Exploring Critical Television Literacy Skills in a Tenth Graders' Classroom*

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Forma de citar este artículo: Esteban Núñez, M. T. (2016). Exploring critical television literacy skills in a tenth graders' classroom. *Cuadernos de Lingüística Hispánica*, (27), 223-244.

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*   Artículo de investigación científica.

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Abstract

This study was aimed at providing tenth graders with spaces and activities to develop critical television literacy skills. This was the first time that students at Antonio Nariño School in Moniquirá, were involved in the analysis of TV programs. Therefore, this activity allowed them to establish a new type of interaction between the TV programs and their personal and familiar worlds. A descriptive case study was conducted and the data analysis reported that teenagers are in a process of building up their personalities and identities. In this process, they ask their closer realities and identify in the sitcoms representations of the reality and spaces to learn about academic issues as well as guides to solve daily life problems.

Key words: Critical Media Literacy, Critical Television Literacy, Teenagers.

Explorando habilidades de alfabetismo crítico en televisión en una clase de décimo grado

Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo proveer a estudiantes de décimo grado con espacios y actividades para desarrollar habilidades de alfabetismo en medios. Esta fue la primera vez que los estudiantes del Colegio Antonio Nariño en Moniquirá, fueron involucrados en el análisis de programas de televisión, por lo tanto, esta actividad les permitió establecer un nuevo tipo de interacción entre los programas de televisión y sus mundos personales y familiares. Se llevó a cabo un estudio de caso descriptivo y el análisis de la información reportó que los adolescentes están en un proceso de construcción de sus personalidades e identidades donde ponen en tela de juicio sus realidades más cercanas e identifican en las telecomedias representaciones de la realidad y espacios para aprender acerca de asuntos académicos, así como también a solucionar problemas de su vida diaria.

Palabras clave: Alfabetismo Crítico en Medios, Alfabetismo Crítico en Televisión, Adolescentes.

Explorant des habilités d'analphabétisme critique en télévision dans une classe de seconde

Résumé

Cette étude a eu comme objectif, le fait de pourvoir aux élèves de seconde, avec des espaces et activités pour développer des habilités d'analphabétisme dans les Médias. Celle-ci a été la première fois que les élèves de l'école Antonio Nariño à Moniquirá, ont été involucrés dans l'analyse de programmes de télévision. C'est pourquoi cette activité leur a permis d'établir un nouveau type d'interaction entre les émissions de télévision et leurs mondes personnels et familiers. On a réalisé une étude descriptive, et l'analyse de l'information a reporté que les adolescents sont dans un processus de construction de leurs personnalités et identités, où ils mettent en question leurs réalités les plus proches En plus ils identifient, dans les télé-comédies, des représentations de la réalité et des espaces pour apprendre à propos des affaires académiques, ainsi qu'à résoudre aussi les problèmes de leur vie quotidienne.

Mots clés: Analphabétisme Critique dans les Médias, Alphabétisme Critique en Télévision, Adolescents.

Explorando habilidades de alfabetismo crítico na televisão em uma sala de aula do segundo ano do Ensino Médio

Resumo

Este estudo teve como objetivo prover a estudantes do segundo ano do Ensino Médio com espaços e atividades para desenvolver habilidades de alfabetismo nos meios. Esta foi a primeira vez que os estudantes do Colégio Antonio Nariño em Moniquirá foram envolvidos na análise de programas de televisão, portanto, esta atividade lhes permitiu estabelecer um novo tipo de interação entre os programas de televisão e seus mundos pessoais e familiares. Levou-se a cabo um estudo de caso descritivo e a análise da informação reportou que os adolescentes estão em um processo de construção de suas personalidades e identidades onde questionam suas realidades mais próximas e identificam nas telecomédias representações da realidade e espaços para aprender acerca de assuntos acadêmicos, assim como também para solucionar problemas de sua vida diária.

Palavras chave: Alfabetismo Crítico nos Meios, Alfabetismo Crítico na Televisão, Adolescentes.

Introduction

Currently we are moving in contexts where mass media has achieved a relevant position. Internet, video games and television are everywhere. These new contexts require codes of communication; therefore it is necessary for people to become media literate in their use and more important in the analysis and understanding of the information that is provided through the media appliances that are part of their daily life.

The study presented in this paper provided participants with questions and activities where they reflected not only about the literal content, but also the information "behind the curtain" that was provided in commercial TV programs or sit-coms such as The Simpsons and The Fairly Odd Parents. The experience they lived with this study opened their eyes to the different intentions and manipulative processes that producers and owners of mass media put behind the content of their products, in this case, commercial TV programs or sitcoms.

One main question and a sub question were answered along the data analysis process: What does the analysis of TV sitcoms reveal about tenth graders critical television literacy skills? And how do tenth graders perceive the role of sitcoms in their critical literacy development?

1. Some Definitions about Literacy

By tradition literacy has been defined as the ability to read and write in a proper way and according to some rules. In that sense, Ferreiro (2003) observes that literacy was considered as a technique. The technique of drawing and reading what is printed. Nowadays, the concept has been expanded and it provides a richer field where literacy is not a simple technique but it involves the world in which the human beings develop their daily life.

Freire & Macedo (1987) state that literacy cannot be considered only as the development of skills; literacy implies cultural processes in which people produce, transform and reproduce meaning.

Regarding the previous considerations, it can be stated that there are different dimensions of literacy depending on the discipline we describe or we are interested in exploring. Thus, literacy cannot be perceived as a simple field of study about reading and writing. Literacy has been approached since linguistic studies that emphasize the language or textual dimensions of reading and writing. The cognitive psychologist studies, in which the mental processes are explored to identify how meanings through and from print are generated. A socioculturalist approach that takes into account acts of literacy where identity and power relations are defined and finally, the developmentalist view about the strategies used and the patterns found in the learning of reading and writing (Kucer, 2001).

The same author further defines literacy as a dynamic and multidimensional word. Therefore, literacy education needs to involve all the dimensions in which the student is immersed in, inside or outside the school. Becoming literate is to be able to read and write the world in different ways. It involves going beyond the printed paper to the screen in the computer or in the TV set. Be literate implies processes that go further than reading and writing in order to answer a test or to develop a comprehension reading activity in a class. Be literate entails the competence to read *between lines* the intentions of the authors or producers.

1.1 Towards an Understanding of Media Literacy

Explaining the concept of media literacy is not simple. Different authors and researchers around the world have intended to find a single definition, but there is not a total agreement. Buckingham *et al.* (2004) cite the definition given by Ofcom (It is the independent regulator for the UK communications industry). For this institution "media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts" (p. 1). These same authors state that children develop media literacy even without training or explanation about it. Under this umbrella, they provide different definitions of what media literacy is, in terms of access, understanding and creativity.

Access is defined as a functional literacy. Most of the children and young people know how to use media appliances and how going through the provided information in them. They are aware of the risks they confront when they are in internet. In that sense, these authors claim that media literacy should be a more helpful strategy than blocking or filtering.

In terms of understanding, different studies have shown that children's knowledge of the language that is used in television, the gap between representation and reality, and the persuasive role of advertising, increase while children and young recognize the world and because of their social and cognitive development (Buckingham *et al.*, 2004). Forms

of media literacy are used, in this part, when children express their emotions or when they make critical judgments about violence and other issues represented in television. This concept of media literacy was the key for the proposed study.

Finally, the concept of creativity seems to be the less explored. Buckingham *et al.* (2004) further argue that this engages a potential field to be explored in the context of education since its exploration can foster the development of critical understanding.

Hobbs (1998) observes that according to the intentions of educators or media instructors, media literacy has been assumed from different points of view. She proposes seven questions that get together the diverse ideas about media literacy and light the way that guide the classroom practices for the teachers interested in teaching and working with media.

- Should media literacy education aim to protect children and young people from negative media influences?

- Should media production be an essential feature of media literacy education?

- Should media literacy focus on popular culture texts?

- Should media literacy have a more explicit political and/or ideological agenda?

- Should media literacy be focused on school-based k-12 educational environments?

- Should media literacy be taught as a specialist subject or integrated within the context of existing subjects?

- Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations?

The experience reported in this paper related mainly to the third question proposed by Hobbs, but it also implies some aspects of the first and the sixth ones. In consequence, for the purpose of this study, media literacy involved two popular sit-coms "The Simpsons" and "The Fairly Odd Parents". These programs were used to engage students personal media consumption understanding into the classroom. Simultaneously, this study involved the process of understanding or analyzing proposed by Buckingham *et al.* (2004).

1.2 Defining Critical Media Literacy

Growing bodies of research suggest that if students are taught to become critical viewers, teachers will give them more than the ability to analyze the construction of isolated

images; teachers also give them the ability to think critically about the composition of the picture, fostering their skills to read words and worlds (Considine, 2002). Reflecting on the same issue, Freire & Macedo (1987) state that

> Critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 36).

Students go to schools with lots of knowledge that is unknown by teachers. Most of schools have included technology and science as areas to teach students how to access them, but some of them do not plan courses to evaluate and analyze the information that is transmitted through the different appliances that students use every day, inside or outside the classroom. In this sense, It can be said that there is not a real relationship between what students come to "learn" and what students need to learn about their world.

Shaw (2003) forces the idea of the necessity of teaching children how to read about, watch, interpret, understand and analyze the time they are living in, on the opposite, he says that we are dealing with a future generation of "civic illiterates, political ignoramuses and uncritical consumers, vulnerable not only to crackpot ideas, faulty reasoning and putative despots but fraudulent sales pitches and misleading advertising claims" (p. 3). He concludes that teaching media literacy is, teaching critical thinking.

Critical media researchers and practitioners claim a social constructionist perspective where viewers construct meaning based on their prior experiences and by establishing a dialogue with the images and sounds they receive from the screen (Tisdell, Stuckey & Thompson, 2007). To this point, it is important to address students' prior experiences. Short (2001) acknowledges the importance of involving learners' prior knowledge, life experiences and social knowing in the educative practices.

Supported in the framework discussed above, Giroux in Freire & Macedo (1987) states that teachers are called to give students opportunities to question multiple languages and ideological discourses contained in different materials and texts.

From all the literature explored and for this particular study, media literacy was understood as the capacity to access and analyze the information that is transmitted in different media appliances as well as the ability to produce different media form. However, as the core of this study was critical media literacy, in this study, critical media literacy was understood as the capacity that students possess to take and assume a critical position

and to express their point of view and opinions about the messages that go particularly in TV programs. In that sense, the present article accounts for the implicit processes when students analyze some TV sitcoms. In the study the other two concepts of media literacy: access and production were not taken into account.

1.3 Television and Critical Television Literacy

Television has played an important part in the evolution of science and technology. Its early stage was conceived as a means for generating education. At the beginning, television was filled with educative programs; later and because of its easy accessibility and the new requirements of the society, television became a space for entertainment and relaxes.

Children and adults devote much time in front of a screen. Lawrence *et al.* (1993) point out that students spend hours in front of a screen, even when they have their meals. Kuan (2007) expresses that elementary-age children spend an average of four and a half hours a day in front of a television screen, computer monitor, or video game and concludes that schools may not be helping young viewers handle what they are seeing and hearing.

The research study, that I developed, relied on Salomon's (1983) cited in Goldthorpe (1993) definition of TV literacy, which is condensed in the next graphic.
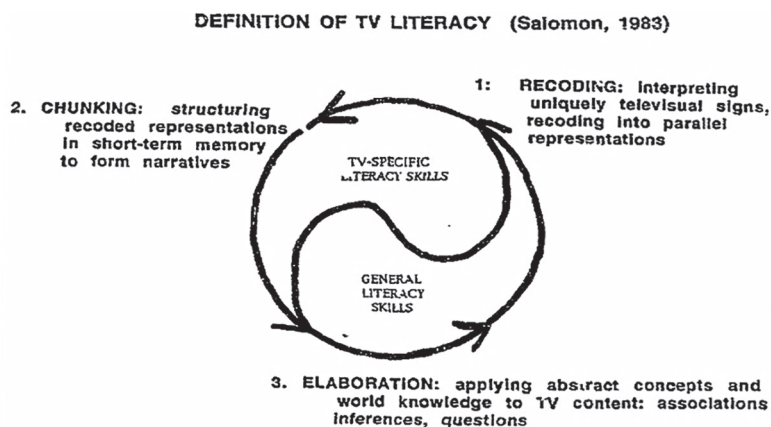

Figure 1. Salomon´s Definition of TV literacy. Taken from "Talking Back to TV: Media Literacy and Writing" (Goldthorpe, 1993, p. 12)

This author differentiates literacy skills between general and specific ones. The specific literacy skills are related to the processes of what he calls chunking and recoding, the general literacy skills are called elaboration. As the diagram shows, it is not necessary to achieve the skills as in a sequence; they can be interconnected or interrelated. However,

it can be perceived that the first skill, recoding, is the first step. In this part, students make interpretations of the television and look for similar representations. The second skill goes beyond interpretations, in this part; students use the first interpretations to form narratives that can be similar or different to the ones presented in the TV program. In the third one, elaboration, the students make use of their prior or more general knowledge of the world to make associations, inferences and to pose and to state hypothesis.

This study looked for the identification of the above skills. It focused on the observation of the critical television skills that tenth graders reveal while observing TV sitcoms. This population is situated in the teenagers' age. Teenagers are in the searching of their identity. During this age, they begin a process of comparison and evaluation of their family and social environments. This is the time when the rules that were followed without resistance when they were children, begin to be broken because teenagers consider that they are able to take their own decisions and to rule their own lives. The parental guide that they required when they were younger is not taken into account or is simply ignored.

In a sense, they are looking for their independence and for a place in the society. For Aguirre (1998), the adolescence is the age of the great ideas and the great theories. It is the time, when teenagers consider that the world is not perfect and that they can change or improve it. That is why; adolescence is characterized with the appearance of new fashions, new groups, new hair styles and new musical rhythms that contradict the ideas of the adults. This new organizations have been called tribes.

In these tribes, the teenagers try to replace the original one: their family. The dining table is replaced for the park, the disco, the bar, the corner and the bedroom becomes a shelter to be alone watching TV or playing a video game.

In this point, it is relevant to clarify that this study tackled aspects of critical pedagogy practices under the light of critical television literacy, where the teenagers' voices are taken into account.

2. Critical Pedagogy and Critical Television Literacy

Usually, schools have been concerned with the production and transmission of knowledge. For Ferres (1994) schools are unable to adapt themselves to the constant changes of the current world. It is well known that they are not anymore the only ones responsible of the educative practices and they currently attend impassive to the process of penetration of the audiovisual culture, without offering, to the new generations, interpretative and critical analysis examples.

In the same line of thought, Creel & Orozco (1990) claim that teachers must be conscious about the role of media and particularly television in the students' lives. Therefore, the teacher must generate strategies to take educative advantage of the excessive exposure that students have in front of this daily.

Children bring to the classroom their impressions and opinions about the programs of TV they watched the day before and they share them with their classmates. Based on these comments, the teacher can act uninterested, silent students or participate actively in their conversations. If the teacher is able to establish an active and critical discussion about the topic in question, then this teacher is providing spaces for critical reflection and appropriations of meanings.

In this case, as language teacher, and considering language as an instrument of power, the researcher was concerned about the implications of changing the rules of the EFL classroom based on the transmission of rules and pieces of the target language. But then it was considered that "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" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 70).

It is through the development of critical pedagogy practices that teachers empower students to be active and reflective members of the society in which they are immersed in. In this sense, classrooms are seen as spaces for democratic constructions of knowledge and not just as spaces for repeating and acting pre-established amounts of language rules that students have to master like robots or automatons.

3. Instructional Design

The workshops intended to account for students' linguistic competence in the English language. During the activities, they were provided with opportunities to practice and to use the four linguistic skills. They were engaged in watching and listening to the episodes in both English and Spanish languages. They were also encouraged to answer different questionnaires and to develop different observations using the English language. In all the activities they were asked to use the target language, however and because of the limitation of time and English language knowledge, in most part of the study, the use of their native language was allowed in order to expand the information they provided.

It was expected that students would use the English language to develop the activities, but it was allowed the use of Spanish because of the time to develop the activities and for those students who considered they were not proficient in the use of the second language.

In this aspect, I regarded Freire's ideas about providing students with opportunities to use their own realities as a basis of literacy, and this includes the language they bring to the classroom; to do otherwise is to deny students' rights that lie at the core of the notion of an emancipator literacy'' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 151).

Five workshops were planned under the light of the theory of PPP ESL lesson plan: Presentation, Practice and Production. In this study, the PPP lessons were not designed only to teach a linguistic topic, but they were also focused on providing students with spaces and activities to observe the critical television literacy skills revealed by tenth graders while analyzing some episodes of two popular sitcoms: The Simpsons and The Fairly Odd Parents.

I insisted on the use of the target language to answer the questionnaires, nonetheless, I could realize that due to the fact students were not graded and they were free to use either of the languages, they preferred to use their native one. Some of them expressed that they were not comfortable if they had to answer in English. For that reason, the EFL classroom was transformed into a space to dialogue, criticize, give opinions and reflect about some television programs, where the participants' confidence was favored giving them the possibility to participate in the language they were more comfortable.

4. Methodology

Since this study pretended to give a detailed description of how critical TV literacy skills were developed by students while watching some episodes of The Simpsons and The Fairly Odd Parents, I decided to approach from a qualitative case study, particularly, a descriptive case study. According to Merriam (1991), a descriptive case study illustrates an exhaustive report of the phenomenon under study.

4.1 Research Context and Population

This study was carried out at a public school in a small town near Tunja, Boyacá. The school has eight branches. The project was developed in the Systems and Academic Branch which is one of the most important ones in the town. In this branch, students from ninth to eleventh grade attend their classes.

The group that was selected for this research was grade10th. This group was not selected at random; It was chosen regarding the core of this study about the students' critical television literacy skills. Tenth graders are in the age when they are able to make judgments and to use analysis to solve problems. Adolescents are in the age when they are more creative and committed with the things that they like. (Aguirre, 1998; Harmer, 2007). Thus, they could provide the researcher with the required information.

The Institution as well as the participants and their parents signed a consent form. In the students' consent form they were asked to select a pseudonym in order to keep their personal identity and integrity. The pseudonyms selected were as follows:

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE
Valery	F	15
The Best	F	16
Jemar	F	16
Anthony	M	16
The Princess	F	16
CHAD	M	16
Danis	F	17
KRO	F	18
FlorMarchita	F	15
Sayury	F	15

Table 1. Participants

4.2 Instruments

4.2.1 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, p. 105). In this sense, for this study students' artifacts are the materials produced by the students during or after the teaching learning process. In this part, I also placed the observation guides that students developed as homework. These observation guides were planned as a supplementary activity to the work that was developed in the workshops.

4.2.2 Interviews

I used interviews to clarify or expand the information obtained from the students' artifacts; I interviewed my students or population. In this case I used the two-minute interview. According to Freeman (1998) it is a kind of interview that teachers can use, particularly teachers who are researching in their classrooms and when time is an important factor. This interview can be done during a break or as a group activity. Freeman recommends it as a way to easily sample students' thinking.

4.2.3 Discussions

The last instrument was group discussions, Freeman (1998) defines discussions as opportunities to engage in and exchange ideas. This instrument allows getting information

about how students understand and interpret what is going on in the class. The discussion was not focused on the episode, but on the different episodes watched in the classroom and those they watched at home. They were organized in small groups and at the end of the class we had a round table to socialize their reflections or points of view.

5. Data Analysis

During the process of collecting data, I used a grounded approach taking into account the model provided by Freeman (1998). I followed up the four activities he suggests: naming, grouping, identifying relationships and displaying. This process guided me to narrow my earliest findings into two main categories: Towards embryonic critical literacy skills and Identifying another way to learn.

The names of the categories and the subcategories emerged from commentaries done by the students and because of their repetitive manifestation in the different instruments.

5.1 Towards embryonic critical Television Literacy skills

The development of critical television literacy skills is not different to the process that human beings has to follow to be skillful in other disciplines as playing a game, reading analytically a book or writing in an academic way. Teenagers' critical television literacy is situated in the period when they begin to give opinions and to identify themselves as active part of the society (Horrocks, 1990). This author also states that teenagers are experiencing a period of intellectual growth. Their values and ideas are in a process of development and evaluation. In this age, teenagers are in an ambivalent situation, they are not children anymore, but they are not already adults. They are living in what can be called an embryonic stage.

After doing a deeper reading, analysis and comparison of the information collected in the different instruments, I could observe that the students' critical television literacy skills are in a process of formation, similar to a baby in the mothers' womb. In this sense, I could establish the name of my first main category as: Towards embryonic critical television literacy skills. This main category refers to a not finished development. The development of critical television literacy skills is similar to a never ending process. This process allows that the viewer retells what is observed, connects the TV messages with more general knowledge, even with their personal life experience; express feelings and give opinions about the same TV messages.

As this was the first time that students were involved in the analysis of the messages and contents of the episodes of some of their favorite TV program, participants evidenced

how they consider that they are beginning to develop processes of analysis. As an example, let us read the following excerpts taken from the different instruments:

"nosotros antes de estos…de… de ponernos a analizar nosotros solo llegabamos a la casa y nos poníamos a ver televisión pero sin analizar porque he… hacían eso o si esos muñecos influían o si no como lo que, lo que nos han hecho en los talleres analizar. Entonces nos parece que es chévere uno tener ya su propia como su crítica ir refinando su personalidad para saber porque le gusta o porque no" (KRO- Discussion 2. Lines 13-23)

"For me, all the characters are positive; they teach us the reality of things, mainly because they are very funny, none is negative, because it shows the reality, not as in other series showing life, the real conflicts that are daily" (Student Sample. Observation Guide 2)

These samples showed me that students recognized that they have begun to interpret, analyze television messages and create their own meaning in a different way since they were developing activities during this research study, it means that their critical television literacy skills are in a process of giving birth. This process involves three main components observed during the collection and analysis of the data.

The first one was observed when students relied on their personal experience or knowledge of the world to express their opinions, to make connections and to provide examples to justify or support their answers or comments. This originated the first subcategory: "making familiar associations". This component allowed me to understand that one of the steps that teenagers follow to analyze TV messages is based on their own experience of life or in what they consider their reality.

Another aspect that I could observe during the data analysis process is that teenagers are in the age when they look for emancipator ideas (Horrocks, 1990). They are in the stage when they consider that their parents and the society were not able to provide them with what they required to be successful individuals. In that sense, I realized about their constant personal identification with the situations lived for the characters of the TV programs under study. This second subcategory was called "Making personal associations".

The different activities developed during the workshops and the discussions provided spaces to express feelings, emotions and self-reflection about the reality lived for the participants and the situations presented in the sitcoms. This process of comparison and self-reflection guided me to establish the third subcategory that is called "Comparing their own Realities with those of the Sitcoms".

5.1.1 First subcategory: Making familiar Associations

The home and the family are important aspects in the psychology of a teenager. They play a relevant role in the development of the teenagers' mind. The home and the family have been one of the spaces in which the adolescents have developed their values and some of the personality features that will be with them during the rest of their lives. During the process of collection and analysis of data, it was common to find that teenagers established connections with their familiar or personal situations to provide examples to clarify or to answer questions.

During this age, teenagers are looking for patterns or models to adapt to (Horrocks, 1990; Harmer, 2007). They compare their reality with the one that they consider would be better adjusted to their own concept and to the concept that they have about the other people.

One important issue in this category is the concept of family that the students established and recognized. Despite this is pointed out since different perspectives, it was identified that most of them emphasize in the concept of nuclear family (Vásquez, *et al.*, 2006). In this sense, they identified that a family is composed by: A father, a mother and children and each one with some particular and relevant characteristics. The following samples, describe their concept of family. When they were asked to draw a typical Colombian family and to write the characteristics of each one of the characters, Jemar reported:

> "Papá: sería muy cariñoso, responsable, trabajador y responsable. Mamá: Hogareña, responsable, humilde, respetuosa con su pareja e hijos, consejera. Hija: Inquieta por saber más, inteligente, buena amiga, compañerista, alegre, responsable, respetuosa y cariñosa con sus padres"

Danis wrote:

> "Style: una niña muy juiciosa a la cual es muy inteligente, es muy cariñosa y adorable. Mauro: un niño muy simpático ya que es la adoración de toda mujer, es responsable aunque a veces se descuida un poco. Father: es el papá más juicioso y beautiful que hay en el mundo, istrabajador,is muy responsable y tolerante. Mother: Es la mamá más cariñosa y amorosa que hay, es juiciosa en su trabajo que posee como teacher, es muy beautiful. Es la familia muy beautiful y especial que hay en el mundo, is unida"

The samples above show a picture of the students' ideas about a family. They establish a Colombian family where father, mother and children are present. However, all of the characters are provided with the best qualities in each one of their roles. It is clear

that all the families they portrayed are totally different from The Simpsons family or the Tommy's family in the Fairly Odd Parents. Even, their concept of nuclear family contrast with their own real situations. In this regard, while I was interviewing Danis about her life in her family, she expressed:

> "mis padres…viven independientes…si…viven independiente entonces yo prácticamente toda mi vida he estado sola…y pues ahí con mi papá que es el que a veces viene aquí por la entrega, cómo estoy, pero nunca sabe si tengo trabajos o que tengo que hacer"

The same aspect was also reported in the same interview by Flor Machita:

> "mi familia es muy separada…vivo solo con mi mami y mi papi solo le pasa lo necesario y ya" (Interview 1, lines 536-53).

The analysis of the data showed me the comparative reading that students established between the familiar situations presented in the sitcoms and their own ones. They recognized that they are part of a family and that their families deal with problems and with situations even harder than the ones represented in the sitcoms. Similarly, they identified themselves as members of a family and therefore of a society where they played different roles. This issue will be described in the next subcategory.

5.1.2 Second Subcategory: Making Personal Associations

Another important aspect in this category is the comparative reading that some students did between their personal or family experiences and the situations lived by some of the characters in the different episodes.

The construction of associations and the production of meanings about the messages in the programs are expanded to other life situations of the children. Creel & Orozco (1990) point out that the children take the messages and appropriate them to establish relations with their daily life.

The following excerpts uncover the way they identify that their personal needs could be similar to the problem presented in one of the episodes observed during the class. In this sense, Jemar said:

> "pues a veces mis papas les colocan más atención a lo que a ellos les importa…por decir los gastos más de la casa que…que uno mismo"

And she continued saying:

"por ejemplo en la de los padrinos mágicos que Timmy…esto…trataba como de pedirle ayuda a sus padres y lo ignoraban, creían que tener poderes era mucho mejor para…para arreglar algún problema que el cariño que Timmy quería tener hacia sus padres"

Making familiar and personal associations between the TV programs students frequently observe and their personal life or experiences has proved to be one of their initial critical viewing skills. It is relevant to notice that when students were asked to observe the TV programs in order to answer some questionnaires or to develop some activities, they were able to provide answers that referred to their personal or familiar situations or answers influenced by their prior experiences and the knowledge that they have about the world that surrounds them.

These initial judgments about the world and about their closer realities are the first steps guide them to begin to identify that they are part of a society and a reality. However, these two concepts can be far away from their own expectations or visions of the world. In these sense, the discovery of hidden intentions can help these teenagers to be better prepared to confront the real world in a more critique and responsible way.

At the same time that they played to be active viewers, these teenagers found similarities between the situations lived for the characters of the TV programs and their own lives. The activities provided a space to express feelings and emotions that were repressed in their hearts and in their minds. Thinking about the other is a possibility to think about my own personal situation. I could perceive this last statement while I was reading and analyzing the information, then I named my second subcategory "expressing feelings and ideas."

5.1.3 Third Subcategory: Comparing their own Realities with those of the Sitcoms

Sometimes, they compared themselves with some situations lived by the characters and they also identified their personal conflicts. According to Moreno (2003) the adolescence is a period when the teenager intends to rebuild his/her beliefs and behaviors. It is a time when teenagers question everything: their parents, their teachers, their education and the society.

In some of the instruments, it was relevant to highlight that participants reflected about their parents' lack of attention because they work a lot and they commented that parents avoided establishing a contact with their children. In the last workshop where they had to refer to the similarities and differences between their family and the families portrayed in the TV programs, Chad reported:

"my father no se preocupa por mi estado, creencia u opinión sobre la vida. Así como Homero, es muy impulsivo al momento de tomar decisiones, sin contar con los demás integrantes de la familia"

Noting the same aspect Danis wrote

"yo paso menos tiempo con mis padres, primero que todo mis padres son separados, vivo con mi papá y él se la pasa trabajando demasiado, hasta hay días que no lo veo y mi mayor tiempo es estar sola"

All the samples showed that participants are critical people who consider the importance of sharing in family as a relevant space where the children are formed in values, their self-esteem is fostered and better conditions of life are planned and created.

Watching TV is easier than reading a book or analyzing a novel. It does not demand a lot of time to develop an academic assignment. Therefore, the second category accounts for the value and opinions students gave to the contents of the TV programs. In this sense I named the second category "Identifying another way to learn". This second category will be described in the next section.

5.2 Identifying another way to learn

Traditionally, it was considered that teaching was the responsibility of teachers, but currently and with the information revolution that we are facing, we have to recognize that most of our students' knowledge about the world is learned outside the classroom. Then, taking into account the time that our students spend in front of a TV, I could say that they have a powerful teacher in their homes and particularly in their bedrooms: this teacher is not their parents but the TV set.

In this part, participants reveal that sitcoms are more than simple pictures in a screen. If it is certain that sitcoms like The Simpson or The Fairly Odd Parents, most of the time are seen, especially by adult people, as bad examples of life, for some of the participants these sitcoms are like teachers or samples to follow when they face a problem. They recognized that beyond entertainment and mischievous, the way like the characters solved the problems in the sitcoms could help them to solve their own ones.

5.2.1 First Subcategory: Problem Solvers

For some of the participants, the sitcoms provide them with ideas to take into account when they face a similar situation to the one presented in the sitcom. Reporting in this aspect, during the first discussion, Chad said:

"realmente los dibujos no son malos… realmente ver un dibujo a usted no lo convierte en un santo o en un satánico… simplemente es una manera de mostrarnos el mundo a través de unos muñequitos… por ver Los Simpsons, el capítulo de la Odisea se sabe el nombre de los personajes o cuál fue la situación"

In the sample above, it is interesting to observe how students interact with the TV programs they usually watch. How these programs show them ways to solve conflicts and how students recognize the gap between fantasy and reality. According to Creel & Orozco (1990) the students are active receptors. They learn from all kind of programs, not just from the educative programs. Even they learn what it is not wanted to be learned.

Regarding this last aspect, I found that participants consider the contents of the sitcoms as opportunities to reinforce or appropriate academic contents. This aspect is addressed in the next subcategory.

5.2.2 Second Subcategory: Learning Promoters

As it was stated before, watching TV is easier and less demanding that reading a book or a novel. Image and sound provide the TV viewer with the scenario and the effects that are necessary to capture his/her attention. Nowadays, it is frequent that teenagers prefer to watch the film about "The Iliad" or "The Odyssey" than reading the book. It could be said that they easily remember names and historical aspects of these two classic books because of the different movies they have watched about them, and not because they were asked to read these books during the first two academic terms in tenth grade.

Regarding this aspect and in the second interview, Chad reported:

"yo he aprendido nombres de… mejor dicho… nombres de héroes de…se puede decir de lo que es lo odisea, Troya y de una forma muy paródica"

Similarly, Danis reported:

"todos los capítulos no son malos hay algunos que dejan enseñanzas"

The participants considered that they learned from the programs, they also recognized that these sitcoms also involve behind intentions from the producers and television sellers. Anthony reported, in the fourth workshop:

"This episode was some funny, but me parece que have some of subliminal messengers."

These samples showed that the participants considered that television brought messages that could influence the viewer or consumer. And at the same time, the students

recognized that the bad contents are more acceptable for most of the viewers. They establish connections between their own life and the sitcoms they usually watch. However and more important than this aspect, we could see that sitcoms are also spaces for learning. But this learning is not just for academic purposes, but that they show ways to confront and solve daily problems. Besides, we could see that students begin to recognize the hidden intentions from both producers and sellers of TV programs.

As far, the different aspects observed during this study allowed me to identify that tenth graders are in a process of building of their identities and personalities. They are beginning to consider active members of the society and they are in the first stage to assume critical positions about the world.

By observing and analyzing the data, it has been reported that they use both general and specific television skills (Salomon, 1983, cited in Goldthorpe, 1993) to make associations, to question and to make narratives. These skills are in a process of giving birth and they require that students and teachers go ahead in activities that promote the development of media literacy activities.

Conclusions

For all the students this was the first time that they were involved in the observation and critical analysis of their favorite TV programs. It was the opportunity to talk about the real life situations that they were confronting every day.

For me, as researcher and as teacher, it was a great opportunity to realize that students are able to express themselves without fearing when they are free to give their opinions and when they are not ruled to learn and apply the knowledge that we as teachers consider they have to learn.

At the end of the study, most students recognized that they liked to watch TV just for pleasure, but because of the project they discovered that it was important to analyze and evaluate the messages that flow up in the different media sources.

For me, as an English teacher, it was relevant to recognize that being a critical educator is to be ready towards the exploration of new learning environments. The new learning spaces have to help students become empowered to understand the cultural and social realities that are constructed from the different media appliances that have invaded their lives. Only by the empowerment of students to become more reflective and more critical, teachers can be sure that they are helping in the conformation of a better society.

In terms of the English language, it is relevant to mention that the limitations of time to develop the activities did not allow me to explore deeper the students' linguistic competence. Another important issue was the students' self confidence to express their ideas; I could realize that they felt more comfortable when they answered in Spanish and they avoided the use of the English Language in their writings.

The written texts done at the end of the workshops showed me their inclination to use some determinants, prepositions, adjectives in English. They mixed these words along all their productions. However, when they had more time to achieve or develop the activities as in the case of the observation guides, some of them ventured to answer in English.

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