D E L T A

Articles

On the notion of "owning a forest": Ideological awareness and Genre-based Pedagogy in university critical literacy

Sobre a noção de "possuir uma floresta": consciência ideológica e pedagogia de gêneros no letramento crítico universitário

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a collaborative action research project integrating a focus on ideological awareness with genre-based pedagogy in the university literacy classroom. Through explicit instruction on the argumentative genre and reflection on the linguistic correlates of neoliberal ideology, we guided students in developing enhanced awareness of neoliberalism and its influence on environmental policy. In the independent writing stage, students' argumentation revealed critical stances towards neoliberalism and adequate command of the target genre. The paper closes with general reflections and recommendations for the adoption of an explicitly critical approach in university literacy education.

Keywords: *critical literacy; Genre-based pedagogy; ideology; neoliberalism.*

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RESUMO

Este artigo discute um projeto de pesquisa colaborativa que integra o foco na consciência ideológica com a pedagogia de gêneros no letramento universitário. Através de instruções explícitas sobre o gênero argumentativo e reflexão sobre os correlatos lingüísticos da ideologia neoliberal, orientamos os estudantes no desenvolvimento de uma maior conscientização do neoliberalismo e sua influência na política ambiental. No estágio de escrita independente, a argumentação dos estudantes revelou posições mais críticas em relação ao neoliberalismo e comando adequado do gênero alvo. O artigo termina com reflexões gerais e recomendações para a adoção de uma abordagem crítica explícita no letramento universitário.

Palavras-chave: *letramento crítico; pedagogia de gêneros; ideologia; neoliberalismo.*

Introduction

In this paper, we discuss and critically reflect on a collaborative action research project oriented to fostering university students' critical awareness of neoliberal ideology and its linguistic manifestation in argumentative texts (specifically, analytical expositions where writers defend a thesis statement by providing arguments based on different types of evidence). Our work draws on the social semiotic conception of ideology (Halliday, 2003; Hasan, 2005; Lukin, 2019) and on the pedagogical principles of Genre-based Pedagogy from the Sydney School (Martin & Rose, 2012). Critical literacy in the university classroom is an increasingly challenging dimension to foster, giving the pressures generated by recent trends towards standardization, curricular efficiency and market-driven technicalization (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). Spaces for critical awareness and democratic citizenship construction face the constraints of a shrinking humanistic curriculum and undergo stern pressures from the pervasive measurement paradigm (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Such changes in the aims of university education are inscribed in the broader social dynamics of neoliberalism, an ideological paradigm instituted towards the later decades of the 20th century and characterized by the extension of market and free trade

logic to a variety of societal domains, including economy, politics, education and science (Fairclough, 2000; Hall, 2011).

Although recent political and economic upheavals (such as Brexit and Trump's protectionist trade policies) have led commentators to declare the end of the neoliberal world order (Fraser, 2017), the sharp inequalities fostered by it continue to grow around the world, Latin America being no exception (Orjuela, 2016). The 2018 World Inequality Lab report alarmingly finds that inequality has continued to climb steadily since the 1980's and, by 2018, 1% of individuals amassed twice as much of global wealth as 50% of the world's population (Alvaredo *et al.*, 2018). Pedagogical proposals bringing these shocking social realities to the fore and implementing replicable practices in raising learners' awareness of them are thus of prime importance. This paper illustrates the integrability of an explicit focus on ideological awareness with the aim of university literacy education to promote students' access to academically valued genres. The combination of a logocentric pedagogy, an appliable theory of language and a focus on collaborative action research, we believe, acts as a facilitating factor in making such integrability feasible.

We begin with a theoretical discussion of ideology and its specific manifestation in neoliberalism, after which we reflect on the potential of Genre Pedagogy for promoting critical literacy in the university classroom. We then go on to elaborate on to describe and reflect on the pedagogical interventions implemented.

Neoliberalism as an ideological apparatus

From a social constructionist standpoint, Fairclough (1992:87) defines ideology as "constructions of reality […] which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination". This definition highlights the regulation of power relations between social groups as the defining feature of ideology, the instrumentality of discourse in the achievement of such regulation, and the socially engendered nature of the constructions that sustain it. The relationship between language and ideology is

thus of central theoretical and descriptive importance, language being the semiotic system most extensively used in construing and enacting social relations. There is no consensus, however, on the relationship between language and ideology. Lukin (2019) identifies three positions: language and ideology as separate domains, as overlapping domains and as mutually constitutive domains. The first position, exemplified by Chomsky's conception of language and ideology as distinct unrelated phenomena, is hard to sustain in face of the evident power of language in legitimating and inducing social action, a form of power historically deployed to mobilize societies into political choices. The second position; which Lukin associates with Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992), (Socio-) Cognitive Linguistics (Van Dijk, 1990; Hart, 2014), and Pragmatics (Verschueren, 2012); holds that language is ideological under specific circumstances (e.g.: when used to legitimate or promote views on the social political order). This position, Lukin argues, presupposes the separability of language and thought and the existence of an external reality objectively accessible to speakers/conceptualizers. The third position, according to which language and ideology are inseparably intertwined, argues that language sustains the culturally embedded representations that mediate our relationship with the social material environment and power ideology itself (Halliday, 1987/2003; Hasan, 2005). Language not only describes social material reality: it provides us with the semiotic potential to categorize and re-categorize the agents, objects and phenomena within it, including the "relations of domination" propounded by social political ideologies.

In this paper, we converge with this integrative view, and approach neoliberalism as a system of representations and valuations of the individual in relation with his/her societal ecosystem. As an experiential construct, neoliberalism represents individuals as the center of societal order: their wishes, needs and wants hold primacy over communal interest, and it is their unrestricted pursuit that grants the possibility of harmonious coexistence and societal advancement. The relationship between the individual and the social material environment rests on the principles of ownership, consumption, free choice and personal responsibility. It is the defense of these prerogatives of the bourgeois individual that shaped the notion of individuality in modernity, as Lemke (1994: 69) writes:

It was from this essentially ideological notion of the bourgeois individual that the later psychological and sociological notions developed. The unity, the incontestable reality of the individual was essential to maintaining a claim for 'its' inalienable rights. Its reality had to take precedence over the reality of corporate social entities such as clans, fiefs, villages, guilds, parishes etc. The individual had to be made more 'real' than other economic and political claimants, so that its 'rights' could be asserted above theirs.

The neoliberal individual is thus one who owns, acquires, chooses and acts upon the social material environment without restrictions other than those imposed by capital. In the neoliberal representation of reality, there are few restrictions on the domain of ownership and consumption, and, as Hall (2011: 722) comments, "every social relation can be bought and sold, has its 'price' and its costs", "everything can become a commodity" and "exchange value is value". The aggregate of individuals' trading, consumption and ownership relations is represented in the technical abstraction of the "market", which neoliberal discourse endows with consciousness and agency: the market "thinks this, 'does' that, 'feels' the other, 'gets panicky', 'loses confidence' and 'believes'" (Hall, 2011: 722). Just as the individuals that constitute it, the market, as a "supra-individual", must be preserved from intervention or control so that it fulfills its teleological mandate: to produce and expand wealth. Other abstractions and metaphors in neoliberal discourse resonate with the motifs of individual freedom and unrestricted expansion, including 'liberalization', 'growth', 'globalization' and 'capital flows'. In neoliberalism, the 'other' is recognized as a fellow consumer, but most importantly, as a competitor in the marketplace to whom no solidarity is owed and of whom 'accountability' is expected.

In preserving and reproducing its representation of the world, neoliberal ideology resorts to evaluative language to enact social sanction and value appreciations. The discourse of neoliberalism morally sanctions individuals in terms of 'capacity' and 'propriety', preconizing the virtues of hardworking 'taxpayers' and rational 'consumers' against the moral inadequacy of 'scroungers' who choose to live off social welfare (Hall, 2011: 715). As an ideology thriving on difference rather than on commonality, neoliberalism foregrounds identity and the civic co-existence of social groups in heterogeneous communities (rather than their convergence to achieve common aims) (Hyslop-Margison &

Sears, 2006). More recent versions of neoliberalism have incorporated nationalist and moralist stances (positively sanctioned by the popular base), coupling the notion of free market with the values of freedom and democracy, and highlighting the State's role in preserving order through increasingly harsh policing and incarceration of a purportedly malfunctioning society. In turn, the appreciation of the public good, labor rights and social welfare has eroded, partly due to association with the values of communism and socialism. By systematically nurturing the indulgent ideal of the free individual, neoliberalism has succeeded at tearing the fabric of social convergence and solidarity, enabling an uninterrupted transfer of public wealth to the hands of a few individuals. Semiotically, the success of neoliberalism has stemmed from its ever-transforming capacity to construe difference between individuals and their social material environment, and to assign favorable evaluations to policies that celebrate this difference.

Genre Pedagogy and critical literacy

In educational systems influenced by neoliberalism, the goal of educating critical and ethical human beings for responsible participation in democracy is secondary to that of training competent and rational citizens capable of competing in an increasingly globalized and uncertain labor market (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). With increasing demands for standardization, accountability and benchmarking, universities have gradually abandoned their commitment for promoting critical social awareness, and spaces for genuine dialogue and contestation have come under closer surveillance and restriction (Davies & Bansel, 2007). The opportunity exists, however, for incorporating critical literacy objectives in the syllabus of university courses, especially those forming part of the common curriculum core. Their thematic flexibility and their tendency to bring together students from different disciplines creates special affordances in these courses for staging pedagogical interventions oriented to critical awareness (Rojas *et al.*, 2016). The question emerges, however, as to which pedagogical design best suits this goal while catering to the also fostering skills for text production and interpretation. The wide range of linguistic models and pedagogical designs available to the

university literacy educator (e.g. Navarro, 2018) calls for the exercise of pedagogical criteria for the configuration of an approach coherent with this dual objective. The most convenient approach, in our context, is one that combines systematic linguistic instruction oriented to fostering autonomy in the deployment of socially valued text types with reflective practice in critiquing and contesting ideological stances. As Halliday (2007: 122) rightly claims:

> "to be literate is not just to have mastered the written registers (the generic structures and associated modes of meaning and wording), but to be aware of their ideological force: to be aware, in other words, of how society is constructed out of discourse - or rather, out of the dialectic between the discursive and the material".

Although Halliday's call makes sense as an overarching aim, in practice, pedagogical implementation often foregrounds one component at the cost the other. Literacy courses may overemphasize generic awareness at the cost of ideological substance, or foreground ideological awareness to the detriment of systematic linguistic instruction. In avoiding these scissions, it is important for the pedagogical approach to purposefully exploit the intertwined nature of language and ideology discussed above. Reflection on ideological issues and generic instruction should not occur as separate stages with distinct goals and methodological emphases, a design that risks presenting both components in a decontextualized fashion. At each stage, learners will benefit from the combined exposure to linguistic resources and observations concerning their role in construing and enacting relations of domination and power. This integrative approach affords the possibility of specific moves in classroom interaction to foreground one component over another, as deemed necessary. In pursuing such an approach, the linguistic theory employed to mediate learners' exposure to genres and ideologies should be 'applicable': it should be a metalanguage designed to cope with the complexity of language in naturally occurring text, rather than to disregard it in favor of parsimony (Matthiessen, 2012). These principles (integrativeness and applicability) should, in our view, be complemented by a focus on informed critique of the linguistic mechanisms supporting ideological manipulation coming from diverse sources, avoiding political polarization or indoctrination.

Genre Pedagogy (GP) is, in our experience, a pedagogical approach that articulates the principles of integration, applicability and informed critique. Proposed in the context of educational projects undertaken in Australia from the 1980's onwards, Genre Pedagogy integrates Systemic Functional Linguistics and the principles of explicit pedagogy in Bernsteinian sociology of education. GP calls for an explicit focus on discourse as a means to promote learners' awareness and autonomous mastery of genres, thus involving the teacher as a source of knowledge about discourse and as a mediator of learners' reading and writing experience (Martin & Rose, 2012). In its inception, the approach represented a counter-response to so-called "progressivist" pedagogy, a body of constructivist principles and practices foregrounding learner independence and teacher non-interventionism (Rothery, 1994). Progressivist pedagogy was charged with benefiting learners coming from middle-to-high income households, who are better prepared for autonomous literacy practice due to prior reading experience at home, while it neglected the needs of learners coming from low-income backgrounds where opportunities for joint reading are less likely to occur. To counter this learning gap, they proposed the "teaching and learning cycle", a cluster of pedagogical practices designed to allow mastery of and critical orientation towards the genres of schooling. Three moments are proposed in the cycle: deconstruction, involving an exploration of learners' knowledge about the target genre and intensive analysis of the contents and structure of a target genre specimen; joint construction, in which students jointly write a text corresponding to the target genre with assistance from the teacher; and independent construction, engaging students in producing a target genre text with minimal teacher assistance. Through repeated participation in these cycles, learners are claimed to not only develop the skills to comprehend and produce specific genres, but also to use them in increasingly creative and critical ways.

Designing the intervention as Collaborative Action Research

Methodologically, our work matches Carr and Kemmis' (1986: 162) definition of Action Research as "self-reflective enquiry

undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out". It is self-reflective in that its initiation and unfolding presuppose, on our part, an interest in understanding the way our pedagogical actions as literacy educators shape and are shaped by learners' evolving consciousness of their eco-social environment as construed by language. We are engaged as 'participants' at two levels: at the praxis level, we participate by planning, designing, implementing and assessing pedagogical action; and at the praxeological level, we participate by jointly interpreting and abstracting principles from praxis. The quest for rationality, in its Habermasian sense, lies in seeking comprehension of the parameters within which critical literacy pedagogy is to be interrogated and fostered, based on the interplay between praxis and reflection, with a view to a more just distribution of symbolic capital for democratic participation (Bourdieu, 1991). Finally, we note the collaborative nature of the project in the fact that, as teacher-researchers with distinct subjectivities and socio-historical backgrounds, we strove at enriching each other's interpretations of unfolding praxis as a way to derive understandings about critical literacy and our role as language educators. Participation in the NCARE network (an international community of teacher-researchers promoting critical literacy through Collaborative Action Research) constituted a valuable space for extended collaboration in that, by sharing ongoing reflections and concerns and listening to those of other network members, we refined understandings of our practice and of the research situation itself.

Action Research characterizes itself for the reflective contingency and non-linearity of its stages, involving spiraling cycles of Planning, Action, Observation and Reflection. In the remaining of this paper, we will report on our actions and emerging reflections, trying to do descriptive justice to the cyclicality and collaborativeness of the experience.

Defining a focus

Prior to the delivery of the course in Semester I 2017, we had agreed to give it a more critical orientation because we saw in it an opportunity

for fostering students' awareness of the social issues affecting Colombia and the world, chiefly inequality. Previous experience in teaching this course made us aware of the need for an explicit focus on inequality and the ideologies that perpetuate it, especially in a society where the media and the educational system induce acritical and ahistorical views of social reality (Chamorro & Moss, 2011). Participation in the NCARE network linked to our nascent interest, given the community's broad aim of using pedagogical praxis to promote social justice by counteracting the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology. Reflection on prior teaching practice and the discussions in the NCARE network thus motivated us to define a critical literacy goal: to foster learners' awareness of linguistic resources for naturalizing and legitimating neoliberal ideology in argumentative texts.

Having defined this broad objective, we set about to consider the actions needed for its realization given the constraints and affordances of the pedagogical context. We decided to choose one target class for the implementation[3], the main selection criterion being of a practical nature: we chose a course whose schedule avoided multiple interruptions during the semester (e.g. holidays and institutional activities) and allowed us to meet every week for planning and discussion. The focus course, called Competencia Comunicativa II, is offered to junior undergraduate students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, with the general aim of enabling students to comprehend and produce argumentative expositions (texts in which a thesis is defended with arguments supported by factual evidence). In Competencia Comunicativa I, the pre-requisite course, the goal is for students to comprehend and produce descriptive and explanatory reports. Both courses are part of a larger institutional program called Eficacia Comunicativa, which also includes extra-curricular literacy activities, interventions in disciplinary courses (called 'Cursos Ñ'), and personalized assistance in the university's writing center (see Álvarez, Benítez & Rosado, 2018 for full description of this institutional strategy). The target class was made up of 31 students, aged 16 to 18, with a roughly symmetric gender distribution. About half of the class were Engineering majors and the other half included similar proportions of Psychology, Journalism and

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3. One of the authors of this paper was the teacher in charge of the course and the other author participated as an external observer and co-designer of the intervention.

Administration students. The total duration of the course is 48 hours (3 hours per week).

The fact that the Competencia Comunicativa II course is embedded within a larger institutional strategy and entails a pre-defined main objective acted as both an enabling and constraining factor. It was enabling in that it created a platform of curricular and extra-curricular experiences that supported and reinforced the goals of the course, and its orientation to argumentation could be assimilated within an explicitly critical framework. It was constraining in that the course already entailed a syllabus infrastructure, with a pre-set number of units and assessment moments attached to each, which teachers are held institutionally accountable for. The course units incorporated the three stages proposed by Sydney School: Deconstruction – Joint Construction – Independent Construction. Constraints are not necessarily negative factors: in this case, the existence of a prior syllabus design offered the opportunity of combining pedagogical practices familiar to us with the innovations proposed by our intervention. Genre Pedagogy, with its focus on making explicit the linguistic resources used in socially valued genres, was congenial with our goal of raising learners' awareness of linguistic resources and strategies associated with neoliberal ideology. The innovations would correspond, first, to the thematic domain to be embraced in course units; and secondly, to the incorporation of a more explicit and systematic focus on language as an ideological system. We decided to stage the interventions in the second and third Unit (the joint construction and independent construction stages) and to use the first four weeks to gather information about students' preferences and ideological stances concerning neoliberal ideology. The former was straightforward: on the first day of class, we asked students to rank five thematic domains in order of interest, relevance and preference; finding that the most highly ranked topic for most students was environmental issues.

"Is that 'growth' for you?": learner's positionings towards neoliberalism

The second issue (students' stances towards neoliberalism) was important for us because it established a point of departure from which

to trace changes in learners' ideological positionings. The challenge, we realized, was to obtain candid views from learners by avoiding presumption of their familiarity with abstract ideological notions and by eliciting their beliefs while engaged in a seemingly unrelated task. We decided to include a follow-up task in one of the reading activities programmed for the second week, in which we asked students to make groups of four and graphically represent the relationship between notions related to neoliberalism. Group members then visited other groups to compare and discuss the relationships proposed. With students' consent, we recorded their interaction during the discussion part, and then met to listen to the recordings and interpret learners' implicit beliefs about neoliberalism.

Excerpt 1:
S3: FTA's we can connect with economic growth, and now, put together business process outsourcing with work. Taxes generate economic growth and privatization generates taxes… it could be that politics handles… look! politics controls the FTA, which promotes economic growth, and private investments.
S4: Aha…
S3: I mean, private investment relates with business process outsourcing, which generates more jobs, organized as worker cooperatives, to generate better salaries and more work stability.

Excerpt 2:
S1: What connection is there then? So here we should put "inequality".
S2: Poverty, look, this can go here.
S1: Where? Economic growth? Economic growth has nothing to do with poverty.

Excerpt 3:
S4: …because when people see that foreign products cost the same than the local ones, then, which one will they choose? They'll be like "no, I'd rather have something coming from the US than something produced here in Colombia". Is that growth for you? I'm saying that this affects the people here, the local farmers, so where's the country's growth?

We were able to identify two positionings, corresponding to Martin's (1995) "compliant" and "resistant" naturalized reader positions. In the first positioning, students' verbalizations suggest unawareness of the links between social issues and the political and

economic environment. S2's interventions in Excerpt 1, for example, reveal a generally optimistic stance towards unrestricted transnational trade, taxation of middle classes, privatization of public services, and labor outsourcing. The abstraction "growth" occurs three times in his first intervention, construed materially as the Goal of the processes "promote" and "generate". At best, S3 is optimistic about these economic policies and their impact on social development; most probably, however, S3's attitudinal evaluation reveals unawareness of the sharp social inequalities fueled by these policies and their detrimental effect on the dignity and stability of middle and working classes. In excerpt 2, this unawareness manifests more explicitly: not only does S1 disregard the connection between unequal economic growth and poverty, she also uses it to counter another students' proposal. The second positioning, the "resistant" position, was evident in only four students' verbalizations, who called into question some of the neoliberal precepts distilled in abstractions such as 'growth' and "competitiveness". In Excerpt 3, Student 4 resists the generalizing notion of 'growth' by reasoning about the effects of unrestricted transnational trade on local producers' welfare. Unlike Student 3 in Excerpt 1, for whom 'growth' is an abstraction that is 'promoted' and 'generated' impersonally, Student 4 reasons about growth in terms of stakeholders and repercussions.

Joint deconstruction: On the notion of 'owning a forest'

The insights about students' interests and ideological positionings gained during the exploratory phase provided us with the tools to initiate a second Collaborative Action Research cycle, with a focus on pedagogical intervention. Bearing in mind our dual objective of promoting learners' command of academic argumentation and their awareness of the ideological loading of linguistic choices, we set out to collect a small corpus of argumentative texts about environmental issues which positioned the reader in favor and against aspects of neoliberal policy. The balance of perspectives, we believe, sharpens learners' sensitivity to ideology and the way it shapes linguistic choices in text, besides enabling their comprehension and appreciation of conflicting viewpoints. One of the selected texts is an opinion column published

in a well-known Colombian financial magazine, a translation of which we provide below. This column was appropriate for our course and unit objectives because, in a short extension, it presents arguments to defend a thesis (that "non-payment for [environmental] services constitutes a problem and a detrimental factor for forests". We could thus use this column to model to students some of the generic and semantic strategies available to authors for defending a thesis.

Ideologically, the column is most interesting due to its overt use of the linguistic strategies for the legitimation of neoliberalism. Based on the notion of "positive externality", proponents of the "Payment for Environmental Services" mechanism claim that citizens should compensate private agents for oxygen production, water generation, conservation of species and other "environmental services" that sustain human subsistence. This strategy is, according to Martínez and Kosoy (2007), one of the latest manifestations of neoliberal ideology in developing nations, since it promotes a market view of natural ecosystems and processes – which nobody legitimately owns - as private goods for which the public must pay. Under this framework, the State is no longer the key agent responsible for environmental balance preservation (despite constitutional dispositions). Environmental "management" is outsourced to agencies sponsored by large corporations (some of them undertaking large-scale exploitation of native forest resources), which offer local inhabitants a precarious payment to work as forest guards. The "Payment for Environmental Services" mechanism thus represents a transfer of public funds to private parties who not only lack legitimate ownership of natural resources, but also, in some cases, benefit economically from the depletion of the resources they claim to be preserving.

> Environmental service payment (our translation)[4]
> Forest ecosystems – natural forests and forest plantations- offer to society goods that have a lot to do with life on the planet itself, and whose essential importance has been increasingly recognized around the world: these include environmental services such as biodiversity conservation, water body protection and regulation, soil protection, landscape constitution, and fixation and retention of carbon dioxide, one of the greenhouse gases affecting global climate.

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4. The Spanish version of the column can be consulted in the following web address: https://www.portafolio.co/opinion/camilo-aldana-vargas/pago-servicios-ambientales-76688

These environmental services were traditionally not paid to those who generate them – the owners of natural forests and tree plantations – because they were free goods that existed in amounts exceeding those necessary for satisfying human needs, there was no private property on them and nobody could be excluded from their use or consumption. Under these conditions, it was not possible for a market to exist in which these goods could be traded and assigned a price. Non-payment of these services, a phenomenon economists call "positive externality", constitutes a problem and a detrimental factor for forests.

As a matter of fact, those who own natural forests, if failing to receive payment for the environmental services that these generate, will have an incentive not to conserve and protect them, but rather to clear them to initiate another productive activity that does generate income for them. A producer who performs sustainable exploitation of the forest, if failing to receive income for the environmental services that it continues to provide by renewing itself continuously, will have a lesser incentive to assume the investments, costs and risks that sustainable exploitation generates, and will lose competitiveness to destructive forest clearance.

Likewise, non-payment leads to under-investment in forest plantations, since producers do not receive income for all the services that his/her trees generate and, because of this, private benefit is lower than social benefit, causing investment to be lower than desirable.

Another unfavorable effect of this phenomenon is that the forest producer, while not receiving payment for environmental services, will need to attribute all costs to one single product, normally wood, losing competitiveness with respect to substitutive products, such as plastic, aluminum and steel. On the other hand, because these payments for environmental services are not made, national budgets do not compute them as part of the country's production. Consequently, contribution by the primary forestry sector – forestry and wood exploitation – to Colombia's national GDP is only 0.2 percent, despite the fact that more or less half of the country's mainland is covered by forests, which lessens its priority for the Government and for society.

Payment for environmental services solves these problems, since it changes the system of incentives in favor of forest conservation and sustainable exploitation, or investment on forest plantations, and against forest destruction, change in soil usage and preference for other investments. Besides, this payment increases and diversifies income sources for persons, communities and companies who own or manage forests and forestry plantations, it reduces their risks, and contributes to overcoming poverty, which is a critical [phenomenon] in these areas, and to fostering rural development.

Deconstruction of the texts took place during Weeks 5 and 6. We adopted a two-tier approach to deconstruction. Our initial focus was on exploiting them as a resource for fostering awareness of the argumentative exposition genre, drawing students' attention to the unfolding of its generic structure and the use of linguistic resources in each textual phase. Among the linguistic resources brought to students' attention were the use of cohesive devices to mediate transitions between arguments, the use of logico-semantic relations and verbal transitivity to construe causal conditionality, and the use of appraisal resources to evaluate positive and negative scenarios.

After dealing with the text as a generic specimen, we switched attention to the text qua ideological device (typically within the same lesson). The first step was situating the text in a wider social historical context by promoting reflection on its conditions of production and circulation, including the author's stakes and the social political backdrop motivating its publication. By browsing the internet on their phones during class, students found that the author had presided a private forestry management corporation in the past; and that, at the time of publication of his column, the national congress was debating a law regulating private access to exploitation licenses in delicate ecosystems, such as moorlands and jungles. These intertextual cues expanded the field for comprehension and critique of the text in connection with underlying social issues, such as the pervasive alliance between private interest and political representation.

After social historical contextualization of the column, class interaction focused on guiding learners to notice the strategies used in the text to legitimate the claim that private investors should be compensated for protecting forests, which occurred in the form of mutually legitimating implications. The introduction construes a legitimating frame for the idea that forest owners deserve financial compensation for the environmental services provided by the forests they "own". The author buries the rather absurd notion of owning a forest into a nominalization ("the owners of natural forests"), reducing its potential for interpersonal negotiation. We note that, in referring to what might be called natural processes (water generation, carbon dioxide retention, soil formation), the author prefers the technical terms "*goods*" and "*services*", construing them within an implicit taxonomy

of marketable commodities. We are then induced to accept that it is the owners of natural forests and forest plantations that *generate* these life-sustaining services and, consequently, are entitled to compensation. Having legitimated two assumptions (that it is normal for natural forests to be owned and that forest owners are the ones who generate vital environmental services), the author proceeds to legitimate the claim that forest owners should receive payment for the environmental services they enable. To this aim, he depicts the depletion of natural "goods and services" as an imminent scenario (omitting the causes behind such depletion) and private ownership as the choice solution for its prevention. The private owner is thus set in a different class from the rest of mankind, a class bearing no responsibility in ecosystem deterioration and failing to receive compensation for its altruistic actions. The author's argumentation rests on a chain of self-contained truths, weaving together technicality and commonsense to sustain the neoliberal myth.

As a post-class activity, we encouraged students to participate in a Blackboard forum by sharing their reflections on the column in a short critical reaction paragraph. Although few students participated, the threads posted in the forum showed enhanced critical awareness and stood in contrast with the responses provided in the pre-intervention task. It was possible to observe participants critically distancing themselves from the apparent normality of neoliberalism-related practices, such as privatization as a strategy for public resource management. The student in the sample post, for example, questions the core neoliberal idea that private ownership of a public good is a necessary condition for its adequate maintenance and functioning. Her quote of the national constitution additionally reflects her awareness of her status as a citizen entitled to rights and obligations concerning the protection of the environment.
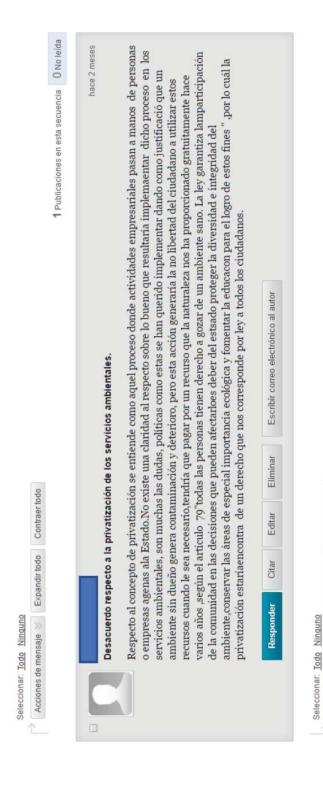
Jesús David Guerra-Lyons, Nayibe Rosado Mendinueta

Figure 1 – Student's comment posted on after-class Blackboard forum

"As regards the concept of privatization, it is understood as the process through which entrepreneurial activities are handed over to people who do not belong to the State. There is not enough clarity as to how good it would be to implement such a process on environmental services. There are too many doubts. Policies such as these have been intended to be implemented <u>using the justification that an environment without an owner will be contaminated and deteriorated,</u> but this action would hinder citizens' freedom to use these resources when necessary. They would have to pay for resources that nature has freely provided us with for many years. According to Article 79 (of the Colombian Constitution): "everyone has a right to enjoy a healthy environment. Law guarantees communities' participation in decisions that could affect them. It is a duty of the State to protect diversity and the integrity of the environment, as well as to conserve areas of special ecological importance and to promote education pursuant to these aims". Privatization would thus be against the right awarded to us by law.

This stage was the first step towards unbalancing learners' naturalized ideological positions because it involved them in reasoning about aspects of their eco-social environment which they were either unaware of or ideologically conditioned to see in a particular way. This stage also helped us learn about ourselves as language educators in our role of mediating spaces for ideological contestation. Class interaction successfully exploited the convergence of students from different disciplines by engaging them in building shared knowledge as part of a budding community of critical citizens.

Writing together: joint construction

Enriched with the insights from the prior Action Research cycles, we set out to carry out a second intervention in the class, which focused on mediated praxis, that is, in accompanying learners' in the process of using language to contest and resist naturalized ideological positionings. This corresponded to the Joint Construction cycle in Unit 3. Our research interest in this stage was to determine the extent to which classroom interaction with a dual focus on generic command and ideological awareness can meaningfully integrate a focus on language and on ideology. The deconstruction helped the class in building a shared field around the issue of Payment for Environmental

Service (PES) programs and their connection with neoliberalism; and recognizing some of the linguistic strategies available for structuring argumentative text. The joint construction stage tapped into this prior knowledge by engaging the class in the collaborative writing of an argumentative text in which a thesis about PES programs was to be defended by arguments supported by relevant evidence.

The initial task was to define an evaluative position towards PES programs and, from there, to formulate a thesis statement coherent with the shared position defined. After a short class debate in which students exposed positions for and against PES programs, the "against" position prevailed and the thesis statement formulated by the class read "Payment for Environmental Service programs are not convenient for the planet". Class discussion then switched to defining three arguments that supported the thesis statement. After brainstorming arguments on the board and weighing their solidity and demonstrability, three arguments were selected: 1) that PES programs focus more on financial gains than on environmental protection, 2) that PES programs could aggravate social inequality, and 3) that PES programs could alter the balance of ecosystems. Joint text planning closed with consideration of the evidence needed to support the formulated arguments, using guiding questions for students to consult sources on their own. A pyramid diagram containing the thesis statements, the arguments and the guiding questions was displayed on the board, as shown in the image in Figure 2.
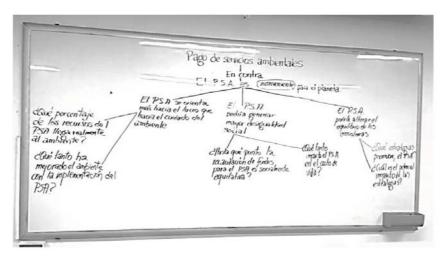

Figure 2 – Joint planning of analytical exposition on the whiteboard

Over a period of two weeks, students focused on searching, selecting and reading sources from which to derive supporting evidence. A critical element was reflection on source trustworthiness in terms of academic rigueur and consideration of authors' stakes in defending particular stances. Interestingly, students themselves became able to identify conflicts of interest in some of the sources consulted (e.g. by noting the interests of their funding agencies in promoting native forest exploitation), and to weigh their reliability accordingly. Once information was gathered and organized, we proceeded with joint writing of the introduction and one of the argumentation paragraphs. On a document projected on the board, students took turns in coming to the front and contributing to the shared text, using the teacher and their classmates' suggestions. This was the opportunity for guiding students' attention to linguistic aspects, such as cohesion, grammatical metaphor, logico-semantic relations, spelling and punctuation, as shown in the interaction excerpts below. Students subsequently made groups to draft the second argument, using the jointly constructed argument as a model and receiving assistance from the teacher upon request. Some group arguments were projected on the board (with group members' consent) for whole-class critique and edition.

Excerpt 4:
T: Can you remember which cohesion devices we use to add additional information? (*Class remains silent*) "besides", "on the other hand", "apart from this" …
S: "apart from this"
T: so you like "apart from this"?
Ss: Yes.
T: Ok (*addressing student writing on the keyboard*), so let's use "apart from this" … policemen… add a period here!

Excerpt 5:
S: I have a question.
T: Yes.
S: Should "director" be written with capital D?
T: Hmm…no, here (*touching the board*) it should be with lowercase.
S: What about "intercultural division" …
T: That one should, yes…because it's a proper institutional name.

The joint construction stage thus scaffolded learners' access to some of the discursive and linguistic tools needed to produce argumentative expositions autonomously and to engage critically with sources. It is possible to note that a focus on language can be embedded in collaborative writing projects, which provide an immediate context for application and avoid the presentation of linguistic knowledge in an abstract isolated manner. The teaching of critical literacy skills for evaluating source can also be embedded in joint text construction without the need for imposing decontextualized political agendas in class: once students develop the ability to think about sources in terms of stakes and social positionings, and to recognize manipulative forms of argumentation, they are better equipped to make informed judgments for themselves.

"Winners and losers": independent construction

Having fostered learners' awareness of some of the linguistic manifestation of neoliberalism, we embarked on a final Action Research cycle with the aim of observing possible changes in students' stances towards this ideology. Students' autonomous production, in general, reflected enhanced skills for planning, organizing, producing and revising argumentative expositions. Consciousness of the generic and linguistic features at risk in this text type, fostered during the joint deconstruction and joint construction stages, enabled learners to manage the process purposefully, with minimal teacher intervention. Our goal in this section is to explore how learners deployed the newly mastered skills for evaluating and supporting arguments in the development of more nuanced and critical stances towards neoliberal ideology. An important point concerns the fact that, although topic choice was free in this stage, about one third of the class chose to focus on issues of wider societal relevance (not directly related to their majors), such as globalization, social inequality, free trade and economic policy. Based on our prior planning and delivery of this course, we consider it significant that a proportion of the class decided to focus on less neutral or professionally oriented final paper topics.

Some of the argumentative strategies in students' papers reflect the critical ability to look at issues from different perspectives and to question arguments coming from powerful commentators. Student

1, for example, defends the thesis that the recently signed free trade agreement between Colombia and the United States is convenient for large corporations, but not for small and medium-scale entrepreneurship. He calls into question the pervasive idea that radical implementation of transnational free trade is a faultless recipe for economic development, citing exponents of this school of thinking and confronting their stance with counter-arguments. Use of counter-argumentation is interesting in that, in our experience with final papers in previous implementations of the course, students have typically aligned with the authors they cite and rarely distance themselves ideologically from them. In excerpt 6, Student 1 considers some of the negative effects which, in his view, arise from the introduction of the free trade agreement in a society not fully prepared for its full-scale implementation. Rhetorical structuring of arguments around cause-effect relations is another argumentative strategy modelled in joint construction and used for resisting hegemonic narratives depicting a rose-colored vision of neoliberalist policies.

Excerpt 6:
Globalization, as Stiglitz affirms, (recognized analyst and Economy Nobel prize winner) is the elimination of any type of frontier that could impede free trade, to achieve the integration of national and transnational economies. However, the first consideration is that Free trade agreements imply winners and losers in the economy of both countries, and in the end, depending on the dynamics of the economy, one can see whose country benefited more from the agreement (S1, Final paper).

Excerpt 7:
The effects of the agreement are already reflected in our country, in the economy losing more and more important businesspeople, in violent protests from affected populations, in the increase of both foreign debt and tax reforms. (S1, final paper).

Another argumentative strategy that reflects more complex and nuanced visions of political and social reality is the deployment of balanced evaluative prosodies. Critical literacy demands the ability to appreciate upsides and downsides, overcoming black-and-white absolutism or relativistic stances that prevent deeper engagement with the issues at hand. Student 2's final paper, for instance, recognizes the importance of multinationals for the economies and labor markets of developing nations (Excerpt 8), despite her thesis that "multinationals

have sustained unfair exploitation of workers in the countries where they are based". In developing supporting arguments, she then provides factual evidence of some of the exploitative practices of multinationals around the world, using evaluative language to enact ethical stances and condemn abusive labor policies of corporations enjoying untainted reputations internationally. Excerpt 9 shows another interesting argumentative strategy, namely the use of causal-conditional sequences to argue against unjust states-of-affairs. By reasoning hypothetically about historical events, learners can become aware of social groups' unequal access to basic rights involving respect for human dignity, such inequality being one of the pillars of the neoliberal world order.

> **Excerpt 8:**
> Such companies [multinationals] are an economic drive in many countries and societies that oftentimes develop their economic models to facilitate their establishment and whose citizens therefore represent a great proportion of the labor force of these companies. This is particularly evident in underdeveloped countries such as China, Brazil, India and parts of South Africa and Latin-America (S2).

> **Excerpt 9:**
> It is a fact that the multinational interest prevailed over the control that could be exercised by a poor, powerless country with deplorable sanitary conditions such a Nigeria, which only in theory could have defended its sovereignty and used its laws. Pfizer would have never done the same in the United States given the superior economic and political power this nation could exercise over the company (S2).

In resisting neoliberal ideology, a key paradigm to confront is the unitary and agentless notion of "growth". Growth is a powerful metaphor prevalent in media coverage of economic performance, and thus resonates with public perceptions of normality and desirability. It manifests to the public as an abstraction, as a general figure representing the overall performance of economy stakeholders, regardless of its implications for societal development. Some of the argumentative strategies in students' papers suggest distancing from this pervasive metaphor and awareness of the disparities it masks. Student 4, for example, contrasts governmental justification of favorable tax regimes for multinationals based on allusions to "growth" with the fact that some multinationals compete unfairly with small local companies, which undergo more stringent taxation.

Excerpt 10:
Governments claim that multinational companies generate growth and promote movement in local markets, but this is not necessarily favorable for the national economy since foreign productivity prevails over the national one and local entrepreneurship efforts decrease (S3, final paper).

Excerpt 11:
Currently, the political, social and economic system known as capitalism, under which big companies and a few number of wealthy people control property, has not been beneficial to humanity, specifically in aspects such as economic and social inequity, the ecological footprint and work exploitation. This issue becomes relevant since in this model private property is pivotal, thus increasing the economic gap and sidelining public ownership (which seeks more equity among individuals) (S3, final paper).

The positions defended by some students aligned with more ideologically conservative or hegemonic currents of thinking, which, in our judgment, does not necessarily imply less criticality. Critical literacy does not entail indoctrination of students into particular worldviews, but a focus on fostering well-rounded visions of reality that resist uncontested narratives and naturalized ideologies. Student 4, for example, defends the thesis that the tax reforms undertaken by recent administrations are beneficial, based on factual evidence linking higher taxation rates with increased levels of human development. A commentator critical of the tax reforms might argue that they represent an unfair burdening of middle and working classes in favor of laxer regulations for corporations and multinationals. Student 4, however, centers her argumentation on the convenience of increasing tax revenue for the State as a mechanism to increase social equality and to strengthen productivity, not on ethical considerations concerning the provenance of additional tax revenue.

Excerpt 12:
It is very important to report your income and pay taxes since what is collected is invested in education, health, legal, and homeland security systems as well as to decrease poverty and strengthening main economic activities, all of which generates wellbeing for all Colombians. Based on the above, one can say that the new tax reform is beneficial for the country, since it would increase the number of taxpayers and in consequence the Government investment would be higher benefiting the whole population (S4, final paper).

Concluding remarks

Collaborative Action Research not only seeks to improve "the rationality and justice" of classroom praxis but also to enrich "understandings of these practices and the situations in which they are carried out" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 162). Regarding the improvement of pedagogical praxis, the experiences and reflections presented throughout this paper contribute to illustrating the feasibility and desirability of a critical orientation in the university literacy classroom. The position we sought to illustrate is that an integrative approach to generic and ideological knowledge about language enables socially relevant discussions to take place in the process of mediating access to academic discursive practices. Such integration demands adoption of an 'appliable' theory of language capable of describing texts as semiotic processes and cultural artifacts, and congeniality with the principles of a logocentric pedagogy which privileges discussions around texts and the social values they legitimate (Matthiessen, 2012).

One important curricular and pedagogical decision lies in the selection of topical domains, the 'what about' component in course design. In the current conjuncture of growing social inequality, dysfunctional democracy and increasing strain on the natural environment, literacy education needs to promote informed discussions on the causes and effects of these issues and engage learners in proposing strategies to overcome them. Most importantly, literacy education needs to dig into the semiotic substance of these issues, exploring how language and other semiotic systems serve to legitimate and promote violence, inequality, injustice and destruction of the planet. The 'reading comprehension' paradigm, one of the signatures of standardized testing in neoliberal education reform, favors compliant reader positions by targeting data extraction and interpretation skills at the expense of deeper critical engagement with text. While these aspects of the reading process are important, it is the ideological contextualization of discourse in text that bears most significantly upon the formation of democratic citizenship.

Although each educational context is to some extent unique in its affordances and necessities, we would like to highlight some replicable practices that, based on our experience, can redound to the benefit

of critical literacy interventions. One of the decisions to be made in adopting a critical orientation to university literacy courses is whether to approach ideology intensively (by focusing on one single ideology) or extensively (by covering several ideologies throughout the course). We opted for an intensive approach, going from linguistic analysis of neoliberal ideology in text, to mediated contestation of neoliberal ideology in joint writing. While we may have missed opportunities to deal with other socially relevant ideologies (e.g. racism, sexism, fascism, nationalism), our class discussions gained in depth and continuity, with lessons feeding on prior discussions and leading to refined appraisals of the ideology under focus. Each ideology has its own set of semiotic manifestations and it may take time before learners develop the sensitivity to recognize them and engage with them in textual analysis. Although an extensive approach may be stimulating and offer thematic variety, we recommend an intensive approach to one ideology in courses of similar duration for the sake of promoting deeper awareness.

Another choice is whether to adopt an explicit stance for or against specific ideologies, with the teacher-researcher actively promoting an ideological stance. Our experience suggests to us that exposing learners to conflicting positions and guiding them into noticing their argumentative strategies works better at engaging learners as critically literate individuals than prescribing an ideological agenda to them. Although, by definition, certain ideological stances are objectionable (e.g. the defense of racism or ethnocentrism), it is important for learners to reach genuine understandings and to define ethical stances without external impositions. The notion of informed choice is at the heart of critical citizenship and there is no apparent justification for it to be disregarded in the classroom. A related choice concerns whether to make ideology the central thematic domain in syllabus design (e.g. to design a unit or a course around the theme of 'neoliberalism'). Despite the interesting possibilities that suggest themselves in this approach, we have opted for exploring ideology in its embedding within another thematic domain (environmental issues), partly because of learners' own manifest interest, and partly because we wished to avoid objectifications of neoliberal ideology as a self-standing entity. A large proportion of the power of ideology lies in its pervasiveness (van Dijk, 1998) and in its ability to hybridize with unsuspected facets of daily life

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(Fairclough, 1989; Lukin, 2019). There is thus a promising potential in the study of ideology as a phenomenon embedded in sports, the arts, science, interpersonal relations, the distribution of physical space, social networks, sexuality, tourism and other aspects of daily life.

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