

## Chapter 20

# Emerging reflective discourses on gender in an EFL class<sup>31</sup>

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### Biographical statement

I am a language teacher from Bogotá, Colombia. I earned an M.A. in Applied Linguistics to Teaching English from the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, where I did a study of the implementation of a feminist pedagogy in a classroom of young adults. I also have an M.A. in Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Studies from the Universidad de Sevilla (Spain). There, I studied the case of a Colombian politician with a Critical Discourse Analysis. I am currently studying for an M.A. in InterAmerican Studies at the Universität Bielefeld (Germany) and plan to go on to a Ph.D. I have taught languages for more than ten years, worked in EFL programs at different universities in Colombia, and taught Spanish to refugees on a voluntary basis for the International Red Cross. My areas of expertise include TEFL, Discourse Analysis, Linguistics, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Political Affairs in the Americas.

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31 This chapter draws on my thesis for the M.A in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia) in 2016, “Unveiling EFL students’ reflections while using Critical Feminist Pedagogy (CFP) when debating”.

## My research into the role of gender in an EFL classroom

My research focused on the implementation of a feminist pedagogy in an EFL classroom of twenty-three young adults in a university in Bogotá, Colombia. I did a needs analysis to determine whether my students had any difficulties and found that there was a breach between the syllabus proposed by the institution and the linguistic and the sociolinguistic needs of the students. Therefore, I decided to use a post-structuralist methodology called Critical Feminist Pedagogy (CFP) (Cohen, 2004) because I wanted to go beyond the traditional communicative classes. According to Cohen (2004), CFP gives students more opportunities to interact with their peers and the teacher while expressing their opinions and reflecting upon models of sex and gender differentiations. My aim was to unveil the reflective discourses that might emerge when the group debated gender inequality.

However, I ended by focusing on the transformations of students' discourses, which, I expected, would be counter discourses on gender stereotypes based on the phallogentric view of Western society. The research questions aimed at identifying if such reflective discourses and transformations would really occur. I designed a didactic unit and encouraged my students to critically analyze different situations of gender inequality during ten classes. Those situations included notions of beauty, censorship, behavior, first impressions, society and the media, attitudes, religion and gender stereotyping. To engage students to actively discuss, I used a Power Point presentation in each session and pictures and videos found online. I video-recorded and later analyzed their responses not only those given in class but also the ones given in interviews and class artifacts. To do this analysis, I used a methodology called "Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis", invented by Kumaravadivelu (1999), and more traditional techniques such as Grounded Theory and Conversation Analysis (Creswell, 2003).

The results showed that students could be empowered to have a critical perspective on issues of inequality, as they reflected not only on gender but also on other spheres of identity (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004). The discourses that emerged during the implementation were related to issues such as racial discrimination and minorities. The reflections, which in some cases were personal narratives, were about gender inequality among men and women from different sexual orientations and the role of the society and the establishment of dominant elites. I was astonished to find that my students even brought up the notion of societal control found in Cultural theory as

proposed by Gramsci (1971), Adorno (1975) and Foucault (1980). The study enabled me to propose a frame to systematize CCDA from the discourse analysis data, with a framework that other researchers can use.

Some of the limitations of this research were that the students did not reach the expected level of proficiency in English and, because of our limited time, only a few showed evidence of a significant transformation in their discourses.

## My path as a teacher

In the course of the design and application of this methodology, I came up with valuable insights and lessons that have become important for my current work as a teacher.

### *The world of post-method teaching*

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First, I realized that I could go beyond the traditional perspectives on teaching, which involve explicit grammar instruction, communicative approaches and methodologies such as Task Based Learning (TBL) (Willis & Willis, 2007): The latter two are much more focused on English as a conversational tool and as experiential learning.

When a teacher uses a non-instrumental approach to teaching, there is a personal change in the perspectives and meanings of education for that teacher (Canagarajah, 1999). When I decided to use a post-method approach like CFP, I became aware of different dimensions of teaching which encouraged my students to engage in political, historical, and critical thinking, enabling them to identify themselves as citizens and actors of change. Sometimes, we teachers are afraid of going beyond the curriculum or the language objectives but then we realize that our influence can help students to become more tolerant and challenge inequality and gender discrimination, acting as agents of change who form other actors of change (Kumaravadivelu, 1999).

Even though a methodology like CFP has many advantages, it did not have a visible impact on all of my students since many of them would not change their collectively constructed phallogocentric discourses to reflections on gender equality. I learned that it would take time to get to lasting transformations.

However, I still believe that the possibility for changing students' outlook on gender discrimination can help to build a more democratic society.

### *The power to empower*

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The empowerment of students can take different forms. It can be done by teaching them a foreign language, so they have access to mobility or information exchange. We usually make proficiency the priority, but what would happen if we empowered them to be critical about injustice or oppression? (Canagarajah, 1999).

The concept of empowerment became a key aspect of this research because students have the potential to resist the collectively constructed notions of gender imposed by Western society and the establishment itself. Those who were highly empowered showed that they deconstructed the hegemonic discourses and their positioning towards politics, raising their awareness of inequalities (Freire, 1970). However, only a few achieved high levels of criticality and empowerment, while most of them could not go beyond a simple reflection.

Norton and Toohey (2011) explain how identity construction is shaped by the different conceptions of reality that a person has and develops during discourse interaction. In the classroom, students may construct their identities by negotiating the meaning of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. We need to take advantage of such opportunities so that classrooms are places where teachers and students grow and construct their identities. If we can teach students how to resist oppression and discrimination through their opinions and reflections, they could become tolerant and critical individuals who will later have a positive impact on our society.

### *Valuing local knowledge*

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During my first years as a student and teacher of English, I believed that the knowledge produced in the developed countries was unquestionably more valuable than the knowledge in my own country. I was clearly wrong.

I experienced how I could create knowledge myself by systematizing an interpretative technique such as CCDA from the analysis of my data, resulting

in a new framework of analysis. Combined with Conversation Analysis Theory, which revealed different codes and patterns in the reflections of my students, such as lexical choices in their speech or certain utterances, this framework enabled me to contrast the data in a more quantitative way. It also made me realize that we, as applied linguistics researchers, need to value our local production of knowledge by recognizing that we can be independent from the postcolonial views imposed by Western societies (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007).

## Suggestions for further research

When we use post-structural approaches, we touch on unexplored spheres of the construction of identity through language learning that have to do with the entanglement and overlapping of notions about race, gender, and sexual orientation. That, in turn, has political aspects, insofar as it changes the individual's relationship with the world, of which the classroom is a microcosm. Hence, there is a strong need to empower students to resist inequality and discrimination (Canagarajah, 1999). I also believe that we can design lessons which transform phallogocentric ideas into tolerance and equality (Cohen, 2004), fight against the discrimination caused by post-colonial ideologies and improve our own teaching. The work of Colombian teachers, both in the classroom and research, is as valid as that of academics in the developed countries (Quijano, 2007) and we need to spread this idea among the Colombian TEFL community.

I thus call on other applied linguistic researchers to acknowledge the importance of broadening the construction of identity, question their own views, use emergent methodologies, reflect on the political positioning of students, recognize that our local production of knowledge is valid, rethink the way we teach English and make use of our power to go beyond instrumentalism.

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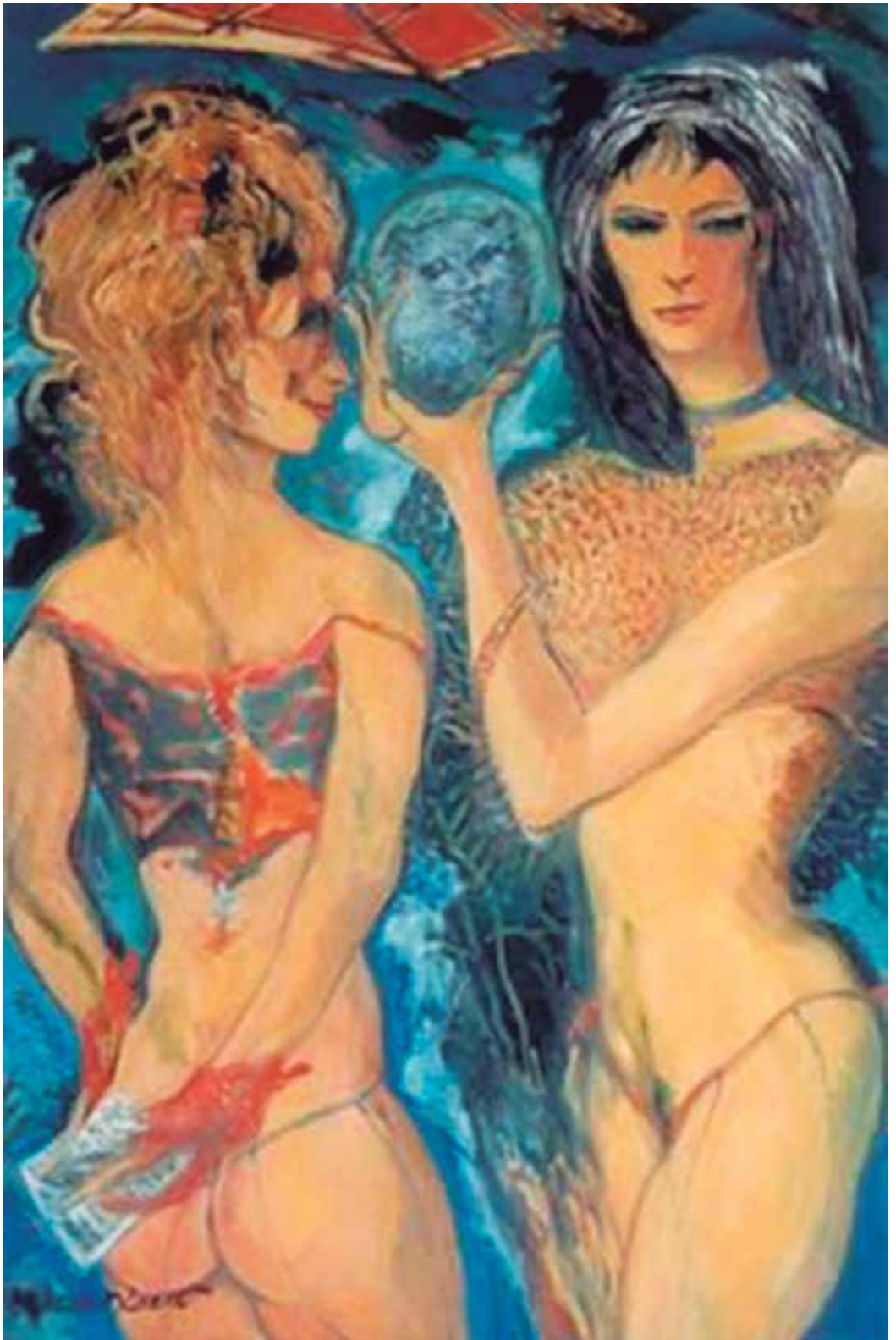
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*Aralia y Violeta (Ángel Loochkartt)*  
Autor  
Colección privada de Amparo Osorio.

*Para poder cruzar esa puerta que tantas veces por temor a lo que pensarán sus padres se negó a pasar, estaba ahí parado decidido a hacerlo, a obtener su libertad. Agarró las pastillas de oxicodona que había escondido debajo de su colchón, esas pastillas que habían sobrado de las recetas a su fallecido padre; las trituró y las revolvió en agua para ingerirlas mejor. Se encerró en el baño y mirándose al espejo sonrió; pintó esos delgados labios y aplicó pestañina en sus ojos, delineó su puntiaguda nariz en el espejo mientras bebía toda la mezcla. Sacó el afilado cuchillo que había escondido hacía mucho rato en la cómoda donde guardaban las toallas. Con un desgarrador grito de dolor despertó a todos en la casa, tan desgarrador que sonaba a las recién paridas madres cuando gestaban un nuevo ser; al escuchar semejante alarido todos corrieron al baño para saber qué ocurría. Al abrir apresuradamente la puerta, lo encontraron petrificado. La escena parecía un cuadro macabro: usaba un brasier de la hermana, sostenía su pene ya amputado y ensangrentado en medio de sus manos, derramaba tanta sangre que esta bajaba entre sus piernas; formado un gran charco por el azulejo amarillento; su rostro reflejaba regocijo, extasiado, se le veía satisfecho y felizmente complacido solo replicaba ...por fin soy ella.*

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