with them. When teaching a language, it is necessary to reflect also about the issues of cross-cultural communication and the potential cultural values that can be imposed through the process of teaching a second or a foreign language.

By recognizing the circumstances mentioned before, teachers are involved in

critical practices where they recognize that discourse is socially constructed and therefore it has implicit intentions or interests where power relationships are stated and where certain ideologies can be privileged. In that sense, language educators and particularly EFL teachers are called to assume active roles by guiding students to read the word at the same time that they read the world.

Under these circumstances, critical literacy has achieved different definitions and approaches. Freire (1970) highlights *Critical literacy* as a theoretically diverse educational project. This project involves the reader as an active participant in the reading process, but it also deals with linguistic and grammatical analysis of critical linguistics and feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, cultural and media studies among others.

In the same line (Auerbach, 1992; & Brown, 1999) point out that Critical literacy encompasses a range of critical and analytical attitudes and skills used in the process of understanding and interpreting texts, both spoken and written. Thus, Critical literacy is also a way of interaction with information that goes beyond the decoding of letters and words. It encourages learners to question the information they receive and read in order to identify the social context, purpose, and possible effects that those texts have on their lives.

Critical literacy asks learners to look at their own opinions, biases, and perceptions of reality, and to consider those of others. In learning a foreign or second language, critical literacy can be a means of involving learners in a process of exploring the new

language and culture. For Lohrey (1998) the term critical literacy refers to efforts to go beyond surface meaning of a text by questioning the who, what, why, and how of its creation and eventual interpretation.

Critical literacy is a means of identifying the writer's or speaker's purpose and for eventually using the language oneself for such purposes. For Freire (1970) critical literacy is a way in which learners can make sense of the issues that drive society, empower themselves, and ultimately take social action. In other words, the development of critical literacy skills enables people to interpret messages in the modern world through a critical lens and challenge the power relations within those messages.

For the purpose aimed in this study, Critical literacy was understood as the ability to read literary texts in an active, reflective manner in order for students to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships throughout the history of mankind while they were involved in a process of self-recognition and identity exploration.

In order to clarify what a *text* is, the definition provided by Robinson, E., & Robinson, S. (2003) was considered. These authors define text as a "vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society". Accordingly, songs, novels, conversations, pictures, movies, among others are all considered texts.

Expanding this definition, Ewing, R., Miller, C. & Saxton, J. (2008) suggest some characteristics that literary texts should

have:

- They will have real, not controlled language that makes sense beyond sentence level;
- They will be rich in words and/or images
- They will be multi-layered
- They will be intellectually challenging
- They will be provocative of emotional responses, and
- They will represent life in an artistic manner rather than every day.

For this study, I took into account all those characteristics. Mainly, I focused on the selection of literary texts in which students could identify some specific issues related to North American Literature. Those texts were selected with the intention of exploring concepts about culture and identity.

Those literary texts were approached with a double intention. Students were asked to reflect upon North America Culture and identity while they reflected about their own perception of their culture and identity. These concepts are not static; they have been evolving at the same time that people have changed their life styles or because of the new technologies in which people have more accessibility to the information and of course to different words and worlds.

Both countries, United States and Colombia, experienced a process of colonization that brought new traditions, new customs, new religions and, of course, new languages. In this sense, a language can be perceived as a means by which people are called to be free or to be dominated. In other words, both countries experienced a conquest of language and a conquest by language.

Seed (1990) cited in Collins & Blot (2003) state that “Throughout the conquest, language became an instrument of domination, a means of coercing speakers of indigenous languages in order to mold their minds, expressions, and thoughts into the formulas, ritual phrases, and inflections of sixteenth-century Castilian culture (p.12). The new language for the indigenous was not a tool to become free because they were free before the colonizers’ arrival. The new language was one of the means that colonizers used in order to dominate and impose their will over the inhabitants of this new land.

In this sense, the language and literacy background that indigenous people possessed before the colonizers’ arrival became into an impediment for the conquerors who wanted to evangelize and colonize the new world. It is in this struggle where I focused my attention with my English literature students. This process of colonization brought within it a hybrid identity which starts in the colonial encounter and that has last to our days.

Therefore, we are the result of a long process in which we cannot talk about a single identity or a single culture. We as, Spanish/indigenous/African descendants, are a mixture. Our culture and identity are a mixture that is not easy to understand but it deserves a deepen study when processes of reading and writing about culture are carried out in a classroom.

Many authors around the world, especially in North America, have written about that struggle for identity. (Ortiz, 2007; Anzaldúa, 2007; Tapahonso, 1982; Momaday, 1975;

Cabeza de Vaca, 1907, among others) In these authors we can perceive that the struggle for identity is a struggle to write the lives of subject peoples. It is a struggle in which people are constantly asking the question who am I? This question was the basis for this study. During the term students were requested to answer different questions considering some literary texts. However, those questions were proposed in order to answer the key question presented before: who am I?

### **Pedagogical Implementation**

In order to provide students with opportunities to analyze, reflect and assume critical positions towards the texts we had for the literature class, I decided to suggest them to keep a double entry journal or dialectical notebook. The purpose of this tool was to ask students to select one quotation, excerpt or line from the texts. These quotations were selected because they considered they were touched, confused or intrigued with the words of the author.

During a semester students were asked to write their dialectical notebooks once each two weeks. In that sense, not only did they have the possibility to select the quotation from the same text, but they had the chance to select several texts we read for the class. Each two weeks, I collected the dialectical notebooks and read what they had written and I provided them with comments about their writings. Sometimes, I invited them to go deeper into the process of reading or I questioned them about the ideas they wrote with the intention of moving them into more reflective and analytical reading processes. Other times, I highlighted those ideas I

considered were the result of a more reflective and analytical process.

Throughout the process of reading the different dialectical notebooks, I could observe that they were more engaged and motivated to keep their dialectical notebooks. At the end of the thirteen week of the semester, I had the information I needed to answer my research question.

As part of the pedagogical implementation I could identify that culture and identity were two concepts that were floating the dialectical notebooks they kept. In that sense, I decided to read about them with the intention to understand the reading processes my students were doing.

### **Culture and Identity**

Talking about culture is talking about different issues. For some authors culture regards art and all the aesthetic products done by people. However culture involves sociolinguistic aspects that are the basis for the construction of social relationships and for the establishment of common ideologies and understandings that are preserved through distance and time.

Kramsh (1998) argues that culture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. These standards are what are generally called their 'culture'.

In this sense, culture is a heritage that permeates life and that remains with us by means of our ways of acting in diverse circumstances or scenarios. We learnt those behaviors from our parents, our teachers or from other people who touched or have touched our lives in their different stages. Culture also involves all the beliefs we have about ourselves and the beliefs that others have about us. It means that culture is the result of a process in which people invent and re-invent their lives in order to feel they are part of a community or a social group.

Nowadays, we are living a process of transculturation because of the globalization and the easy access to the different means of communication. Ortiz (1995) states that the transculturation process is a phenomenon that goes beyond acculturation and deculturation. Transculturation involves both and it is also the result of the constant struggle people live in order to become or to be recognized as part of the new society that the global world is claiming. A new society where people should play a critical role, but the situation is that this phenomenon is as stronger that many people become part because of fashion or because they are pushed by other people.

The problem with transculturation relies on phenomenon that is almost unnoticeable. It demands an urgent analysis in the academic settings where culture is a field of study. This literature class involves culture and therefore the analysis of the numerous situations regarding culture is taken as an important issue. It is necessary to provide spaces to reflect upon culture as heritage but also as a process that is in constant transformation and that carries out serious implications for

people belonging to the least favored social groups: indigenous people, minorities, ethnic groups and in our current times under developed countries as Colombia.

It is not necessary to do a complete study to realize that because of globalization we are living a new process of colonization. Because of globalization we have being called to speak a language that is the requirement to be part of the global world. However, we can say that the establishment of that requirement has serious implications for us as non-English speakers.

Fanon cited in Bhabha, (2002) states that to be colonized is more than being subjugated physically, it is being culturally too. Being colonized is to lose one's language and to absorb other's. For Fanon, being colonized by a language has large implications for one's consciousness. Therefore, who are subjugated try to assume all the cultural baggage from the subjugator: In that way, those who are subjugated are accepting their inferiority, they are assuming that they are not completely human and almost savage.

So then, if this new world requires a common code, then it is necessary to create the means for people or our students to learn the code without losing or diminishing or culture, our identity and our particularities as the racial mixture we are part of.

Defining identity is a complex process that involves all the scenarios in which people spends their lives. We play many roles in different moments of our lives and probably we are not the same at school, at home, at work, with our students, parents, children,

spouses. We see ourselves differently in different contexts; as a result we live in a constant struggle to answer the question that guided my literature seminar: who am I?

Perdomo (2001) argues that the reader requires thinking skills, such as the ability to classify, compare, analyze, deduct, induce and synthesize. The same author also suggests that students should read things of their interest, and that reading topics should not always be imposed by the teacher, but they could be chosen by the students. She also states that teachers should help students, not only through the teaching of reading strategies (prediction, global understanding of a textbook, inferences, deduction of meaning through vocabulary), but through the steering of thinking skills.

The author concludes that students will improve these skills and strategies by establishing analogies between his/her mother tongue and the foreign one, and in doing so, the reader will gradually become more autonomous. This study guided me to allow my students to select the quotations they liked the most in order to reflect about them. In this sense, they were not free to select the whole reading, but they were free to select the part they want to reflect about.

### **Type of study and Methodology**

The study was approached through the action research method. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) cited in Burns (2010) propose four stages in carrying out an action research: Observing, planning, acting and evaluating. In the study and by means of observation, I could identify the situation with

my students when they were asked to answer some questions about the literary texts we read in our classes. The second step was carried out when I introduced the dialectical notebook in order to push them to select a quotation or an excerpt from the literary texts. That selection should be based on the quotations that intrigued, confused or touched them. The third stage was covered when students wrote about the quotation and when students were motivated to participate actively in the discussions we had in our classes as well as in the process of writing their essays. In the last stage, the data was analyzed and the findings came out.

### Research Context and Participants

The Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, UPTC, is a public institution located in Tunja, Boyacá. It offers 54 undergraduate academic programs and 17 graduate programs. It is divided into different schools that offer an array of programs such as: Medicine, Engineering, Law and Political Sciences, Social sciences, Education, Economics and Administration, among others.

Foreign Language Teaching has been the responsibility of two academic units at the University: The Languages School and The International language Institute. This study was carried out at the Language School, with eight level students who took the seminar in Culture and Literature of English Speaking Countries.

### Population

The group selected for the study was

students who were taking the seminar in Literature and Culture of English Speaking Countries. This group was not selected at random because I choose them regarding the core of the study about the students critical literacy skills" and "literary texts". It was a group of 35 students, 23 girls and 12 men. Participants were ranged from 21 to 30 years old. For the study, five out of the thirty seven students voluntarily accepted to participate in the study, four women and a man. They all signed a consent form. In order to protect their identity, along the data analysis I will refer them as S1, S2, S3, S4 and S5.

### Instruments

Any type of research is relevant if it is based on and if its results emerge from a process of triangulation. Triangulation allows the corroboration, validity and reliability of the information. In this case, a methodological triangulation was used (Denzin, 1970).

Data sources included dialectical notebooks or double-entry journals, and students' artifacts two student reflective essays. Dialectical notebooks and students' reflective essays on readings were used to capture students' responses to the texts discussed in class and to examine students' critical literacy development.

**Dialectical notebooks:** They are note-taking frameworks that help students construct meaning as they interact with a text (Calkins, 1986). Students were asked to design their dialectical notebook as a series of conversations with the texts we read during the course. Students were asked to select and to reflect about the quotations

that intrigued, confused or touched them. This instrument was used to capture students' responses as well as the key tool to identify the emerging critical literacy skills.

**Students' artifacts:** They are "the range of written and symbolic records kept by or on participants in a social group" (Goetz and Lecompte, 1984, cited in Merriam 1991, 105). Two reflective essays were used to examine in a more deepen way students' critical literacy development. Students were asked to write in a reflective and critical approach about the literature topics or texts we had for the class. For this task, they had not only to focus their attention on particular quotations form the texts, but in the general content of the texts they read for the classes or in the topics approached around those texts.

## Findings

To collect data, I used five dialectical notebooks or double-entry journals, and two critical reflective essays. From the data collected I could identify some of my students' critical literacy skills emerging from the reading activities we approached in our classes. Critical literacy is associated with the possibilities students have to question, analyze and criticize the texts they are asked to read.

In the next charts, some excerpts related to the development of some critical literacy skills are presented. The left column presents the quotation selected by the students and the right column the reflection they did towards the quotation selected.

The aim of all literacy programs, as the literature class I conducted, should be the development of a critical literacy where learners focus not just on the mechanics or content of written texts, but on the construction and the way that readers are positioned within the texts. (Hammond, et al 1992, p.12)

The data collected allowed me to identify students use of critical literacy skills to reflect upon issues related to gender and race discrimination, power, equity, language, identity among others. Furthermore, it was possible to identify that they were not focused only on one critical literacy skills. The data analysis showed that critical literacy skills are overlapped. The analysis skill goes hand in hand with other critical literacy skills as reflecting or questioning.

The next sample evidences the connection among the different critical literacy skills. This participant selected one quotation related to gender position:

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions, she could turn: to the church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (p.39)</p> <p>Anzaldúa, G. (2007)</p>	<p>During different ages, women's role has played an important part in culture. They have been characterized by their jobs. Women do not have the opportunity to do other things that culture has established for them.</p> <p>Women are the result of society wishes. Women do not have the opportunity to be who they want to be. Truly, who am I? And Am I what I want to be? Who has the answer? I as a woman or the society as a Judge? (S3, Third Dialectical Notebook)</p>

The same situation related to gender position can be observed in the next sample:

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“Culture forms our beliefs...culture is made by those in power- man. Males makethe rules , womentransmitthem” (p.38)</p> <p>Anzaldúa, G. (2007)</p>	<p>Culture is made by our beliefs and traditions. Any person is part of a culture because of the way he/she performs in his own life. Nowadays, our culture has some rules that are controlled by men. They have the power to control women. In that way, we can see that machismpredominates in life. They can manage the women as they want.</p> <p>The work of a woman is trying to change that conception. We can manage our life without men. We also have a body, a soul, a heart. We also feel everything that happens in life. We also can take risk to manage our lives! (S2, Third Dialectical Notebook)</p>

Although this participant was criticizing the role women have been imposed, she was also stating the new roles women should take. Women are responsible of giving a direction to their lives.

Language perceptions were also analyzed and reflected along their dialectical

notebooks. Language for the participants cannot be perceived as a simple tool to communicate something. For them language has power. They analyzed that by means of language cultures have been dominated and nowadays, language has been used to control people. The next samples exemplified their reflections.

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“Making Language Familiar and accessible to others, bringing it within their grasp and comprehension, it is what a writer, teacher and storyteller does” (p.4)</p> <p>Ortiz, S.( 1992)</p>	<p>Language can expose and show real life and how we can promote a change on people's ideas. Language is power and it doesn't belong to certain people, it is open for everybody. What happens when it belongs to certain people is that they cover the language with unknown stuff and behind it, there can be an objective or plan they got in mind (I'm talking about government) Government makes language harder to understand. Government control people through language. (S1, First Dialectical Notebook)</p> <p><i>From the same quotation S5 wrote:</i></p> <p>People think that language is only a tool to communicate ideas. That is not true! Language make in contact with culture, feelings, emotions, and thoughts, to show the others what is inside our hearts. The heart is waiting for a moment to tell his history to others.</p> <p>Every day we have to look for own voices....our voice is the only one who knows what is really happening with our lives. (S4, First Dialectical Notebook)</p>

The dialectical notebooks gave also students the possibility to question about their own identities. The next excerpts present how they

besides reading the text for the class, they were also reflecting and identifying that sometimes it is difficult to know who we are.

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“In other words, I am Three” (p. 3)</p> <p>Mingus, Ch. (2008)</p>	<p>I'm not the reflection of the mirror, I'm not the clothes I wear, I'm not the words I use. I'm not the stuff in my room; I'm not my own shadow...</p> <p>Or Could I be my own shadow that just appears at night, and needs some light to come out?</p> <p>Or could I be what my eyes watch inside themselves?</p> <p>Or the meaning between lines?</p> <p>Or could I be something else that I don't know yet... (S1, Second Dialectical Notebook)</p>

In this case, S1 is analyzing that he is not what he has considered as part of his own perception. He is not the person he observes every single day in the mirror. He is not what he likes to wear. He is something that he

has not discovered yet. He is looking for an answer to know who he really is.

On the same line of thought S5 wrote in her third dialectical notebook.

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“Because I'm a mestizo continually walk out of one culture and into another, Because I'm all cultures at the same time” (p.99)</p> <p>Anzaldúa, G. ( 2007)</p>	<p>To start recognizing myself in the mirror, I must take the word "mestiza" and sort of highlight it. Because I'm a mestiza, a mix of cultures, a mix of feelings and struggles throughout times. I'm the living proof of my past, my roots, my blood. I can see on my face the features of my grand, grand, grandmother; her rounded eyes like mine, her strong legs like mine, her long hair just like mine, and what I see is a lifetime of customs and traditions running in my blood....I'm a mestiza, a mixture, I got the understanding for jumping from one culture to another, learning from the differences, feeding my soul with the essence of what is surrounding me, dancing with sound of African Bungoes.</p> <p>(S5, Thid Dialectical Notebook)</p>

For this participant, recognizing her roots is the starting point to know who she is. She is a mestizo as Gloria Anzaldua since she can see it in her eyes, in her hair, in every part of her body. She is a mixture of cultures and by identifying those aspects; she can recognize herself in a mirror. This quotation showed me that the use of the dialectical

notebooks allowed participants to identify that they did not belong to a single culture. As a result of the mixture of different cultures through our history, boyacense people can move from one culture to another.

This last observation is also evident in the next sample:

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“Who were you that night after all the beer you drank that long winter day, who were you?” (p.1)</p> <p>Tapahonso, L. (1987)</p>	<p>Who were you? It is a very difficult question. Maybe it is very hard to answer because we don't know who are we? In the present we don't like to recognize our mistakes....when we are drunk, we don't see us in a mirror. But I consider it is a good idea for seeing how others are looking us and how our soul....we have immersed two cultures...but it seems we do not know. We are proud of being descendants of white people, but that people were barbaric and they make us to forget who we were and who we are. (S2, Fourth Dialectical Notebook)</p>

Regarding the same issues, S1 wrote in his first essay:

Our roots and our origins have been penetrated by the North American Culture, and our identity as Latin has been stained because of the frequent abuses from the United States in aspects of immigration, discrimination, segregation, racism, slavery, drugs and its imperialist policy.

These participants besides reflecting about the cultural heritage we have, they are also criticizing the colonization process. For them, the conquerors as well as North American

Culture are responsible of indigenous or native cultures disappearance, as it is stated in the dialectical notebook: “they make us to forget who we were and who we are”. Thus, I could identify that “we read not only as individuals but as members of social groups, as parents, consumers or teachers-one or other of these social identities may be salient on any particular occasion we interact with written language” (Wallace 1992, p. 67)

Racism was also part of the critical analysis participants were doing. The next participant stated that more than a skin color, there are other ways to segregate people: land, family and even last names:

Quotation	Reflection
<p>“The U.S Mexican border es una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds” (p.25)</p> <p>Anzaldúa, G. (2007)</p>	<p>A border is a line that divides a culture, a thought, a history and a life. On television many politicians and experts in economy, sociology, history and human rights say that all of us are a family. But nowadays we can see that there is racism. A huge hate for black people even native people. Nobody is better than others. All of us are equal without having in mind the land, the family, the last names....we don't need a borderland, we are not dangerous. (s2, Third Dialectical Notebook)</p>

A similar analysis related to segregation was observed in one of the essays written by S4:

“We cannot say that crossing a borderland is good or not. We are all Americans, but we cannot enter or go to American countries as easy as it should be. We are in the same continent. We have some characteristics different of the other countries. We are a family and each country is a member of this beautiful family called America”

The same idea was also discussed by S5 in her essay:

“The belief that a person is less than human because of skin color, language, customs, place of birth or any factor that reveals the basic nature of that person, makes people do not know who they are. In other words they do not know what their identity is”

For other participants, identity recognition becomes into a kind of struggle. Some of them stated that they were hidden. Sometimes to be hidden was their decision but other times it happens because of external circumstances. That is the case that I could observe in the next sample:

Quotation	Reflection
<p>"Do not worry about imitating someone....go for your own voice...I'm who I am." (p.1)</p> <p>(Momaday, S. (1996)</p>	<p>We are all surrounded by different circumstances which make us grow in different ways and see the world under other perspectives. Talking about myself, I found my own voice with some delay....I was hidden for many years, running away from who I am. A woman with passions and desires, starving for living up without regrets. While I was doing this journey inside my soul, I crushed with emptiness, with imitation of a false reality, nothing around was mine...I had not built anything. (S3, Five Dialectical Notebook)</p>

This participant considered that she was hidden because she believed that what she was doing reflected her. However, one day she woke up and identified that her beliefs were full of emptiness. She was imitating and what she considered hers did not exist. This participant also stated her position as woman. I could say that this reflective process helped her to identify that she had dreams and she was able to live her life with more passion.

All the data collected allowed me to identify that involving students into different activities, as the dialectical process they followed, gave me also the possibility of listening to my students voices regarding their positions towards sociocultural issues that are implicit in the texts we had for our classes. In this sense, Shore (1994) in Brown (1999) states that: «Critical practice connects issues of power, inequality, and knowledge with the literacies we teach and learn»(p.53). These practices should be mandatory along the curriculum areas related to literacy.

## Conclusions

Dialectical notebooks or double entry journals are useful to guide students into more reflective and analytical reading processes. Before the implementation of the double entry journals, students read the texts because it was something that was asked for the literature class. However, after reading and analyzing what they wrote regarding the quotation they selected, I could identify that through the dialectical notebooks their reading processes were more thoughtful and critical.

It was also possible to identify that the texts used for the class provided students with opportunities to reflect upon socio cultural issues that were implicit in the same texts. Participants were able to question gender, race and identity while they were reflecting upon the quotations they have selected.

Through the use of dialectical notebooks, participants went beyond the simple reading they used to do before the implementation of these double entry journals.

Guiding students into a different type of reading revealed that it was possible to foster the development of critical literacy skills. Although it was the beginning of a long process to follow with, I can say that these participants will continue reading future printed and not printed texts into a more reflective and analytical way.

## References

- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands: La Frontera: The new Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making meaning, making change: Participatory curriculum development for adult ESL literacy*. McHenry, IL and Washington, DC: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Bhabha, H. (2002). *Interrogating Identity. Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative, in Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, K. (1999). *Developing critical literacy*. Sydney, NSW, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University.

- Burns, A. (2010). *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching: A Guide for Practitioners*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cabeza de Vaca, Á. (1907). *The Narrative of Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca*. Edited by F. W. Hodge. New York: Scribner's.
- Calkins, M. (1986). *Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Collins, J & Blot, R. (2003). *Literacy and Literacies*. West Nyack, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from: [http://site.ebrary.com/lib/biblioteca\\_uptc/Doc?id=10069924&ppg=172](http://site.ebrary.com/lib/biblioteca_uptc/Doc?id=10069924&ppg=172).
- Denzin, N. (1970). *The Research Act in Sociology*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Ewing, R., Miller, C. & Saxton, J. (2008) 'Drama and contemporary picture books in the middle years' in J. Hughes, M. Anderson & J. Manuel (eds.), *Drama Teaching in English: Imagination, Action and Engagement*, pp. 121–135, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Ferreiro, E. (2003). *Past and Present of the verbs to Read and to Write*. Toronto: Groundwood Books
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Hammond, J., Burns, A., Joyce, H., Brosnan, D. & Gerot, L. (1992). *English for social purposes*. Sydney: NCELTR
- Hefferman, L & Lewison, M. (2000). *Making real-world issues our business: critical literacy in a third grade classroom*. *Primary voices K-6*, 9, 2, 15-21.
- Kramersch, C. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford University Press. Oxford
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Lohrey, A. (1998). *Critical literacy: A professional development resource*. Melbourne, Australia: Language Australia.
- Merriam, S. (1991). *Case Study Research in Education: A qualitative Approach*. San Francisco. Oxford: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Mingus, Charles. (1998). *Beneath the Underdog*. London: Canongate Books.
- Momaday, N. (1975). *The Writer Warrior*. Retrieved from: <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mom0int-3>
- Ortiz, F. (1995), *Cuban Counter point: Tobacco and Sugar*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Ortiz, S. (1992). *Woven Stone*. Tucson: University of Arizona press.
- Perdomo, M. (2001). *An approach to making students autonomous readers of the English Language*. *Profile*, 2, 1, (pp. 57-58).
- Robinson, E., & Robinson, S. (2003). *What does it mean? Discourse, Text, Culture:*

*An Introduction*. Sydney: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Tapahonso, L. (1987). Who were You? Retrieved from <http://www.hanksville.org/voyage/poems/drunk/drunk4.html>

Wallace, C. (1992). Critical literacy awareness in the EFL classroom. In. N Fairclough (ed). Critical language awareness. Harlow: Longman.

#### THE AUTHOR

MARÍA TERESA ESTEBAN NÚÑEZ is an assistant profesor at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia. She holds and M.A. in Language Teaching from the same University. She belongs to the research group Knowledge in Action-KIA. Currently; she is the Academic Coordinator of the M.A. in Language Teaching Program at Uptc.