



# Enhancing Language Learning Engagement through Critical Literacy Practices<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This research paper seeks to determine the connection between language learning engagement (LLE) and critical literacy in 34 ninth-grade students from a public high school in Caquetá, Colombia. A Participatory Action Research study was conducted, consisting of group interviews, questionnaires, and student artifacts. Students' experiences of local social and environmental issues informed the critical literacy practice to provide learners with tools to examine problems occurring in their community. The findings emerging from this research suggest that the practice of critical literacy engages students in learning from the cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. This critical approach plays a pivotal role in activating students' motivation to persevere with language learning and tackle learning-related difficulties.

**Key words:** critical literacy; language learning; language learning engagement; social issues.

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## **Resumen**

### **Fomentando el involucramiento en el aprendizaje de lenguas a través de prácticas de alfabetización crítica**

El estudio descrito en este artículo intenta determinar la relación existente entre el involucramiento en el aprendizaje de idiomas y la alfabetización crítica de 34 estudiantes de noveno grado de una escuela pública de Caquetá, Colombia. Se realizó una investigación acción participativa y se usaron los siguientes instrumentos de recolección de información: entrevistas grupales, cuestionarios y artefactos escolares. Las experiencias de los estudiantes en relación con temas sociales informaron la práctica de alfabetización crítica para proporcionar a los aprendices las herramientas necesarias para enfrentar los problemas que ocurren en su comunidad. Los resultados de esta investigación sugieren que la práctica de una alfabetización crítica compromete a los estudiantes en el proceso de aprendizaje desde unas dimensiones cognitivas, sociales y emocionales. Este enfoque crítico juega un papel crucial en activar la disposición de los estudiantes para enfrentar el aprendizaje de un idioma y contrarrestar las emergentes dificultades para aprender.

**Palabras clave:** alfabetización crítica; aprendizaje de idiomas; involucramiento en el aprendizaje de lenguas; problemáticas sociales.

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## **Résumé**

### **Améliorer l'engagement dans l'apprentissage des langues grâce à des pratiques d'alphabétisation critique**

L'étude décrite dans cet article tente de déterminer la relation entre l'engagement envers l'apprentissage des langues et l'alphabétisation critique chez 34 élèves de neuvième année d'une école publique du Caquetá, Colombia. Une recherche-action participative a été menée et les instruments de collecte d'informations suivants ont été utilisés : entretiens de groupe, questionnaires et artefacts scolaires. Les expériences des élèves en relation avec les problèmes sociaux ont éclairé la pratique critique d'alphabétisation pour fournir aux apprenants les outils nécessaires pour faire face aux problèmes survenant dans leur communauté. Les résultats de cette recherche suggèrent que la pratique de la littératie critique engage les élèves dans le processus d'apprentissage à partir des dimensions cognitives, sociales et émotionnelles. Cette approche critique joue un rôle crucial en activant la préparation des élèves à faire face à l'apprentissage des langues et en neutralisant les difficultés d'apprentissage émergentes.

**Mots-clés :** littératie critique ; apprentissage des langues ; engagement à apprendre ; problèmes sociaux.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes language learning engagement in students from a public school in the department of Caquetá, Colombia, considering not only the cognitive, but also the emotional, and social components of engagement. A review of LLE research finds these latter components are frequently overlooked by educational stakeholders. The following quote from the school's literature illustrates how cognition is exclusively emphasized in the teaching and learning processes at this specific institution: "As an alternative, the challenge is to intellectually potentiate young learners, with the intention of developing communicative skills that enable them to interact and build a fairer and more competent country" (Institución Educativa Juan Bautista la Salle, 2009). The social and emotional components of engagement appear to be overlooked in classroom practices. It seems interaction serves as the goal for learning English, but it is far from being a means for learning to take place.

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Storch (2008) affirms that little research has been carried out concerning the impact of engagement and attention on language learning, citing that the lack of research is due in part to the complexity of accessing and measuring internal learning processes such as attention and engagement. The Caquetá school system is not an exception in this lack of research. Identifying the relationships between language engagement and critical literacies in high school learners offers a significant contribution to the public education sector in Caquetá. This study employed qualitative research (QR) methods to examine levels of LLE in a specific public school setting.

### Statement of the Problem

This research study investigated the connection between LLE and critical literacy. According to Svalberg (2009), "as a construct, the notion of engagement could provide ways of explaining why some linguistic or language-related behaviours and attitudes seem to facilitate language learning and learning about language/s more than others" (p. 243). Meanwhile, Pineda et al. (2014) argue that

while the expansion of education coverage and enrollment has been evident in Colombia there is also a need to examine how educational institutions are seeking to strengthen student engagement with their academic endeavors and thereby raise graduation rates. (p. 3)

For the context of this research, engagement constitutes a significant component in learning a foreign language that may function as a type of mediation between the development of critical literacy and the learning process.

Critical literacy for this study is considered a means for bringing analytic and reflexive processes to participants' life experiences to enable transformative practices that benefit their contexts and encourage language learning. Norris et al. (2012) define critical literacy as a way of encouraging readers "to question, explore, or challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and readers [as] it examines issues of power and promoting reflection, transformative change, and action" (p. 59). Thus, critical literacy may serve as a possible means for reflecting, proposing, and acting through the learners' compositions which question social contexts and their significant problems.

Results from a needs analysis aimed at identifying the perceptions and attitudes of the students regarding LLE prior to the study intervention suggest that, even though English classes focus primarily on academic results and fail to guide students to discover the whys and wherefores of language learning. Students' responses to a focus group interview demonstrated a significant lack of engagement during the English classes. The absence of engagement in education is a phenomenon that most educators are able to identify in learners, and one that results in significant difficulty in meeting lesson objectives and achieving successful learning outcomes.

Following Al Rifai's (2010) ideas, engagement connects with the reasons students encounter to learn the language, and it explains the motivational variables that can guide learning. The benefits that students in the study ascribed to language learning are connected to the ideas of enrolling in college, traveling, and trading with foreigners. Language learning was a cognitive process for this group of participants, but it was not considered a social process.

Similarly, students linked the positive and negative feelings emerging from the class dynamics to their engagement level. Teacher-centered classes were associated with a decrease in student learning commitment. In agreement with Fredricks et al. (2004), achievement is closely tied to the different dimensions of engagement; in reality, emotional engagement has the power to increase cognitive engagement and, therefore, raise achievement levels. Meanwhile, social engagement is related to students' involvement in activities beyond the classroom, connecting students and their peers, and acting against student dropout. These connections highlight the multidimensionality of engagement and adds weight to the idea of providing students with the opportunity to embrace language learning from the cognitive, social, and emotional perspectives. Within this context, having determined research definitions of LLE and examined students' perceptions and attitudes around it, this study sought to determine how useful critical literacy is in enhancing LLE.

In this regard, critical literacy may serve as an approaching framework for this disintegrated concept to be interpreted. Bacon (2017) states that "the practices realized through critical literacies, however, are often denied to the growing number of students who are learning English as a second or additional language (henceforth *multilingual*

*learners*)” (p. 425). Thus, critical literacy may open a door for the students in the present study to become aware of their foreign language learning and understanding of the world.

For LLE, critical literacy presents a valuable scenario for students to engage with learning and critically understand the world. Jordão and Fogaça (2012) assert that critical literacy serves as the basis of a discursive view of the world and attributes a fundamental role to language in understanding or interpreting learners’ experiences. Thus, critical literacy promotes the discursive competencies that interplay in the process of language learning.

This research study’s general objective was to determine the connection between LLE and critical literacy for ninth graders at a public high school in Florencia, Caquetá. The specific objectives were to describe how ninth-graders at this school perceive LLE, explain how critical literacy impacts LLE levels for these students, and assess the use of a macro-strategy to enhance LLE through the practice of critical literacy.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

42 This review will focus on the two main theoretical constructs implied in the research questions: namely, students’ language learning engagement, and critical literacy, and then how these are considered essential factors in the language learning process. Each construct will be examined regarding some specificities or contextual factors.

### **Learning Engagement**

This concept considers the multiple ways in which learners engage with the construction of knowledge. Marks (2000) conceptualizes engagement as a “psychological process, specifically, the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning” (pp. 154-155). More often than not, this investment in learning is matched by students’ social support from their family, peers, and teachers. This definition positions engagement as a holistic concept beyond the cognitive realm, as it includes other essential factors mediating students’ motivation to persevere with learning.

Learning engagement has also been defined as the means to attaining learning-related outcomes. In this respect, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) state that engagement “is the direct (and only) pathway to cumulative learning, long-term achievement, and eventual academic success” (p. 24). To a certain extent, learning engagement is a predictor of students’ success in reaching learning goals.

## **Measuring learning engagement**

Accurately determining the degree to which learners engage with their learning processes is a common concern and learning engagement researchers have invested time designing different frameworks (Appleton et al., 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004). Concerning such frameworks, Betts (2012) suggests:

The three types of engagement, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional, might facilitate the construction of three different measures of engagement, with each focused on a single type. However, it would also seem appropriate to identify specific aspects of each general type that could constitute a subcomponent, or subdimension, of the general type. (p. 787)

This entails selecting specific subcomponents and defining each one of the types of engagement. This subdivision depends on context specifications, the engagement strategy, and the object of engagement to be measured. Thus, this research study presents a further definition of the subcomponents of engagement considering participants' context, the approach of critical literacy as the engagement strategy, and the English language as the engagement object.

It is also important to explore some of the engagement strategies that researchers implement to enhance LLE and how such approaches vary depending on the context and the different research purposes. To illustrate this idea, Kaminski (2019) advocates for the use of multimodal texts to engage students with language learning. This strategy relies on alternative modes such as songs, drama, picture books, among others, to present and construct meaning with young learners. From this experience, the author concludes that the different elements provided by the multimodal texts helped learners to decode meaning; as a result, students were able to engage in this practice, and they embraced language learning.

## **The multidimensional nature of learning engagement**

Engagement can be seen as an interrelation of the main components, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Each of these components provides significant insights for understanding learning engagement and its connection with critical literacy within this study's framework. The literature on the subject suggests that behavior, emotion, and cognition can be operationalized to establish on engagement indicators, thereby facilitating its measurement. In this regard, Fredricks et al. (2004) claim, "behavioral engagement encompasses doing the work and following the rules; emotional engagement includes interest, values, and emotions; and cognitive engagement incorporates motivation, effort, and strategy use" (p. 65). These descriptors position the

developmental constructs of engagement as observable phenomena so that teaching decisions can be made based on accurate feedback.

### **Language Learning Engagement**

Svalberg (2009) asserts that:

in the context of language learning and use, 'Engagement with Language' (Engagement) is a cognitive, and/or affective and/or social state and process in which the learner is the agent and language is object, and may be vehicle (means of communication). (p. 3)

What is new from this concept is the transition from behavioral to social engagement and Svalberg presents a table of the key characteristics of LLE, which might serve to explain this conversion.

44 In this regard, Svalberg (2009) defines LLE in terms of states and processes to refer to some of the conditions determining an engaged learner and how these conditions are developed. The author suggests that cognitive engagement is represented by a state of "heightened alertness, [and] focused attention," while its process is driven by "focused reflection and problem solving" (p. 246). On the subject of emotional engagement, the state reflects a "positive orientation towards the language," and the process indicates the "willingness to interact with the language" (p. 246). Concerning social engagement, the state is described as "behavioral readiness to interact," and the process focuses on "initiating and maintaining interaction" (p. 246). Social engagement approaches the behavioral disposition students might have to invest in learning.

### **Language learning engagement and particular contexts**

Considering that institutions have, within their autonomy, particularities based on their orientations, resources, alliances, and approaches, it is pertinent to state that the concept of LLE is closely connected to notions of time and space. By this, we mean, students' level of engagement depends on the classroom events and how teachers and learners approach different learning experiences. In this regard, LLE is far from being a global construct applicable to every setting. On the contrary, it is a multidimensional concept that needs to be examined in light of the unique features inherent to each learning environment.

The role of collaborative work is a determinant factor for engaging learners in the language learning process. Fredricks et al. (2004) highlight that "it is assumed that students will be more engaged when classroom contexts meet their needs for relatedness, which is likely to occur in classrooms where teachers and peers create a



caring and supportive environment” (p. 80). Under these circumstances, it can be said that collaborative activities provide opportunities for language learning through well-planned social practices with clear objectives, which may result in greater student engagement.

In the learning and teaching context, educational institutions are critical agents in enhancing LLE. In their study on student engagement and academic performance, Pineda et al. (2014) consider educational institutions as spaces where well-articulated programs may serve as a means of engaging learners and reduce student dropout rates. They assert that:

[Student engagement] is also associated with the policies and practices of an institution to encourage student participation in the programs and services offered. From this perspective, engagement is presumably strengthened to the extent that the institution designs and organizes learning opportunities that encourage students to invest more effort and dedication in the performance of cognitive tasks and in social participation. (p. 3)

In this view, LLE does not only depend on a learner’s effort and commitment to their process, but it interplays with external factors such as institutional programs and additional services such as alliances with governmental organizations or private institutions.

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### **Critical literacy**

Critical literacy principles direct learners towards resolving inconveniences they may encounter in their immediate contexts. The intention is to provide participants with educational scenarios to propose transformative solutions for the issues affecting their school and surroundings. To this end, this section deepens the understanding of what critical literacy entails and examines the implication of the construct in education, teaching and learning, language learning, and as a means of social transformation.

Critical literacy is often related to notions of analysis, reflection, and social transformation. Luke (as cited in Cañas & Ocampo, 2013) points out that critical literacy refers to “the use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (p. 6). In this way, critical literacy represents a means for bringing such analytic and reflexive processes to participants’ life experiences to enable transformative practices to benefit their contexts.

Critical literacy is seen as a highly relevant resource able to engage students in language learning. In a study carried out in rural Colombia, Cruz (2018) discovers how teachers understand English teaching as a social practice. He declares that “critical

pedagogy allows us to exalt alternative and locally grounded attempts to make English teaching socially relevant, especially in communities where English appears to be far removed from their everyday life” (p. 67). That is, critical literacy in the classroom ignites students’ everyday life and therefore learning.

### **Critical literacy in teaching and language learning**

Lewison et al. (2007) encourage teachers to challenge traditional classroom practices and use language learning as a pretext to equip learners with the necessary tools to fight against power relationships controlling their community, giving them opportunities to construct and negotiate meaning collectively, revise learners’ assumptions, and question the implications of classroom practices.

Critical literacy has served to language learning as a pedagogical approach that supports understanding, reflection, and practice. As Contreras and Chapetón (2016) report in their study on the impact of implementing collaborative learning in a social and dialogical perspective, there are enormous possibilities to incorporate and articulate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) syllabus contents within students’ realities to help them understand and reflect upon those realities and become active agents. It includes pedagogical practices that call for reflection on the local realities and encourage learning experiences that engage learners in the subject matter and involve them in the ideas of transformation and proposition of innovative practices.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This investigation was carried out under the qualitative research (QR) framework as it emphasizes data interpretation from a holistic perspective. In this regard, Gillis and Jackson (2002) advocates QR as a means of integrating the methods and techniques for observing, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting characteristics, patterns, attributes, and meanings of the human phenomena under study. Similarly, Mason (2006) asserts that qualitative methods are focused on the human experience and on the meanings ascribed by individuals living the experience, the broader understandings, and on the deeper insights into complex human behaviors which occur as a result.

### **Type of study**

Considering the previous stances on qualitative research, the inquiry for this study was Participatory Action Research (PAR). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) state that PAR enables participants to understand their social and educational practices and how they are the product of particular material, social and historical circumstances reproduced in

everyday social interactions in particular settings. Regarding group work and PAR, Miskovic and Hoop (2006) concur that the shared experience of participating provides the language and opportunities to articulate the direction for ongoing research and establish possibilities for solutions or action within the organization or group.

## **Participants**

The participants were 34 ninth graders from a high school located in the municipality of Florencia, the capital city of the department of Caquetá, in Colombia. The group consisted of 17 female and 17 male students aged between 13 and 15 years old. Most students were from a low socioeconomic background. Consequently, the school and neighborhoods experience social problems related to micro-trafficking, drug-taking, stealing, begging, and environmental concerns such as river pollution and waste disposal. These circumstances became the core of discussions and assignments for which students assumed a very critical perspective.

## **Data Gathering Instruments**

Data collection consisted of focus group interviews, questionnaires, and students' artifacts. Decisions made regarding the design and application of data collection tools were considered to advocate for ethical principles.

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### *Focus group interviews*

This data collection instrument aimed to describe practices that engaged students in language learning. Focus groups have been widely considered an effective method for qualitative research studies. Marshall and Rossman (2006) coincide that the researcher creates a supportive environment in which discussion and differing views are encouraged during a focus group. With this in mind, an initial and a post-intervention focus group interview was applied collectively to all the participants. The aim of the initial focus group interview was to describe how the participants perceived LLE before the pedagogical intervention took place. The intended data to be collected were students' ideas and perceptions about the language and LLE. The post-intervention interview was planned to describe possible variations of students' responses and the degree to which students engaged (or not) with language learning after the critical literacy pedagogical design.

### *Questionnaire*

This instrument was designed to explain how critical literacy influenced LLE for the students that participated in this research project. Mathers et al. (2007) affirm that "questionnaires are a convenient way of collecting useful comparable data from a large

number of individuals” (p. 19). Thus, two questionnaires were applied in this research study. The first focused on inquiring about students’ perceived problems in their school and community. The intention behind this instrument was to select the topics for the subsequent pedagogical intervention workshops. The second questionnaire aimed to gather the participants’ insights about critical literacy practices and how the practices engaged them in language learning. This instrument’s general structure combined critical literacy principles with the multidimensionality of language engagement: the cognitive, social, and emotional.

### *Students’ learning artifacts*

The artifacts for this research consisted of the students’ final written texts from the workshops and the final version of the school journal. The aim of analyzing the students’ artifacts was to explain aspects which support the critical literacy macro-strategy constructed to enhance LLE at the high school. These artifacts provided valuable insights and opportunities for reflecting upon how they embraced critical literacy to engage in language learning.

## **Data Analysis**

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The data collected for this research study were analyzed with the help of the program ATLAS.ti. In addition, the school journal created from this pedagogical intervention was manually analyzed to describe the macro-strategy used to enhance students’ LLE.

The analysis detailed in this section was carried out following Creswell’s (2014) model for analyzing qualitative research. This interactive model analyzes information via a bottom-up process to move from the simple to the complex steps. These steps seek to enhance codes’ identification, categorizing codes into, and targeting the research results.

Overall, the categories emerging from this research study encompassed participants’ perceptions of LLE and critical literacy as a means to holistically engage students in language learning. They also led to an approaching critical literacy macro-strategy for the enhancement of LLE.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Participants’ Perceptions of Language Learning Engagement**

This category presents students’ reflections of the LLE experience based on the application of a post-intervention focus group interview. This interview related possible variations (if any) on how participants perceived LLE after the critical literacy pedagogical design.

*A preview of students' perceptions and attitudes towards LLE*

This subcategory accounts for the way students perceived cognitive processes, feelings about the language, and their recognition as social beings. These ideas correspond to the concepts of cognitive, emotional, and social engagement.

Students' eagerness to focus on learning has to do with the ownership they report about learning and how that sense of commitment enhances their language learning process. It entails the knowledge-related actions that students are willing to adopt to approach learning. Students' focus on learning goes hand in hand with the importance they give to the language. Concerning this, one of the participants observed:

"I did not like English, learning those words, what for? If I will live here, right? But my mother said that it was important for business and to travel, then she has supported me to learn." [Comments translated by the authors].

This participant demonstrates being reluctant to learn something considered unnecessary. This problem has to do with the reasons students encounter to learn the language; as Al Rifai (2010) states, "(...) language acquisition theory ensures the crucial importance of a different affective variable, motivation, which is a cluster of factors that energize behavior and give it direction. (...) Motivation involves the learners' reasons for attempting to acquire the second language" (p. 5216). To invest in their construction of knowledge, students need to be clear about the whys and wherefores of learning. In that order, students decide whether to take the initiative to focus on learning or not and what sort of strategies serve their purposes the most.

The relationship between students' cognitive engagement and their desire to achieve academic goals is also an issue under consideration. Students seemed to be equally interested in both learning and performing well academically. Nonetheless, when asking students about which concerned them the most, the learning or the grade, a participant answered:

"During the reading class, you gave three texts, then you asked who wanted to read in English, and I was the only one who raised my hand because I wanted to learn. I did not like that you said that you were giving a grade for the ones who chose the English text because at that moment another five to six students raised their hands."

In this case, grades for these students enhanced their willingness to appropriate learning. As Finlay (2006) suggests; "However, evidence of a relationship between cognitive engagement and achievement is much stronger, [...] [it] does not eliminate the possibility of a bi-directional influence between outcomes and engagement: it is most

likely that they influence each other” (p. 4). It implies that the possibility of achieving outstanding outcomes may eventually enhance their engagement for students who do not seem cognitively engaged. Similarly, those who appear engaged have broader opportunities to attain better academic results once the grade is inherent in their learning process.

Emotional engagement explains the affective-related aspects impacting students’ learning processes. For Fredricks et al. (2004), emotional engagement is the composition of learners’ values, feelings, and emotions, both positive and negative, towards the class, the teacher, or the school itself. It defines students’ disposition to complete tasks. In this case, students’ feelings about the lessons relate to their preferred topics and activities. Several students correlate games, group work, and the variety of class topics to positive feelings and attitudes such as interest, willingness to participate, confidence and ease. In this regard, one of the participants pointed out:

“I prefer a fresh and dynamic class, where you feel motivated to pay attention and where you learn something new. Instead of a class where you receive a text, fill in the blanks, where you have to sit, and look at the teacher, I mean an insipid class that does not motivate you.”

50 Another group of students also referred to the counterpart of emotional engagement. As one of the participants mentioned, regular classes refer to a teacher-centered class focused on basic grammar. Activities consisted of filling in the blanks and not enacting them to participate and commit to learning. Concerning the negative feelings coming from this sort of class, students highlight the fear of making mistakes or failing the course, discomfort, and little desire to engage in classroom practices. Meanwhile, a student reported that certain activities, such as memorization and spelling in front of the class, were highly demanding. This caused the student to feel less able to achieve a learning outcome:

“I felt stupid in those activities in which we had to memorize a one- or two-page English text, and read it in front of my classmates. I was afraid of making mistakes, mispronouncing, or misspelling. I thought I was about to fail the course because of a word, and I felt uncomfortable. I never showed any interest in English in that place. [...] Once, I cried because I felt terrified of being unable to read it.”

As explained by students, these understandings relate to the feelings of lack of interest, little commitment, and fear to practice the language, resulting in a reduced emotional engagement, even in the cases in which students describe English language learning as a “must.” Because of that, Lally (2002) claims, “Most language acquisition research concentrates solely on student performance. However, considering students’

beliefs and perceptions can help teachers create language-learning environments that are more student-focused and engaging to the learner” (p. 927). As a result, considering learners’ perceptions about their learning and language is a way to bring students an alternative engagement experience.

The case of social engagement, as a construct, refers to students’ search for opportunities to work collaboratively to build up the language and practice inside and outside the school. It recognizes learners as social beings who embrace their mother tongue and a different language to explore the world. Indeed, excerpts of students’ responses propose that even though they find occasions to initiate interactions, they do not make efforts to maintain these contacts, principally because of language limitations. Again, for these students to gain enough confidence and expand the language domain, social engagement cannot represent only the ultimate goal. On the contrary, it might be seen as a fundamental articulator of the process of learning a language. To do so, learners need to negotiate interactions within the classroom, discuss the language, and adopt stances so that these interactions become a means for learning to occur.

The initial focus group interview analysis has provided information to describe how these students perceive LLE from its cognitive, emotional, and social components. The results from the analysis show that there is not a scenario where one of these fundamental components is separate from the others. Under these circumstances, students’ understandings of the language-related factors, their social recognition, and the emotions emerging from the learning experience influence their attitudes regarding learning processes.

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#### *The co-constructed experience of language learning*

This section examines students’ perceptions of LLE after a critical literacy practice intervention. Responses to the post-intervention questionnaire account for the variations in students’ LLE after their participation in this research study. Once participants embarked on the inquiry, analysis, and reflection of local issues, they began constructing a safe space for interaction and awareness about the language and the world.

#### *Students’ engagement: the integrated component of the classroom experience*

This subcategory presents findings illustrating how the components of engagement interplay within this research study. Again, Svalberg’s (2009) ideas of engagement define language as the object and communication vehicle. In this sense, language-related attitudes refer to the language as the object while communicating, reflecting, and making meaning. To exemplify this idea, in the following comment, a student expresses the object-vehicle relationship of language.

“I think the topics are very important because those are problems that occur today, and we should learn from them. Besides, writing English texts will allow us to learn more English, so it is like two in one.” [Post-intervention focus group interview, February 2019].

In this case, language as the vehicle is driven by the student’s idea of using the language to address existing problems. Similarly, language as the object reflects the learner’s attitude towards the writing task and language learning. So far, this analysis has shown how the state of engagement involves cognitive, social, and emotional components.

### **Critical literacy: An effort to holistically engage students in language learning**

This category analyzes with the findings arising from the application of a post-intervention questionnaire to inquire about students’ insights regarding critical literacy practice. The subcategories emerging from this analysis include students’ self-defined interaction with the critical literacy practice; critical literacy: approaching challenges for the L2 learner; and from literacy explorers to empowered world writers. The above subcategories identify and describe how critical literacy impacted LLE in this study.

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#### *Students’ self-defined interaction with the critical literacy practice*

This subcategory describes an important group of terms that students alluded to as indicators of their interaction with the critical literacy practice.

The ideas highlighted in this analysis are evidence that participants principally related the critical literacy practice to the notions of teamwork, learning, dynamics, and sociability. The terms teamwork and sociability can be analyzed together due to their semantic similarity. Teamwork was a term that prevailed in the interviews, enhancing students’ LLE from the social dimension. Its prevalence suggests that critical literacy played a crucial role in social engagement and the possible correlations with the other constructs.

The term sociability also connects to the construct of social engagement. Based on Philp and Duchesne’s (2016) ideas, “learners are likely to be more effective in language learning when they are socially engaged: that is, when they listen to one another, draw from one another’s expertise and ideas, and provide feedback to one another” (p. 57). This analysis suggests an influence of social engagement on students’ language learning, something that will be analyzed in later sections.

Participants also connected critical literacy and learning and dynamics, once they recognized them as key factors describing their interaction with the pedagogical design. The terms addressed in this subcategory are a starting point for considering the complete spectrum of critical literacy intervention. Some other terms, such as



communicative, commitment, and friendship, also contributed to understanding how critical literacy impacts students' engagement.

*Critical literacy: approaching challenges for the L2 learner*

This category's discoveries have to do with language-related difficulties emerging from critical literacy implementation in a particular context. The challenges that students encounter when embracing these processes may influence language learning, as expressed by a participant:

"The truth is that I have not learned to read in English at all since it is sometimes harsh to me, and I do not know some things."

Learner's language ability and experiential background are crucial aspects to consider when exploring critical literacy in the classroom. Obstacles that the L2 learner faces to appropriate critical literacy, such as limited language command, may lead to learning disengagement. This study's findings further uncover that some of the features inherent in disengagement, such as passivity, lack of initiation, and apathy have been experienced in some stages of this study. The following excerpts illustrate this idea.

"Reading is good, but I do not like it that much, even though what I read made me understand topics that I did not know."

"I have always had the interest to learn English; however, sometimes I feel sluggish."

The students' responses reveal two key points. The first student reports that he does not like reading; therefore, reading linked to critical literacy may be challenging. Nonetheless, this student acknowledges that reading helped him understand new topics despite his lack of interest in such a process. Meanwhile, the second student highlights his interest in the subject and recognizes that laziness hinders his language learning engagement.

Reschly and Christenson (2012) claim that "the parallel for engagement may be that having low engagement is different from being disengaged/disaffected" (p. 13). In this sense, further examination of this concept will be required to determine students' disengagement levels and implications.

*From literacy explorers to empowered world writers*

These findings underline the multiple ways in which participants consider the potential of critical literacy to impact in their LLE. Initially, several students discovered that their participation in the two workshops enhanced their awareness of the realities in their immediate contexts. Critical literacy led students to adopt a more active role in their

community when conceiving ideas to prevent and act towards their most common local issues. The following comment illustrates this idea:

“It is important because these topics are a reality in our daily lives; observing and emphasizing these topics is great. This way, we can prevent and be prepared to act when dealing with discrimination and environmental issues.”

Delving into the problematics directly affecting students and their communities added significance to the educative process as it allowed students to mirror themselves through the texts. Thus, exploring a powerful form of literacy, reading, gave birth to an empowering mechanism to fight against local constraints: writing. Students also emphasized how critical literacy includes the practice of writing as an act of freedom. The school journal was the means for students to raise their voices and become critical agents of change.

Critical literacy draws students' attention to their role as writers who appropriate the word to contribute to the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Regarding this, one of the participants explained:

54 “It has allowed me to become a writer because we have observed the problems that we have in both our school and family contexts or in the place we live, and we have proposed projects for a solution.”

The significance of critical literacy embeds in the power of the word “writer.” The comment evokes students' self-recognition as active contributors to solving salient problematics encountered in their community. In this respect, factors mediating students' writing processes and their engagement with language learning are worthy of attention. The social nature of the reading and writing tasks enables students' cognitive engagement. This concept plays an important role in explaining students' writing endeavors connected to processes, knowledge construction, and knowledge transformation.

In the same vein, writing also implies a social dimension. The process of writing critical reflections elicits the social nature of engagement. According to Ahn (2016), “Through meaningful engagement, one displays the knowledge of and awareness of language(s), willingly interacts with language(s) and/or other individuals, participates in social interactions, and further identifies and reflects oneself as a user of multiple languages” (p. 44). Writing in collaboration with peers, interacting with the second language, and making meaning of common concerns respond to the features of socially engaged learners.

These components of learning engagement need to be viewed as mutually reinforcing each other and therefore analyzed together. The findings from this study suggest that the writing processes within critical literacy have somehow mediated both

the cognitive and the social engagement attitudes of these participants. Similarly, emotions arising from implementing critical literacy in the classroom are also imperative to this study. From the participants' viewpoint, the critical literacy pedagogy uncovered feelings that support their reflective praxis. Whereas some students relate these feelings to the topics studied in class, some others refer their emotions to past experiences, as expressed in the following comment:

"The topics cause me a lot of sadness because it hurts me to see how we are. I also remember every insult people told me when I was a child. I remember how they bullied me and despised me when I was little."

Despite the above mentioned, several students found that critical literacy practice helped them improve their language skills. The fact that multilingual students are bravely exposed to academic content in the foreign language strengthens their linguistic competencies and uncovers power relationships surrounding the educational context. Roca and Murphy (2001) explain, "the study of cognitive processes in isolation from the contexts in which they occur may turn these processes into meaningless patterns of behaviour since the writing task and the writer's response to it are framed by social relationships" (p. 27). The following excerpt indicates how students consider that the critical literacy design enhanced their linguistic competence.

"The project helped me to know and learn more about the topic; in English, it helped me to improve my vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing."

This student refers to the connection between learning the contents embedded in the critical literacy practice, social and environmental issues, and improving language skills. These findings suggest that students who engaged in language learning through the pedagogical design improved their linguistic competence. This idea leads to further analysis of the relationship between learning engagement and academic achievement.

Critical literacy meaningfully enhanced LLE in this particular context. From the participants' viewpoint, critical literacy created opportunities for teamwork and social interaction; these activities incorporated the social component of engagement. The fact that students conceptualize learning as a primary signifier of critical literacy practice reveals its connection to cognitive engagement. Jordão and Fogaça (2012) explain "since the stress involved in trying to understand a foreign language is eased, students will be able to bring their "real" world to their English lessons, and by so doing, discussion in the mother tongue will help students learn English as a social practice of meaning-making" (p. 77). Similar connections between critical literacy and cognitive engagement are students' ideas regarding their improved language skills. In the same context, dynamics illustrate the different class events pivotal for teacher-student interaction and

peer interaction in feedback. Thus, the extent to which classroom dynamics challenge or enable students' LLE is an issue worthy of attention.

Critical literacy also has significant challenges in describing L2 learners' encounters with this pedagogical approach. These challenges mostly connect to the language-related difficulties uncovered through the processes of reading and writing. How these challenges affect (or not) students' LLE is an area that requires further corroboration. From another point of view, critical literacy also encouraged students to move on from the exploration of basic literacy skills to the empowerment of writing processes. In doing so, students developed awareness of the local realities affecting them and embraced journal writing as an act of freedom, which connects to the social and cognitive components of engagement.

### **Approaching critical literacy macro-strategy for the enhancement of language learning engagement**

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The last category of this study focuses on developing a macro-strategy for the enhancement of LLE as informed by the practice of critical literacy. This strategy consists of a scenario where the cognitive processes of reading, reflecting, and writing, along with the social and emotional factors of learning, converge in the social practice of inquiring about local issues. In doing so, this study discusses the changes emerging from the process of writing a school journal. Findings reported in this section suggest that the school journal supported both LLE and salient problematics recognition in a particular community. To complete the macro-strategy picture, this study analyzes students' artifacts, draws connections with previous findings, and considers existing theory in the fields of LLE, critical literacy, and social practices. Under such circumstances, this section attempts to propose a macro-strategy to enhance students' LLE through critical literacy practice.

#### ***The meaning-making process of learning***

Previous findings regarding students' perceptions of LLE demonstrated that it is important for students to engage in language learning. It is important to make meaning of the purposes, topics, and strategies related to learning. The task of identifying and exploring local issues is a workable way of adding such meaning to students' efforts.

The meaning-making process of learning goes hand in hand with Kumaravadivelu's ideas regarding the post-method pedagogy. In light of this, the principle of particularity evokes the recognition of participants' profound concerns, leading to the design of contextualized workshops allowing them to explore and reflect upon their local issues. Then, as Kumaravadivelu (2001) puts it, "(...) Language pedagogy, to be relevant, must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular

institutional context embedded in a particular socio-cultural milieu” (p. 538). As a result, particularity has enabled this study to propose a macro-strategy attempting to explore the issues that concern this particular group of learners and contribute to alleviating them.

The critical literacy macro-strategy goes from students’ meaning-making from the local issues which affect them to an appreciation of learning-related issues. In this regard, students stated their critical stances on some social and environmental issues that they eventually developed through written compositions. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2009),

For learning in a classroom to be ‘efficacious,’ it is necessary that what a person (whether child or adult) does *now* as a learner be connected in meaningful and motivating ways with ‘mature’ (or insider) versions of related social practices. (p. 64)

The journal encouraged learners to appreciate language learning as it connected to the meaningful task of voicing concern and expressing their opinions about local issues.

The digital version of the journal presented students’ understanding of the social and environmental issues affecting them. Learners’ comprehension of discrimination patterns in the classroom included lookism, bullying, racism, sexual and gender discrimination. This particular excerpt illustrates students’ ideas of sex and gender discrimination in the school context:

Sexual orientation discrimination and gender discrimination are a reality in the classroom and the school. Students from our school have faced sexual discrimination due to their different sexual orientations. (‘Are you a victim of sexual discrimination?’, school journal excerpt).

This comment uncovers students’ awareness of discrimination forms in their school and demonstrates students’ support for students suffering sexual and gender discrimination. Thus, the school journal became a significant advocator of school policies to prevent and reduce this form of discrimination among students, strengthening academic achievement.

Another form of discrimination identified and addressed by participants is lookism. The practice of critical literacy guided students in the construction of value judgments. To some extent, supporting students to be aware, reflect, and reshape social relationships may contribute to a more compassionate, inclusive school climate. According to the participants, discrimination based on physical appearance can bring fatal consequences. This issue exacerbates negative consequences as discrimination

based on physical appearance often leads to rejection and harassment among school members.

On the subject of environmental issues affecting the school and the community, ninth-graders acknowledge that one of the most salient problematics is water pollution, specifically in rivers and streams, as stated in the following comment:

In the municipality of Florencia in Caquetá, there is a stream called the Perdiz. This stream is one of the problems of environmental contamination in our city. This problem of contamination affects people, animals, and plants. ('Contamination in the stream La Perdiz', school journal excerpt).

This entry demonstrates their critical posture regarding the side effects that water pollution brings to their community. Similarly, students wrote about environmental problems impacting their neighborhoods. The pedagogical intervention invited learners to analyze, reflect, and inquire about local community problems. The journal writing served as a means for students to express concerns and feelings related to their community's problems while making meaning of learning process. The journal encompassed a new form of communication where students used their second language to advocate for social transformation.

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#### *Acting beyond the symbolic levels*

The reflection process linked to critical literacy practice has been the initial step in understanding social and environmental issues embedded in the participants' community, followed by efforts to consider potential solutions. Both reflecting and proposing ideas for transformation evoke the nature of critical literacy.

Participant critiques included initiatives to shift local ideologies naturalized within their communities to act beyond the symbolic level. The practice of critical literacy has led students to encourage readers to participate in the local initiatives proposed in the journal. In the following extract, the authors proposed a solution that involved the general community in the recovery of the green spaces in La Amazonía neighborhood, a place where waste disposal has caused vegetation degradation and a loss of species.

The solution we students propose is to make people aware of protecting the environment. ('Human waste disposal in Amazonia neighborhood', school journal excerpt).

The promulgation of voices that emerged from the critical analysis and reflection in the classroom is imperative to transforming paradigms and behaviors among the school and the community members. Such practice entailed a stand of critical literacy

that encouraged ninth graders to contribute to their community's development while embracing language learning. Barno (2014) affirms, "Literacies, in all her glorious forms, promote dialogue and engagement, offer validation of our many selves, mirror our experiences, and offer windows into the wider world" (p. 39). In this study, dialogue and engagement have been experienced through the implementation of the macro-strategy mentioned which includes students' proposals to advocate for substantial change.

*Journal writing as an opportunity for critical engagement*

Critical engagement is perhaps the most direct way of converging the results from practicing critical literacy to promote LLE. On the subject of critical engagement, Bacon (2017) expresses, "critical literacies, enacted through a variety of pedagogies and techniques, can motivate and inspire critical engagement among teachers and learners alike across a vast array of age groups, cultures, and pedagogical contexts" (p. 446). Learners, as agents of social change, illustrate the relationship between language learning and critical engagement. Participants developed critical skills that enabled them to integrate their knowledge about the world and their understanding of the language to meet awareness and transformational needs in their community. In reality, critical literacy practice opened up space for learners to explore local issues and contest the status quo.

Critical engagement is associated with the action-taking process consisting of understanding, reflecting, and inquiring to accomplish transformational goals. It reflects students' recognition of the socio-political relationships influencing their local realities. This example illustrates this idea:

One of the solutions that we propose to improve the environment's quality is to make a mobilization peaceful [sic] so that the local government gives the community a solution. ('Stream pollution in Villa del Recreo neighborhood', school journal excerpt).

As stated in the literature review chapter, critical literacy in teaching connects to Lewison et al.'s (2002) definition of critical social practices as means of "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on the sociopolitical, and (4) taking action to promote social justice" (p. 382). Consequently, participants invite their community to protect the environment and raise political awareness. This initiative encompasses the academic factors related to understanding and reflection, language use, and to self-identification as social agents able to take mindful actions.

In the subject of discrimination in the school context, students proposed inner initiatives to promote sensitization among school members. The following idea is an example of this initiative:

To stop happening [sic], we should talk to the students about the issues and make campaigns to avoid bullying. ('Bullying', school journal excerpt).

This excerpt highlights the necessity of halting behaviors that threaten students' well-being. Likewise, the excerpt echoes the authors' intention to represent people who face bullying in their daily lives. The pedagogical intervention helped learners identify forms of discrimination, understand their roots, reflect, and call for social transformation.

The consolidation of the school journal represents a meaningful resource for English language learning. This writing endeavor has served the purpose of understanding language as a socially relevant tool that allows learners to make their voices heard, act beyond the symbolic level and advocate for critical engagement. Regarding language learning and critical engagement, Cruz (2018) points out: "Critical pedagogy allows us to exalt alternative and locally grounded attempts to make English teaching socially relevant, especially in communities where English appears to be far removed from their everyday life" (p. 67). The social nature of this approach to language learning redefines students' possibilities to make meaning of the learning experience while communicating with their community.

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The school journal has served as a valuable arena for students to work through their language learning processes and express their ideas, thoughts, and emotions. It has been a platform for learners to communicate real-life social and environmental concerns, support their own language learning, and raise the prospect of local action.

To summarize, the school journal project encouraged learners to take on roles as researchers, planners, and writers, and share insights on specific themes. The macro-strategy for the enhancement of language learning, described previously, emphasizes the significance of making meaning in the learning process, of acting beyond the symbolic level, and providing opportunities for critical engagement. In reality, the school journal supported learners in expressing their interest in becoming critical agents, critiquing power relations, and questioning the status quo within societies. To do so, students embraced the ideologies of transformation and appreciated the importance of raising awareness of numerous issues affecting their community.

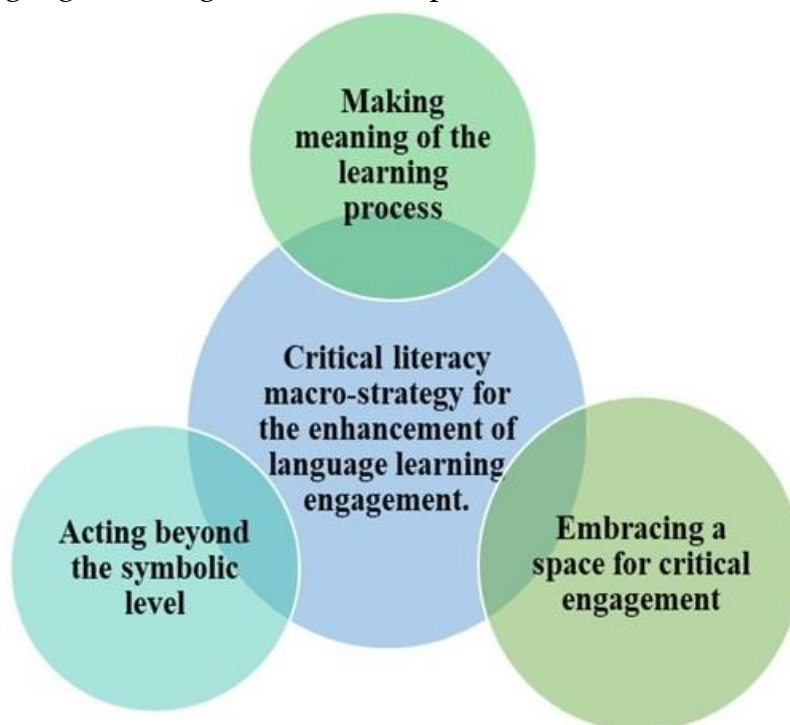
### **Macro-strategy model for the enhancement of LLE**

Based on the previous analysis of the constructs of critical literacy and multiple components of LLE, this study proposes a diagram (see Figure 1) framing the elements that constitute the critical literacy macro-strategy. The model refers to the meaning-



making process as the significant element which enables students to appreciate the purpose, the topics, and the strategies embedded in language learning.

Furthermore, acting beyond the symbolic level means proposing alternatives through local initiatives bring together communities around common objectives. This element helps learners see themselves as social agents who contribute to their community's development while engaging in language learning. The last element combines the results of practicing critical literacy to engage in language learning. This idea leads to the proposition of critical engagement as the process of valuing local issues to engage in language learning from a critical point of view.



**Figure 1.** Critical literacy macro-strategy model for the enhancement of LLE

## **CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This study demonstrated that students' LLE in the classroom is a complex process that needs to be recognized as a multidimensional construct with cognitive, social, and emotional components. On the issue of critical literacy, this investigation affirmed the relevance of adopting context-sensitive practices that reflect students' realities and add meaning to language learning. This study demonstrated reciprocal relationships between the cognitive, social, and emotional components as well as between LLE and critical literacy in this group of ninth graders. LLE was enhanced by the practice of critical literacy which provided students with an enriched learning experience that encouraged cognitive, social, and emotional engagement.

For students participating in this study, language-related factors, the social implications of language learning, learning from the local context, interacting with peers, and the emotions emerging from the classroom experience all influence LLE. How students interplay with the different components of engagement also changes their attitude towards language learning.

The practice of critical literacy in this particular context added significance to language learning. Awareness of local realities provided a means to raise language learning motivation. The fact that students used their second language to read, write, and reflect on salient problems in their community allowed them to engage in language learning holistically. The converging element of ascribing meaning to learning and experiencing the context-sensitive nature of literacy emphasizes the idea of critical engagement. This notion connects to Comber's (2017) insights "(...) children growing up in poverty need access to the most complex and salient forms of literate practices possible in order to contest the way things are and to work to represent their communities for justice" (p. 68). In this case, journal writing represented a salient form of literacy. This practice surpassed the scope of classroom engagement and involved learners in the experience of questioning literacies as a means to engage in critical language learning.

62 The macro-strategy to enhance LLE through the practice of critical literacy proposed in this study invites language teachers, especially those who work in challenging contexts, to advocate for such practices which are able to engage students in language learning by making meaning of the learning process, critically engaging in learning, and acting beyond the symbolic levels.

The present research study responded to the necessity of exploring innovative forms of language learning. In the study context, institutional efforts to enhance language learning have traditionally focused solely on academic performance. Thus, the study of LLE is in an essential contribution to the understanding of the language-related attitudes emerging from the application of a particular approach to language learning. LLE and critical literacy constitute transformative constructs that enable teachers to move from a conventional grammar-based curriculum to a multidimensional way of conceiving language teaching.

This study invited teachers to explore students' everyday living conditions and design learning material which reflects their specific contexts, creating a sense of belonging for students and supporting them to advocate for change in their communities. This study demonstrates how a school journal can lead to engaging students in language learning and, by doing so, encouraging them to speak out on social issues and act beyond the symbolic level.

In the academic field, this study has expanded on the perspective of LLE, which, according to Storch (2008), has been little researched. Similarly, this study has contributed to the understanding of language learning in underprivileged contexts. It

also proposes a macro-strategy for enhancing LLE through the contextualized practice of critical literacy, resulting in meaningful learning experiences able to challenge the concept of engagement.

Concerning teacher-researchers, this study offers scenarios in which language teaching and learning can be considered from the cognitive, social and emotional perspectives. It challenges some deeply-rooted teaching conceptions and practices based on themes mandated by tradition, curricula, or textbooks, inviting us to re-orient our practices towards reflective and social educational practices which enhance engagement, in turn, students motivation in language learning.

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