

# Reading the World: Increasing English Learners' Global Literacy through International News<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This case study examined how a group of four EFL<sup>2</sup> learners enhanced global literacy through the discussion of social conflicts, reported by news media, including *The New York Times*, *the Guardian*, and *CNN*. The experience was carried out in a conversation club that was conducted by the researcher's initiative to help these participants create awareness of global literacy. Data were collected from these participants' critical reflections on power, race, and gender problems in different cultures through field notes, logs, and one questionnaire. Findings revealed that participants developed global literacy as they used the foreign language to analyze and discuss discrimination, hatred, and prejudice in many nations. This research concluded that incorporating news in EFL education can prepare speakers to empower themselves as world citizens of a globalized society.

**Key words:** critical literacy, mass media, human rights, global literacy, EFL education.

## Resumen

### Leer el mundo: Fortalecimiento de la alfabetización global de estudiantes de inglés a través de noticias internacionales

Este estudio de caso exploró cómo un grupo de cuatro estudiantes de inglés mejoraron su alfabetización global mediante la discusión de conflictos sociales emitidos por noticias internacionales como *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* y *CNN*. Esta experiencia se llevó a cabo en un club de conversación que el investigador creó para ayudarles a estos participantes a ser conscientes de la alfabetización global. Se recogieron datos de las opiniones críticas de los estudiantes sobre conflictos de poder, raza y género en diferentes culturas mediante notas de campo, diarios y un cuestionario. Los hallazgos indicaron

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of an independent research study, conducted in the first term of 2016 with voluntary EFL learners in a conversation club in Bogotá, Colombia.

<sup>2</sup> EFL: English as a foreign language.

que los participantes desarrollaron la competencia global cuando utilizaron la lengua extranjera para analizar temas de discriminación, odio y prejuicio en varias naciones. Esta investigación concluye que la incorporación de noticias en la educación de ILE puede preparar a los estudiantes para empoderarse como ciudadanos del mundo en una sociedad globalizada.

**Palabras clave:** alfabetización crítica, medios noticiosos, derechos humanos, alfabetización global, educación en inglés como lengua extranjera.

### Résumé

#### **Lire le monde : renforcement de la littéracie globale des étudiants à travers les informations internationales**

Cette étude de cas a examiné comment un groupe d'étudiants d'anglais ont amélioré leur littéracie globale grâce à la discussion de conflits sociaux diffusés des médias internationaux tels que *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* et CNN. Les données ont été recueillies des opinions critiques des étudiants portant sur des conflits de pouvoir, de santé, de racisme et de genre dans de différents endroits au monde à l'aide de notes de terrain, de journaux et d'un questionnaire. Les résultats montrent que les participants sont devenus plus forts en littéracie globale, car ils ont été capables de construire de nouvelles connaissances sur d'autres pays. Comme résultat de cette recherche, on peut conclure que l'incorporation des informations internationales dans l'apprentissage de l'anglais, en tant que langue étrangère, peut préparer les locuteurs à être des citoyens du monde dans une société globalisée.

**Mots-clés :** littéracie critique, médias, droits humains, littéracie globale, anglais langue étrangère.

## INTRODUCTION

Society and personal lives are widely influenced by mass media. Whether on traditional (TV, radio, and newspapers) or digital (Internet or social networks) media, news aims at keeping people informed about the social, political, and cultural events that happen around the world. Likewise, news is a powerful means that informs about social issues such as injustice, human cruelty, corruption, crime, and wars. News makes people aware of the fact that contemporary society, in its strive to become more globalized, is at the same time collapsing due to violence, indifference, and lack of global literacy. Global literacy, according to Eguchi (2015), refers to "a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary (...) for global collaboration" and for successful "problem

solving and innovation (...) in the interconnected global society" (p. 235). Global literacy is understood as the capacity to analyze world conflicts and human development in order to establish better intercultural relations, embrace a sense of belonging to a pluralistic society, and help to improve present life conditions.

This article reports a case study research that encouraged a group of EFL speakers/learners to enhance global literacy through the discussion of recent news. This resource was chosen, first of all, considering its potential to develop global literacy as news addresses global issues related to social injustice and inequality. Secondly, news media were chosen for being a source of exposure to authentic language in use. Thus, news was selected as an ideal material that could drive non-native speakers of English to use the foreign language more meaningfully while, at the same time, help them become more *globally literate*, a competence that EFL speakers need to improve in the current process of globalization. Another salient claim of this study is that learning English as a foreign language should go beyond achieving linguistic proficiency. It should also entail individuals' global awareness to learn about other cultures, develop social skills to face the challenges of global communication, and understand how the world is interconnected.

Jenkins (2006) and Focho (2011) assert that English as an international language is a vehicle that can help language learners to be *globally literate*. That was the case of the four non-native English speakers/learners involved in this research who sought to enhance their global literacy because they were about to travel abroad and needed to behave as world citizens. An in-depth description of how these speakers started to foster global literacy with the support of news provided by *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian* is here reported. The research question guiding this study was: How does international news influence a group of EFL speakers' critical global literacy development?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The role of global literacy in EFL learning**

Global literacy is a concept framed in a broader field named critical literacy. Along these lines, these two terms need to be defined and

related. UNESCO (2005) has defined critical literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, (...) and employ” (p. 21) printed materials or texts such as books, newspapers, and images in order to identify underlying messages related to injustice in the world (Freire, 1970; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). During the reading process, readers question and analyze unfair cultural and political conflicts of everyday life, namely abusive power, oppression, and lack of values, while considering how human beings can improve the quality of life and establish a more democratic social order (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). With critical literacy, students are called to find ways to establish “equitable coexistence on this fragile earth” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 68) while being encouraged to enhance their capacity to promote dialogue, good relations, human rights, and non-violent resolution of conflicts. Being literate is to gain *knowledge*, create *attitudes*, and use *skills* to function in one’s own cultural community and in an interconnected global civilization (Banks, 2004).

Gee (1991) and UNESCO (2008) affirm that literacy goes far beyond learning to read and write words. It is rather an umbrella term that involves multiple levels of literacy according to particular contexts. In this regard, Street (2009) states that there are “multi-literacies,” specifically, computer literacy, visual literacy, and cultural literacy. Global literacy, the one proposed in this research study, is one of the literacies that needs to be enhanced in this ongoing globalized world.

Global literacy, as being a part of critical literacy, is a social competence that allows a person to acquire critical understanding of current national and international events in order to function effectively as a world citizen or a “world-minded person” (Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007, p. 183). It constitutes a social concern about global problems that affect humanity in general, regardless race, religion, gender, and economic level. It opposes classism, colonialism, sociocentrism, and supremacism, which are hazardous political ideologies that still dominate the relationships among different countries and cultural groups. Therefore, global literacy entails critical thinking strategies and personal action to save and improve humankind from prejudice and inequality.

This study argues that it is suitable to help EFL learners to start creating awareness of their personal global literacy while learning the foreign language. Sooner or later, many learners, like the participants

involved in this study, might get acquainted with different people around the world through internationalization experiences, including opportunities to study abroad thanks to academic mobility, exchange programs, and scholarships. Besides, EFL learners might get engaged in transnational trips and tourism, job offers abroad, international business, and cross-cultural communication. Moreover, a high percentage of EFL learners are likely to become English teachers, as it is the case of two of the four participants involved in this study. As EFL educators, they must know that teaching English means more than mastering language structures and vocabulary. Their pedagogical mission will consist of preparing future students to become more globally competent and world-minded to support human rights and those human beings that are still illiterate and victims of underprivileged circumstances in their own nation and abroad.

That is why several EFL researchers, including Nakamura (2002, 2003), Revelo (2008), and Focho (2011) advocate global literacy practices in EFL education. They emphasize on language learners' awareness on respecting universal democratic values and human rights, based on the fact that the main purpose of learning a foreign language is to establish global communication and intercultural understanding with other communities worldwide. Nakaruma's study (2003), for instance, provides theoretical basis on the concept of globalization and claims that global literacy in EFL/ESL education can be integrated into the communicative language classroom. This researcher designed and implemented a content-based syllabus at a University in Japan that included global issues such as human rights, citizenship, environmental problems, and war and peace in the world. Two of the main findings with this research experience were that students valued the importance of learning global human issues in EFL education, and that many of these students started to get involved in humanitarian activities to serve hungry children and impoverished people in the world, a fact that indicated that learners became more globally conscious.

At the national level in Colombia, Calle (2017) makes a critical reflection on the importance of educating EFL learners to become citizens of the world. She did a documentary analysis of the Colombian Standards

for Language Teaching<sup>3</sup>, published by the Ministry of Education (MEN) in 2006. Her analysis produced three main findings. First, the standards still need a more explicit incorporation of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in the EFL classroom. Second, the standards only address the superficial and lower-level skills of citizenship (e.g. “I greet courteously/politely,” “I show a respectful and tolerant attitude when I listen to others,” MEN as cited in Calle, 2017, p. 162). Third, GCE is mostly suggested to be developed through reading. Calle (2017) concludes that GCE needs to be more visible in the standards, that an appropriate methodology to enhance GCE still needs to be adopted, and that teachers should be educated to become globally literate. Calle (2017) suggests that empirical research on incorporating global literacy in the Colombian EFL education must be a top priority.

### **Reading the world: the inclusion of news in EFL learning**

Literature about the use of news in ESL/EFL<sup>4</sup> is scarce (Moglen, 2014), and the few published reports are mainly oriented to help learners improve vocabulary, grammar, and the four language skills. For instance, Moglen’s (2014) recent study incorporated online, printed, and TV news media sources from *Fox*, *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *The Week* magazine to help ESL students learn vocabulary and language forms through “authentic contexts” and “authentic materials” (p. 34). Similarly, research on vocabulary, grammar learning, and language skill development (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) through news sources has been a salient contribution by Teng (2015), Bahrani and Tam (2011, 2012), Cross (2011), and Berber (1997), important EFL scholars interested in how news influences foreign language competence.

However, Moglen (2014) asserts that because of the relative lack of published research on the impact of news on English learners, the inclusion of news into ESL/EFL education requires further inquiry. Influenced by Moglen’s assertion, this research study wanted to contribute with the inclusion of news articles in the EFL context from a different perspective: one that appreciated news not only as instructional material for developing learners’ communicative competence, but also

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<sup>3</sup> Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: inglés (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> ESL: English as a second language/ EFL: English as a foreign language.

as an ideal resource to build non-native English speakers' critical global literacy, since little research has been done from this investigative angle. Several reasons underpinned the use of news for this inquiry process. First, since news contains authentic language (Gebhard, 1996; Nunan, 1999), this material could motivate EFL speakers/learners to listen to, read, speak, and write analytically about the problems of real life. Second, news media could facilitate the negotiation of meaning and the construction of new knowledge about the real world more significantly in EFL. Third, news reports usually denounce violence, discrimination, wars, injustice, and corruption, these being social conflicts that learners can analyze through a critical literacy process in order to build a culture of social responsibility for the wellbeing of the planet (Schattle, 2008). By articulating critical literacy with the analysis of news articles in EFL education, learners can start considering how to eradicate expressions of hatred, exclusion, and human rights violation, while in turn learning to become exemplary citizens of our modern civilization.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Research design**

This research meets the principles of a qualitative case study, a common approach in the field of education (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). It aims at examining holistically and in-depth a particular phenomenon or group at a specific setting. In this occasion, the researcher observed how a small group of Colombian EFL speakers and students, who served as the participants of the inquiry, dealt with the critical reflections on several international issues reported in *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian* news (see Table 1) to facilitate the initial enhancement of global literacy. This analysis also determined if the phenomenon under observation (EFL learners' global literacy) succeeded or failed during the intervention.

### **Setting and participants**

Four non-native English speakers/learners participated in this case study in Bogotá, Colombia. They were three females and one male, all having university studies, but holding different life experiences. They were interconnected by their interest in improving their English fluency and



accuracy. The first woman, Natalia<sup>5</sup>, was a 30-year-old English teacher at a public school in Bogotá, and had been admitted in a master's program at a University in the USA. She was planning to travel in fall, 2016. The second woman, Gina, was a 28-year-old computer technician who needed to improve her English because she had been promoted and was going to travel to the USA for work-related purposes. The third woman, Amanda, was a 26-year-old student of modern languages at a public university in Bogotá, and was in the process of applying for a scholarship in Australia. The fourth participant, Diego, was a 28-year-old student who needed to study English as a requirement to finish his undergraduate studies. Two of them had been students of a language Department at a public University, while the other two were their friends.

Since they were planning to work or further their education abroad, they wanted to take English conversation classes to improve their speaking skills before traveling. So, the teacher-researcher invited them to participate in a conversation club in which they could discuss and debate controversial topics related to globalization and conflicts in the world driven from recent international news. This experience constituted a great opportunity to do investigative work on the integration of global literacy practices in EFL education.

The four learners signed a consent form in order to be part of the conversation club. Their English proficiency level was different, ranging between intermediate B1 or B2 according to the CEFR<sup>6</sup> (Council of Europe, 2001): They were able to speak about *their own personal situations, to deal with general information*, and to give personal opinions. However, they needed to foster accuracy, fluency, and pronunciation, and to enhance their critical capacity to support their points of view in normal conversation. Therefore, the conversation club was a space to improve their critical literacy and language level through the discussion of different news and, somehow, get prepared to travel abroad.

## Data collection

The data collection process was conducted in the conversation club from March 05 to April 23 of 2016, as participants met on Saturdays

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<sup>5</sup> The names of the participants are pseudonyms as their real identity has been protected for ethical and research reasons.

<sup>6</sup> CEFR: The Common European Framework of References to Languages.



from 3:00 to 6:30 at the house of one of the participants. Field notes were collected in each meeting, as suggested by Koshy (2005) by focusing on EFL participants' thoughtful comments on the news. Notes about the ideas and opinions that participants provided were taken in two forms: a) Participants' short verbatim sentences, containing exact words and opinions. b) Paraphrased ideas in the form of reported speech of what participants had said. Additionally, extended notes were taken right after each session in order to reflect about the level of critical global literacy accomplished during the discussion of the materials. A second data collection instrument was participants' logs, which were diary entries keeping record of participants' thoughts and points of view about the news. Participants wrote short entries in the logs at the end of each session guided by key questions (from March 05 to April 23), (e.g. how did the news discussed today help you to be more sensitive/critical about global issues? Why?). Logs were kept in a folder for data analysis. The last instrument was a questionnaire (See Appendix A), containing five questions, which aimed at analyzing participants' thoughts about the whole experience. That is why it was administered when the conversation club finished, on April 23. It was an important instrument because it constituted an introspective technique that required participants to respond freely open and closed-ended questions related to the main issue being investigated (Wallace, 2006).

### **The development of the conversation club**

The research procedure was supported by the discussion of global news in a conversation club which was named "Reading the World through News." In the first session, participants were asked about the definition of global literacy and how they could enhance it; but they said that they had never heard about this term before. Therefore, the first session focused on creating conscious awareness of this concept. The teacher-researcher gave a short presentation with the support of a handout that contained key information to understand this kind of literacy. Learners were told that they could enhance global literacy through different means, essentially by reading about or listening to local or international news, reading literature and history books, and watching documentaries, just to mention a few examples. Also, it was explained that language speakers could enhance this literacy by getting interested in the beliefs, traditions,

and ideologies of other cultural groups around the world because global literacy implied intercultural understanding. Participants were aware that they were going to read authentic news from *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *CNN* (See Table 1) in the foreign language (English) with the intent to build such important literacy. The criteria to choose these news sources were based on three aspects: They have a good reputation worldwide, they belonged to Anglo-Saxon cultural backgrounds, displaying news in the language that the participants were learning, and because participants suggested their use.

After this introduction, participants came prepared to the club sessions with the reading of the news (See Table 1). Also, they completed some worksheets that included key questions to answer individually, so that they started to create individual awareness and came prepared to the conversation club with initial/previous information to share with and analyze intelligently with their partners. Through the analysis of different news, they started to understand the concept of global literacy and gradually became more globally literate. For the purpose of this article and in order to provide a clear description of the conversation club, four topics were chosen as can be seen in Table 1. It is important to say that there were more topics and news, but these four topics were chosen at random to analyze the experience. The second column in Table 1 shows the global issues addressed in the conversation club, the third one displays the news headlines discussed, and the fourth includes the news sources:

**Table 1.** Reading the world: News that facilitated critical global literacy development in the conversation club

| Session | Topic/ news                             | Topics/ News articles discussed  | Materials/News source                        |
|---------|---|--|--|
| 1       | Understanding global literacy (March 5) | Definition of global literacy<br>How we can develop global literacy<br>Why it is important to be globally literate | Teacher-researcher's presentation<br>Handout |

|   |                                   |  |  |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| 2 | The conflict in Syria (March 12)  | Syria conflict: "10 moments that drove the crisis forward" (Leigh, 2013).<br>"Obama Weighs 'Limited' Strikes Against Syrian Forces" (Shanker, Chivers, & Gordon, 2013) | <i>The Guardian</i><br><i>The New York Times</i> |
| 3 | Health issues: AIDS (April 2)     | "HIV remains a global health problem thanks to ignorance and prejudice" (Fowler, 2014)   | The Guardian                                     |
| 4 | Gender and race issues (April 16) | "The town where boys are 'groomed to become pimps'" (Myles, 2015)<br>"A Conversation with Black Women on Race" (a video) (Brewster & Stephenson, 2015)                 | CNN<br><i>The New York Times</i>                 |

### Data analysis

Field notes were analyzed by following the grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2012), which helps the researcher to discover patterns that emerge from the collected data to answer the research question. The grounded approach required reading the data many times until repetitive patterns related to participants' similar reflections were recognized, leading to establish significant associations in the data to later create initial categories or themes. Those themes represented the sets of patterns found and associated with global literacy in the conversation club. Then, through a process of triangulation (Freeman, 1998), participants' comments on global issues registered in the field notes were compared to their comments in the logs and later in the questionnaire to assure validity and verify if similar patterns and initial categories were present in all the three data collection instruments. After this process, final categories emerged which, at last, were shaped into statements/findings. For example, it was detected in the field notes that participants often talked about *lack of social responsibility*. This pattern was also found in the questionnaire. Thus, each piece of data (pattern) related to this issue was classified under the initial category: "lack of social responsibility." At the end, this category became a formal statement/finding called:

“participants criticized humans’ poor sense of social responsibility for their neighbors,” embracing the opinions and aspects that “lack of responsibility” implied to understand global literacy. The findings are analyzed below in detail.

## **FINDINGS**

### **EFL speakers constructed new knowledge about other nations of the world**

One of the chief findings in the data was that the four EFL speakers acknowledged the news as a facilitating means to learn about interesting cultural aspects and current situations in other nations, and to be conversant with international events that they knew were happening in the world, but that they just did not pay attention to or did not have full understanding of. For instance, these learners lacked knowledge about the current conflict in Syria. Amanda affirmed that she knew there was a war in Syria, and that although Colombian TV news often reported about it, she “never paid attention to that problem because it was boring news and was not a problem in [her] country” (field notes, March 12). However, she said that from the first moment she started to read the news about the Syrian Conflict in the foreign language, she was able to learn interesting cultural information. For instance, she told the other speakers in the club that she did not know where Syria was located on the map, but when she was reading the news “10 moments that drove the crisis forward” (Leigh, 2013), she became curious and did further research. On her own initiative, she learned that Syria was located in the Middle East, bordering Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Israel, and that 20 million people lived there (field notes, March 12).

The same situation occurred in Gina’s case who said that she had never been interested in the Syrian war because it was “far away from Colombia.” Yet, as she started reading the news about this crisis she had learned that “Damascus or Ash-Sham was the capital of Syria,” and that “there was a civil war there because Bashar al-Assad, the president” had ordered the military forces to attack “opposition leaders” and civilians who requested his resignation (field notes, March 12). The four speakers stated that this was the first time in their lives that they were aware of

having learned about a foreign culture and problems of other nations in a more realistic way as mentioned in these samples<sup>7</sup>:

The news [about Syria] were new information for me, because although in the news speak about it, I had never been interested about this real conflict, I like to learn this information, because I can be aware of unjust situations of the world. Something I learned about Syria was that most children at the age of four only know the war, they were born in the middle of it, and they don't have any expectation for a better life. (Gina's log, March 12)

These data indicate that before this research experience, participants just did not care about global issues as they frankly confessed they were indifferent towards foreign news. However, during the conversation club they recognized that it was important to know about the problems of the world, and that details such as the situation of many children trapped and killed in the middle of a civil war in Syria helped them to become more globally literate and more "aware" of the government tyranny and the economic misery of this broken nation. Thus, they saw the Syrian war with new eyes and from a more critical lens.

Participants' initial global literacy was also enhanced through the learning of cultural information and current events along the discussion of the news article "HIV remains a global health problem thanks to ignorance and prejudice" (Fowler, 2014). Although Diego and Natalia had read about AIDS previously, they confessed that they just knew the basic information regarding prevention and the physical effects this disease produced on people. However, they reported having learned about cultural beliefs related to AIDS in different countries when they wrote their personal reflections in the logs:

I was surprised that in 80 countries like Russia, Nigeria, and Uganda, homosexuality is a crime and gays can go to prison. The church in Russia and the Anglican and Catholic Church in Uganda support the laws against homosexuals. Gays don't want to take the HIV test because if they are infected, they may go to prison. (Diego's log, April 2)

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<sup>7</sup> These are verbatim samples of students' production during the development of the conversation club. Therefore, they include learners' grammatical mistakes, since they were EFL learners improving their English level.

Participants' comments evidence that they were working towards developing global literacy by constructing new cultural and updated knowledge about ideological positions on AIDS in different countries. Diego and Natalia, for instance, discussed AIDS from an intercultural lens rather than from a clinical perspective as they pointed out that being gay means being a criminal in many nations of the world. They analyzed how this powerful cultural ideology discouraged men and women from taking the HIV test because if the test results were positive, the government would punish them instead of giving them medical treatment.

As can be seen, participants' comments indicated that the news facilitated global learning as they acquired social *knowledge*, as suggested by Banks (2004), regarding the serious threats that AIDS, and the conflict in Syria can cause on the lives of millions of people, even though those facts were not close to their own lives. In this sense, they were reading the world to be more globally literate.

### **EFL speakers criticized humans' poor sense of social responsibility for their neighbors**

One of the most important aspects that emerged from the data analysis was that the news helped these EFL speakers to think critically about humans' poor sense of social responsibility for other humans' needs and personal hardship. Social responsibility can be understood as an ethical duty to act for the benefit of a society or a community that is in crisis. It implies to become ethically responsive toward social, cultural, economic, and humanitarian issues. Participants argued that the news helped them to reflect about their responsibility for taking care of the world. They reflected that, unfortunately, people in general, including themselves, did not have a strong sense of social responsibility for caring about their neighbors' suffering. For instance, when they discussed the news "The town where boys are 'groomed to become pimps'" (Myles, 2015), which deals with the problem of white slave trade and forced prostitution among underage girls in Mexico, speakers pointed out that they were moved by Rosa's case, a 17-year-old Mexican girl who was deceived by a man that convinced her to go far away from her hometown to later force her into prostitution. Participants analyzed how the man, also Mexican, started to court Rosa, manipulated her with promises of love until "she fell in love with him," and finally took her to the U.S.

One participant said, "Her own boyfriend forced her to be a prostitute in a foreign country" (Field notes, April 16). The speakers analyzed the poor sense of social responsibility from different angles with regard to the problem of white slavery in Mexico as reported in the news. First, Amanda criticized Rosa's supposed boyfriend for being a man that not only deceived and "took advantage of this young girl in order to get money," but also lacked human compassion and respect for women. According to the students, Mexican pimps, as many other pimps around the world, only care about getting money and lack sympathy for the dignity of female victims because "those men use dishonest ways to capture women and force them to have sex with many men against their will" (Field notes, April 16). Speakers equally criticized the lack of social responsibility of the Mexican government and the police who were incompetent to eradicate white slave trade in that country, as these data indicate:

In Mexico the trade in women is a very big problem. I think that the police and government have to work harder to save young women from sex trafficking. Societies have to protect women (...) and educate them to avoid falling in the tramp of pimps and sex industry. (Diego's log, April 16)

Speakers equally criticized the towns people in Tenancingo for being accomplices of white slavery, as they knew that the girls of the town were being kidnapped and forced into prostitution, but did nothing to stop this problem. Learners thought that the citizens' attitude towards this issue was marked by indifference, complicity, and carelessness:

This situation is very difficult because in the Mexican town where it happens, it seems that everybody is in agreement with that, and they do not denounce pimps. In the news video, an old lady threatened the reporter because he was covering the news about white slavery in Mexico, so he had to leave the city because his life was in danger. (Natalia's log, April 16)

These data show how watching news critically encouraged EFL learners to become more globally literate and critical when they questioned why in Tenancingo, a Mexican city, a woman threatened the reporter who was doing the news coverage on the ruthless effects of white slavery. However, a debate arose in terms of citizens' social



responsibility when Natalia argued that “it is true that some cruel people are directly involved in white slavery” and threaten those who try to denounce, but there are many other “ordinary citizens who are forced to be silent because if they denounce, white slave traders will kill them” (Field notes, April 16). It happened to the reporter who was risking his life in Mexico when covering this story. Moreover, Natalia was very fair-minded about the fact that poor sense of social responsibility was not only on the government and people in general, but also on girls themselves who many times were naive and believed that handsome strange men were selflessly going to change their difficult lives for better:

I know that most of the time these women are forced to prostitution, but it is also true, that it happens because some young women are looking for a better life, and they believe in strangers’ unreal promises like having a good job, earning money, or having a happy marriage, but for sure, they are never going to improve life with those strangers. (Natalia’s log, March 26)

Natalia’s comment and the speakers’ opinions show that they believed that many young girls around the world needed to be educated to become socially and personally responsible for not falling pray to men’s offers related to economic prosperity, proposals of love, and happily ever after stories. Natalia stated that, unfortunately, corrupt pimps are everywhere to take advantage of girls’ dreams, economic needs, and feelings to later kidnap and exploit them sexually. The whole group also mentioned in the questionnaire (administered on April 23) that the news on white slave trade in Mexico had been a thoughtful global topic addressed in the conversation club because it had led them to consider how they could give good advice to their daughters and other women they knew in their own country, Colombia, where white slave trade was also practiced. These critical views showed how the participants became more interested in other human beings in other parts of the world as suggested by Schuerholz-Lehr (2007), and were analytical about the conflicts of the world that the news reported. They were able to reach deeper understanding of the intersection between global issues and their sense of responsibility not only as local, but also as global citizens as they mentioned in the questionnaire (April 29).

### **EFL speakers were critical about discrimination, hatred, and prejudice**

Critical literacy was fostered in the conversation class as the participants were able to express their personal opinions about attitudes of discrimination and misogyny in the United States when they read and discussed "A Conversation with Black Women on Race" (Brewster & Stephenson, 2015), an interview in which several black women talked about their emotional pain and psychological trauma for having to face day-to-day hostile experiences in which many white Americans mistreat and humiliate them. The four participants did not understand how, in the twenty first century, black women continued being discriminated because of their color, since participants had the idea that the United States was supposed to be the most exemplary and progressive country in the world in terms of democratic principles, human rights, and equality for all its citizens:

Black women suffer from discrimination and isolation in the United States. Other Americans always look at them different, it is difficult for them to find a good job as professionals because they are always rejected by companies and the business sector in general. These attitudes are against civil rights and human dignity. (Gina's log, March 26)

Female African-Americans' social situation in the U.S. was one of the most shocking news articles discussed in the conversation club because the participants not only disagreed with the racist and misogynist attitudes in the U.S., but expressed feelings of anger, sadness, and sympathy for those black women's life stories:

They had to handle many oppressions from white bosses at their workplaces just for being black women. People believe they don't have a good profile. I was annoyed and sad about the story of the black woman who said that a white art producer told her that she was not professional enough to dance on stage because her hairstyle was different from the other white dancers. (Amanda's log, March 26)

These comments indicated that the interview given by some African-American women led participants to be responsive to and more world-minded about the adversity of other human beings in different geographical sites. They reasoned critically that all women in the world,

despite their color, race, or origin, should be given the same opportunities that white people already take for granted to get educated, find a job, and be treated as qualified professionals (Field notes, April 16).

Amanda also said that comparing the physical features among races such as their skin color and hairstyle does not make any sense because physical characteristics do not determine if a person, black or white, is bad or good or should be superior or inferior, and that nobody has the right to make those discriminatory distinctions. Diego also mentioned that the racist attitudes of many white citizens in the U.S. were “absurd” since, for him, just because a person is black does not mean that he/she is bad or less important. Diego also stated that in fact, there were many good black people around the world and many corrupt, evil, and dishonest white men. Similarly, there were many “bad black men as many good and honest white men” out there (Field notes, April 16). These insightful opinions provided by the participants led them to make an important conclusion at the end of the session: that the color of skin does not determine the true nature of human beings, and that it is the issue we human beings must be less concerned about. The four participants concluded that all citizens of a global world needed to be more concerned about becoming better human beings by improving their moral and democratic values, by being more humanitarian with underprivileged individuals, and by defending human rights (Field notes, April 16). These important conclusions about issues of race and segregation that still exist in the U.S. provide vivid evidence of how the four EFL speakers questioned and confronted injustice and oppression in the world, as suggested by Freire (1970) and McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004). These conclusions are also instances of their intellectual and critical literacy progress.

One interesting finding in the data was that these EFL speakers related issues of racism and hatred to their own identity as non-native speakers of the English language. Since three of them were planning to travel to the U.S. and Australia in order to further their education or improve job conditions, they immediately identified themselves as both foreigners in those countries and members of one minority group: Latinos. In consequence, they were afraid of being victims of xenophobia by the natives once there (Field notes, April 16 and April 23). This finding was interesting because these participants related the global conflicts

that they had read about in the news articles to their own personal lives. They commented that although there were still many racist people in the U.S., president Donald Trump<sup>8</sup> among them, they needed to act as intercultural beings and global people, and that they needed to confront those negative racist attitudes with their own positive attitudes towards understanding other peoples. In this sense, they affirmed they were starting to get ready to confront any type of xenophobia and exclusion by other human beings. They also concluded that not all American citizens were racist and biased about other cultural groups, and that there were also world-minded people in those countries.

### **Learners recognized they were becoming more globally literate during the experience**

Data revealed that the participants acknowledged having become more globally literate during the reading, the written reflections, and the discussions on the news articles during this experience. They often wrote and said the expressions “I learned that . . .,” “I didn’t know that . . .,” and “I can’t believe these things happen nowadays,” among others, to express surprise, sympathy, and even indignation with the problems of the world that they had never given much thought to in detail before. They mentioned that they were not used to read or to watch any type of news, that instead they preferred to listen to music or watch fiction shows or entertainment TV, and that when they watched TV news sporadically, they never analyzed the news being broadcasted. However, they recognized that during this research they created awareness of the importance of global literacy in their lives because they were able to do profound and well-argued analysis of the news, a task that they had never done neither in their native language nor in previous English courses:

Sometimes, one knows that things happen because we only pay attention to the headlines, but one can never really imagine the horrible crimes that are happening out there. When reading the news carefully, one can get well-informed and be more aware, analytical of injustice and oppression of many people worldwide. (Amanda’s questionnaire, March, April 23)

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<sup>8</sup> When participants were speaking about racism and hatred in the U.S., they brought to the discussion the news about Donald Trump’s discriminatory attitudes and negative comments against immigrants and Latinos. At the time the conversation club was developed, Donald Trump was a candidate for presidential elections. He had been attacked for having said, according to the news, outrageous comments against Latinos.

Therefore, as globally literate, these EFL speakers recognized that they were critical thinkers during the conversation club because they evaluated and disapproved instances of prejudice and inequality in our present global society through the support of current news provided by important mass media, including *CNN* and *The New York Times*. These four participants never hesitated in their attempt to make objective and well-founded judgments so as to determine why modern human beings need to stop cruelty and hatred against others on earth. They equally acknowledged that they still needed to come a long way to become fully global citizens, and that the experience in the conversation club was the beginning of this task (Field notes and questionnaire, April 29).

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Two limitations of this case study were the little number of participants and the relatively short period of time for data collection. Time was a constraint because participants did not have too much time to meet more often in the conversation club as they had many several responsibilities and some of them were making arrangements for their upcoming trips abroad. Thus, findings should be understood in the particular context in which this research was conducted. Nevertheless, given the scarcity of similar previous studies, the current paper still contributes to the growing and much needed field of inquiry of relating critical global literacy and EFL teaching. This study represents an example of how English teachers can enhance global literacy through their practices and the use of particular materials.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This research study has shown that integrating news in an EFL conversation club potentially influenced learners' initial awareness of global issues, and therefore, enhanced their global literacy. This was achieved by understanding how discrimination, bigotry, and violence still affect the human relationships among people despite the effort of many nations to construct a peaceful and interconnected multicultural

society. In particular, when reading the news provided by *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian*, these speakers discussed complex social and cultural topics related to injustice and tyranny in Syria, homophobic ideologies against AIDS patients in patriarchal societies, sexual exploitation and forced prostitution in the U.S.-Mexican border, and racism and misogyny in the U.S. This is one of the main achievements of this experience, because encouraging EFL learners to discuss conflicting events of the real world is not a common practice in EFL education. EFL textbooks and other commercial materials approach culture as the accumulation of a number of congratulatory and happy experiences related to ideals of everyday life and preconceived images of traditions (music, sports, entertainment, hobbies, trips, tourist places, holidays, etc.), but seldom confront learners with issues of identity, cruelty, unfairness, and adversity that are present in the real world.

It is important to clarify that global literacy requires more than just being reflective about the social struggles of many people on the planet. It also demands each individual to become an active agent of social change against cruelty and violence by getting involved, for instance, in humanitarian causes, social work, and community projects. Naturally, the first step to construct global literacy is to generate critical reflections on actions that can endanger our coexistence and human rights, as the reflections achieved by the four EFL speakers that participated in this study.

More research must be conducted to identify and understand more practices in enhancing EFL learners' global literacy. Future studies might concentrate on how global literacy can be fostered through other topics, authentic materials, and methodological alternatives. For instance, it is still needed to enhance global literacy through literature, technology-based materials, and by encouraging learners to embark in charity and humanitarian projects. Also, research must be done on how to train English teachers to increase their global literacy.

The last conclusion is that learning a foreign language does not only mean to be fluent and accurate when using it. Learning a foreign language, especially one as worldwide spread as English, entails the development of other skills, including intercultural competence and critical global literacy. The target of language learning is being able to participate in a broader conversation with speakers of different linguistic

and cultural backgrounds. Learning a language could be a means to act as mediators of social change and a catalyst in the building of a fairer, more global and interconnected society.

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**Fecha de recepción:** 23-08-16.

**Fecha de aceptación:** 15-05-17.

## **APPENDIX A**

### Questionnaire on global literacy development

Please, answer the questions below based on the topics discussed in our conversation club.

1. Do you believe the news discussed in the conversation club helped you to develop global literacy? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_. Explain why and give examples.
  
2. If your answer to the previous question is "Yes," which aspects in the news specifically helped you to enhance global literacy? Give examples. If your answer is "No," do not answer this question.
  
3. Should English classes incorporate news articles as a resource to develop EFL learners' global literacy? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_. Explain why and give examples.
  
4. Based on the experience in the conversation club, what does it mean to be a global citizen or globally literate?
  
5. What do you think is the role of including news in the EFL classes?