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## ENHANCING FOURTH-SEMESTER STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH TV SERIES

### Mejorar el pensamiento crítico de unos estudiantes de cuarto semestre a través de series televisivas

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#### Abstract

This research was carried out with some fourth-semester students from a foreign languages program of a Colombian university. The purpose of this research was to implement TV series to promote critical thinking, which would be based on the contrast of cultural aspects between the Colombian and Anglophone culture. An action research approach was used to encourage a preservice teacher implement excerpts from Tv series and subsequently lead debates around the topics covered in the series. By using TV series, the students increased not only their cultural appreciation, but also their listening skills and their ability to express their opinions in English. These findings might be valuable for teachers who intend to apply TV series in the foreign language classroom. .

**Key words:** *critical thinking, cultural appreciation, TV series.*

#### Resumen

Esta investigación se realizó con los estudiantes de cuarto semestre de un programa de lenguas extranjeras de una universidad colombiana. El propósito de esta investigación fue implementar series de televisión para promover el pensamiento crítico, que se basaría en el contraste de aspectos culturales entre la cultura colombiana y la cultura anglófona. Esta investigación tomó el enfoque de una investigación-acción en la que el profesor en formación propuso extractos de series de televisión y posteriormente fomentó debates en torno a los temas tratados en las series. Al aplicar las series de televisión, los estudiantes aumentaron no solo su apreciación cultural, sino también sus habilidades para escuchar y su capacidad para expresar sus opiniones en inglés. Estos hallazgos pueden ser valiosos para los profesores que tengan la intención de aplicar series de televisión en el aula de lengua extranjera.

**Palabras claves:** *pensamiento crítico, apreciación cultural, series de televisión.*

Learning a foreign language has become a necessity to have an active role in the globalized world. As explained by Oana-Roxana (2012) “language study introduces people to new realms of ideas, customs, habits, and values. In both professional and personal ways, the twenty first century places demand on people’s global knowledge” (p.81). This asset offers the foreign language learner the opportunity to be engaged in cultural cooperation and understanding. Hence, when educators decide on the most suitable methodologies to teach a foreign language, it is imperative for them to consider the techniques which they will approach the cultural component.

In that way, culture involves every tangible and intangible feature, which define a nation or a society. According to Zimmerman (2017) “culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts” (p. 1). Thus, the task of the language teacher becomes, not only to tackle every aspect covered in the previous definition, but also to find a technique for students to understand the active role of culture in the evolution of a language, and to achieve a more analytic perspective towards modern-life issues.

Concerning tools applied to motivate the inclusion of culture and critical thinking within the foreign language classroom, literature, films, internet, and fieldwork are the foundation of the most popular methods, and although TV series are still an uncommon technique, it proposes numerous benefits. Based on Garcia (2016) “ Over the past twenty years, TV fiction has become one of the most powerful and influential trends in popular culture” (p.2), it means that the the interdependent relationship between TV and culture is an evident phenomenon nowadays. Regarding this aspect, Pratomo & Kriyantono (2016) exposed that the role of Anti-Corruption television in Indonesia entails a much more thought-provoking perception within students. Furthermore, Seo (2017) found that Face Me and Smile (2010) and Modern Family (2009) created an aesthetic experience that could promote cosmopolitanism. Similarly, the researcher discovered that the general theme of both programs focused on why we need to overcome our differences in ethnicity, culture, and beliefs. Finally, Korres & Elexpuru (2017) found that, within their favorite TV characters, students perceived values related to belonging, emphasizing family and friends, as well as the skills needed to succeed in these relationships.

The advantages previously mentioned entail an asset when working with students who fail to recognize the relationship between foreign language learning, interculturality and globalization. For instance, in the foreign languages program of the University of Pamplona, most of the students tend to conceive foreign language learning as a mere mastering of the four competences, namely, speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Although this aspect encompasses a significant portion of what learning a foreign language



represents, without a proper understanding of the context in which the language is used, learners have no option but to conceive language as an abstract structure with no specific purpose in their daily lives. Moreover, when students are taught to achieve a high level of proficiency of the four competences without the development of an analytic perspective towards the world surrounding them, they lack the abilities to provide a solid argument concerning modern-life issues.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

This study took a qualitative design since the information that was collected corresponded to reflective journals, interviews, and questionnaires. Furthermore, this study adopted an action research approach. As stated by Creswell (2021) "Action research designs are systematic procedures used by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather quantitative and qualitative data to address improvements in their educational setting." (p. 22).

The methodology used to present the videos took place from May until July 2019. The episodes chosen were: Nosedive and Shut up and dance from Black mirror Serie, Three Robots, and Zima Blue from Love Death Robots Tv series. Finally, it was showed "you Kent always say what you want" from The Simpsons Tv series. These episodes were chosen since they contained elements that were considered worthy to discuss with the students, namely, the use of social media, online safety, the future of human race, the notion of "human" and the relationship between media and politics, respectively. These subjects were deemed pertinent since they encompassed aspects of modern society, which were convenient to pinpoint the differences and similarities among the British, USA, and Colombian culture The researcher showed an excerpt of every episode, and then, proceeded to start and assess debates based on the issues observed in every episode.

## 2. PARTICIPANTS

The selected population for this research were the students from Intermediate English II course, group B. To select this population, the investigator carried out convenience sampling, which is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria are included for the purpose of the study (Etikan et al., 2016, p 2). Thus, the researcher selected this population since the schedule assigned to this group allowed him to collect data in a uniform way. The sample consisted of three participants. This sample was selected by carrying out a purposeful sampling; according to Etikan et al. "the purposeful sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the

participant possesses” (Etikan et al., 2016, p 2). The criteria to select the participants was based on their constant contribution in the activities that included the use of TV series and the development of the critical thinking skills.

### **3. INSTRUMENTS**

Concerning the types of data to collect, the researcher focused on gathering first-hand information, that is, qualitative data, which involved the outcome of the methodology used inside the classroom, the validity of the arguments of the participants, and their opinions regarding the use of TV series as a didactic tool. This information was gathered through reflective journals, one semi-structured interview and one questionnaire.

### **4. REFLECTIVE JOURNALS**

The reflective journals were centered on the observation, analysis and reflection upon the activities carried out in the classroom. The researcher showed an excerpt of popular British and USA series, and then, proceeded to start a debate based on the issues observed in every episode. The investigator wrote down every phenomenon noticed during these debates and then he analyzed the success, or the failure of these discussions based on the participation and the arguments exposed by the students.

### **5. INTERVIEWS**

The interviews were carried out to understand the participants’ perceptions and opinions regarding the use of TV series to enhance critical thinking skills; it is worth mentioning that the researcher designed one interview composed of eight questions for the three key participants.

### **6. QUESTIONNAIRE**

For this investigation, a questionnaire was designed to analyze the opinions of the students regarding the use of TV series as a didactic tool to enhance the critical thinking skills. This instrument was administered to the fourth-semester students of group B and it consisted of seven open-ended questions. Hence, the students were encouraged to write down their own opinions regarding the use of the TV series for foreign language learning.

### **7. DATA ANALYSIS**

The data that was analyzed proceeded from five reflective journals, three semi-structured interviews and twenty questionnaires. To analyze the information, the researcher first decided on a type of analysis, namely, interpretive analysis. According to Hatch (2002)

“the interpretive analysis is based on generating explanations for what is going on within the data; it is about making inferences, developing insights and drawing conclusions” (Hatch, 2002, p. 179).

## 8. FINDINGS

The first finding corresponds to the elements that fostered students’ critical thinking skills and their ability to be active learners of the society in which they live. Accordingly, the adequate use of TV series inside the classroom allowed students to question the society and the period in which they live. The elements that promoted critical thinking skills among the students were the cultural appreciation and modern issues.

The cultural appreciation refers to the contrast or the comparison between cultures made by the students, while using the topics of the TV series as the main “catalyst”. For instance, in the final debate, which concerned the relationship between politics and media, one student compared the situation of journalism in The United States and Colombia, a fact that evidences the ability to analyze the information and signal a point of view based on the context in which the students live. Regarding, modern issues, it entails the attitude of the students towards the period in which they live and how they react towards modern-day problems. Accordingly, the TV series proposed by the researcher, evidenced issues that afflict modern societies, a fact that permitted students to realize their role as humans in history. For instance, in the first debate related to the use of social media, the students emphasized the fragility of social relationships due to social networking sites, the threat of trusting strangers, the existence of fake profiles and the rewarding experience of a childhood without social media in it.

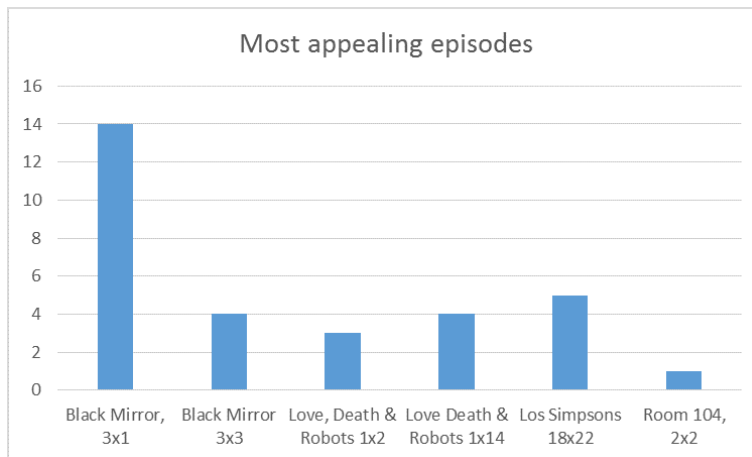
The second finding corresponds to the advantages that were observed while using TV series as a didactic tool among fourth-semester students. These advantages can be split into two sub-themes, linguistic advantages, and psychological advantages. The linguistic advantages allude to the influence of TV series in the foreign language competences.

The students stated that the skills, which they developed the most, were the oral comprehension and the oral production. One student mentioned that she was capable of learning expressions that were common in daily-life language, a type of speech that is rarely taught in academic contexts. The psychological advantages allude to the feelings and emotions that the use of TV series caused in the classroom dynamics. Also, it was noticed that the use of this tool was adequate to help students to “chill out” inside the classroom. For instance, one student stated, that the use of TV series allowed her to forget about the stress of academic assignments and enjoy a “movie time” inside the class.

The third finding corresponds to the preferences of the students, in other words, to the episodes of the TV series that students found more appealing and the debates that they considered more relevant. Regarding the episodes of the TV series that students found more appealing, it was discovered that the most popular episode was Black Mirror, “Nosedive” (see figure 1). According to one student, she was attracted to the topic of this episode since it revealed a reality that afflicts her generation and that is generating new patterns of behavior, a fact that she can relate to her personal affairs.

**Figure 1.**

*Most appealing episodes*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates the TV episodes that were worked on with the students and their level of popularity. “Black Mirror”, season 3, episode 1, proved to be the most fashionable among them all

Regarding the most relevant debates, the students considered that the most pertinent debate was the one related to the future of humans (see figure 2). This debate was deemed the most relevant since it discussed the possible future of humans. In this regard, a student highlighted an unsettling outlook for the future of humankind, and their imminent extinction due to their careless behavior.

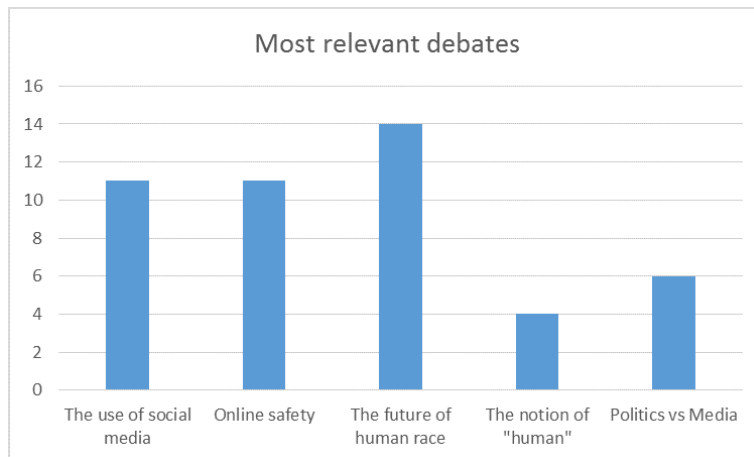
## 9. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this investigation was to enhance fourth-semester students’ critical thinking skills and cultural appreciation by means of TV series. Moreover, since research concerning the use of these tools was scarce in Colombian contexts, the findings of this

investigation represent an asset for FL teachers who intend to apply these materials to promote critical thinking skills among college students.

**Figure 2.**

*Most relevant debates*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates the debates that were worked on with the students and their level of popularity. “The future of human race”, proved to be the most fashionable among them all.

Accordingly, this research encountered that while using TV series, students become aware of the similarities and differences among Colombia, British and USA cultures. . In addition, students notice issues that affect the generation and the society, which they are part of. Therefore, teachers who are interested in using TV series inside their classrooms might benefit from this investigation, since it discusses the topics and issues that students find more pertinent, when attempting to enhance their critical thinking skills. Similarly, this study might serve as a confirmation of the advantages of TV series for those FL teachers who might feel hesitant about the use of this tool. This research encountered that TV series are useful to learn lexicon and expressions used in the target language daily, a characteristic that develops both listening and speaking skills.

Accordingly, one of the advantages of the TV series used within this research is that they were authentic materials, that is, they were not conceived as pedagogical tools, but as a reflection of the social issues and the culture of the country in which they were produced. As reported by McLuhan (2016) “television reflects and nurtures cultural mores and values” (McLuhan, 2016, p 395). In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between television and culture, in which one influences the other. Thus, concerning TV series and



language, a certain community might adopt expressions from TV series, just as dialogues on TV series might rely on expressions from a specific community. For instance, on the series, Love, Death & Robots “Three robots”, one of the characters used the expression “tea bagging”, a practice that is very common in American gaming sites.

Finally, this investigation is of paramount importance for FL teachers searching for TV series appropriate to develop critical thinking skills, which are appealing to college students. Among these TV series, Netflix series, Black Mirror was the top favorite since it evidenced the influence of technology in modern society, a phenomenon that students completely understand since they are part of the generation that is being affected by this situation. Furthermore, “Black Mirror” can be considered a series designed for people who are interested in discussing the impact that technology, social media, and media have on modern society.

## **10. RECOMMENDATIONS**

For future research, it is imperative to consider several aspects to obtain the best results out of the technique implemented in this study. One of the most common drawbacks that was observed during the generation of debates based on TV series was the lack of participation on the part of the students. This phenomenon occurred mainly because of two main reasons: *the debates were not graded*, and *students did not get the main point out of some episodes*, an aspect that caused a lack of interest in the discussions. For further implementation of this technique, it is imperative to find methods that motivate students to take part in the discussions; these methods might range from behaviorist approaches such as grading the students for the relevance of their participation, to a more flexible method such as asking students what discussions they might be more interested in. In addition, for future implementation, it is crucial to give students clear instructions before playing the TV series for them to pay attention to the video, and not to conceive this technique as a purposeless “movie-time” session. Thus, one option might be to propose a listening activity for them to be attentive to all the situations and aspects within the TV series.

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