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Can high school students check the veracity of information about COVID-19? A Critical Media Literacy Proposal in ESL classes

Introduction

Information is everywhere: in television news programs, on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and also in instant messaging apps like WhatsApp. On the one hand, we seek information about what is happening in the world, it has been easier than ever to be informed or entertained, once that the most varied contents are a touch away from their users. On the other hand, we live a serious crisis never before experienced in modern society, demanding measures to contain or regulate the use of the internet and digital media. The internet has been used for the dissemination of lies and hate speech, leading us to a digital crisis, perhaps without precedents for human history. The development of critical readers and writers, therefore, imposes itself as a *sine qua non* condition for full participation in social life. We must know how to discern fact from fiction, seeking to verify sources and contents.

To this end, the promotion of moments in classrooms that enable the development of critical media literacy, not only in L1 (first language) but also in L2 (second language) are crucial. It is important to highlight that in this study, we will refer to L1 as Portuguese language, which is one of the official languages in Brazil, and L2 as the English language. According to Kleiman and Marques (2020), it is the role of the school to prepare students to identify values and ideologies in all texts they read in order to question and confront information disseminated as unquestionable. Those contents are frequently manufactured by certain institutions and shared as apparently legitimate in popular sources, but they “only contribute to oppression itself and the exploitation of socioeconomically vulnerable groups” (Kleiman & Marques, 2020, p. 30).

In Brazil, this is in fact the great challenge of the school: to develop a curriculum that develops free citizens, committed to ethics and truth, which involves the integration of different areas of knowledge. This is such a challenge in our country considering the inequality in our educational and social systems, cruelly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, critical media literacy is imperative, since it becomes the deepening of critical literacy, allowing the analysis of texts originated from the most varied media and their power relationship with their audiences (Kellner & Share, 2007).

Additional language classes can be an excellent space for the promotion of critical media literacy. The authentic materials used in these classes can serve as

analytical tools, proposing reflections and debates, incorporating real meaning to the tasks that are proposed (Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019). Students are surrounded by information and it is essential for them to know how to analyze its veracity, and it sounds reasonable to do that by using authentic materials, especially considering that checking the veracity of information is not only a skill for school, but a skill for life. Many studies were developed regarding critical reading of news media (Kiili et al., 2019; Kohnen et al., 2020; Geers et al., 2020), although none of them has used widely shared WhatsApp¹ videos as a material of analysis for the participants.

With these assumptions in mind, we developed a pedagogical proposal during ESL (English as a Second Language) classes with the objective of promoting critical media literacy by identifying false news related to COVID-19 and also writing about them. The participants were 3rd year high school students, from a private institution with a bilingual curriculum (Portuguese/English) in the south region of Brazil. In this article, we discuss this pedagogical proposal by analyzing how students evaluate the veracity of information about COVID-19 in a widely spread WhatsApp video and which resources they use when writing a journalistic article collaboratively with other peers. We hope this study helps ESL teachers reflect on the importance of developing critical media literacy proposals in their L2 classes, showing them that this is not only possible, but crucial.

Literature review

Critical Literacy in English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes

The objectives of ESL classes are being expanded over time. Teaching grammar and vocabulary is no longer enough, especially if we consider classes in which students have a high proficiency in the target language, as in the case of the students at the school where this research was developed. The dynamic and fast-paced society in which we live in, expects ESL students to be able to act in a future whose contours are uncertain. They need to be able to move in different spaces - geographic or virtual - and to live peacefully with social and cultural differences. Therefore, it is necessary to develop students' perception and sensitivity so that they

¹WhatsApp is the most popular instant message appliance in Brazil. The appliance allows you to send instant messages, pictures, videos, files and audios to other users.

recognize and respect the diversity in their communities as well as their connectivity to the global reality.

In September 2020, approximately 63% of the world's population had access to the internet (*Internet Users Distribution in the World*, 2020). Meanwhile, Brazil had approximately 70% of its population with access to the internet according to the latest statistics from 2018. However, 80,2% of the population is connected through wireless broadband connection and 99,2% of people use smartphones to reach 3G and 4G connections, as stated in the report provided by IBGE, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*PNAD Contínua TIC 2018*, 2018). Those statistics show that although the number of connected people may seem high, the quality of this connection and the equipment used as means to access it are not ideal. Brazil is still a long way from establishing digital equity, and the remote classes format adopted by many public and private schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has evinced it. Although unsatisfying, the data has shown that we have never been more connected, and the physical frontiers do not represent barriers for communication and content sharing anymore.

With all those digital possibilities, new forms of communication are reshaping the way people communicate, interact socially, and learn. Consequently, English language classes cannot be ignored from this revolution. Proposals that instigate critical literacy in ESL classes can be great allies in promoting moments that go beyond the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. According to Luke (2012), critical literacy approaches understand language as a way of not only representing but also reshaping the world. That is, critical literacy, linguistically speaking, implies “understanding how texts and speeches can be manipulated to represent and actually change the world” (Luke, 2012, p.9).

The perspective of critical literacy in the ESL classrooms broadens the perception of teaching only the technicalities of the English language. New approaches to ESL are being suggested, with a more comprehensive view of teaching, emphasizing the need to: a) understand the rapid changes in the world; b) assist students in celebrating their multiple identities; c) promoting critical reflection on the world; and, d) empower students through an English teaching practice that questions unequal power relationships (Na & Kim, 2003).

The benefits of ESL teaching practices that encompass critical literacy can be various, such as approximate the reality of students with the additional language, and make the classes more meaningful with authentic materials to learn a new language, while raising awareness on the sources providing those contents. However, when considering the technological advances that we have experienced in the last decades, it is necessary to promote critical literacy practices that go beyond textbooks and analog activities. It is impossible to disattach ESL classes from the general fabric of the new cultural society being established. Nothing within a society operates in isolation (Freire, 1967). More than ever, now is the

time to think critically not only in offline contexts but also in online ones, especially considering the enormous amount of information provided to the students by online platforms.

Critical Media Literacy and News Literacy

In addition to the practices of critical literacy in ESL classes, the digital age brings along the demand for criticality when consuming and producing content in the online modality. It is necessary to develop students' critical reading and alert them about the importance of verifying sources in the immensity of information available in the most diverse news media and social media. In order to do so, activities that promote critical media literacy must appear in ESL classes as well. Critical media literacy is a deepening of critical literacy, which allows students to critically analyze texts from the most varied media and their relations with the audience, information and power (Kellner & Share, 2007). Therefore, exercises that promote critical media literacy can help students select and analyze the content they consume online, not only inside the classrooms, but also, and more importantly, outside.

A real example of this necessity presents itself when it comes to the so-called *fake news*, strongly supporting the development of critical media literacy tasks. Generally speaking, fake news is defined as news of a journalistic nature, in its majority, which presents false information in order to deceive the reader. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook and instant messaging apps like WhatsApp have been platforms for easy and rapid spread of fake news. The 'digital citizenship' and 'new media literacies' bring with them the skills and knowledge necessary for us to be successful in a scenario of constant expansion of social media. The distinctions between consumer and producer no longer exist and the fine line between public and private demands new ethical challenges for children, young-adults and adults who consume online content (Hobbs & Jensen, 2013).

Thus, it is necessary to address those issues which are central to the experience of growing up in a world full of mass media, diverse culture and digital media (Hobbs & Jensen, 2013). It is extremely important to promote moments of analysis of news, advertisements, songs, debating about the discernment of fact, fiction and opinion in the ESL classes as well, considering the vast array of online content available for speakers of not only one language, but two or more.

One of the most important goals of media literacy is to show that the media's representation of reality is frequently inaccurate and/or incomplete (Kellner & Share, 2005). News media content is not immune to this distortion of reality seen in the general media. Therefore, news literacy has a crucial role in students' lives, once it is expected to inform self-governing citizens (Christians et

al., 2009). This important role faces countless challenges with the emerging of digital media products demonstrating both their positive and negative outcomes.

Although news articles have long been present in L1 and L2 classes, educators and scholars are still discussing the applications and the forms of analysis of news literacy (Ashley et al., 2017; Fleming, 2013), but one thing is for sure: the importance of equipping students “to access, evaluate, analyze and create news media products” (Maksl et al., 2015, p.31). Critical media literacy, and specifically news literacy, can help not only students, but society in general when it comes to analyzing the information they consume, identifying the quality of its sources and questioning its veracity. Therefore, ESL contexts can be spaces to nurture proposals and strategies to develop critical analysis of online content, once teachers can adapt the activities according to the level of proficiency of their students in the target language.

Challenges of evaluating online content and the importance of collaboration

As discussed in the previous section, one of the most challenging assignments in the digital era is to evaluate the veracity of online content. Considering the complexity of the task, researchers have found that people rely on a variety of strategies in order to determine whether the information they have encountered online is real or fake. Some of those strategies include: site or source cues (e.g. appearance, absence of advertising); message cues (e.g. citations, links to external authorities); author cues (e.g. author qualifications and credentials) along with qualities of the individual user such as internet experience, reliance, and personality traits (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015).

Other psychological studies have shown that users tend to believe information which has been shared by trustworthy people, such as friends or relatives (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Velasquez, 2012). These findings portrait what frequently happens in instant messaging apps, such as WhatsApp. Users of the app usually share information they have received from close ones without checking its veracity first, once they trust the collocutor. The sharing without checking movement encounters a significant characteristic of the users of Web 3.0. Individuals no longer have to search for information, rather than browsing to find websites of their interest, many users consume the most random contents through social media, videos that are suggested for them, or even through Google's home page (Kohnen et al., 2020).

With all those possibilities to access content easily, or simply receive it, we must bear in mind the central role of the new literacies. Leu et al. (2017) describes some of the new literacies of online research, which include skills and strategies students must have in order to read and conduct research in the digital

era. The authors claim that online research and analysis can be an individual act, but it seems to be enhanced when performed collaboratively. The process of collaborative learning is described as the engagement of two or more learners coordinated in synchronous interaction with the purpose of achieving the same goal (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016).

There are many elements of the new literacies to be considered, but one of them is particularly relevant for the sake of this research: “Collaborative online reading and writing practices appear to increase comprehension and learning” (Leu et al., 2017, p.8). When engaging in collaborative writing practices, students can enhance their understanding on the topic, consequently broadening their productions. Collaboration is a fundamental competence to participate in the social practices of the 21st century (Zammit, 2010).

Several studies have shown that offering activities that promote collaboration among students refines their thinking and leads them into producing deeper and more significant analysis (Rowse & Walsh, 2011; Kersch & Marques, 2017). Collaboration in both online and offline writing practices has been seen as significant to improve the comprehension and knowledge development of the students who are engaged in those practices (Leu et al., 2017; Ashley et al., 2012). In fact, collaboration can be an interesting ally in critical media literacy proposals, once each peer can offer their own perspective to the production, challenging their points of view.

Method

Brazil has around 120 million active users of WhatsApp and the app is used for both professional and personal matters. Consequently, the propagation of news, fake or not, through WhatsApp is frequent and rapid, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic reality faced in 2020. We believe that students must question the information they receive and consume, with that in mind, one of the most effective ways of developing this critical consciousness is by analyzing and questioning authentic materials at school, such as videos students receive in their own WhatsApp interactions.

The proposal was conducted by the author 1 of this article, who is the English teacher of the participants being described. We will refer to her as *the teacher* throughout the article. The research is of qualitative nature with an interpretative approach. The study is characterized as an action research as well, once the author 1 of this article has conducted the proposal herself in her own classroom, making an intervention with her students. Our objectives with this study are reflected in the following research questions:

RQ1: How do 3rd year high school students check the veracity of information regarding COVID-19 provided by a widely circulated WhatsApp video?

RQ2: Which resources are being used by the students when writing in pairs their own journalist article demystifying fake news?

Considering the questions, the objective of the study was to analyze how the students checked the veracity of the information shown in the WhatsApp video and the resources they used in their collaborative writing assignment.

Participants and setting

In Brazil, children join mandatory education when they are 4 years old, attending 2 years of kindergarten. When they are 6 years old, they are upgraded to 5 years of primary school (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th year), with ages around 12-13 they attend 4 years of secondary school/elementary school (6th, 7th, 8th and 9th years), finally attending 3 years of high school (1st, 2nd, 3rd years) and concluding their basic education at the age of 17-18 years old. The participants of this research were students from the 3rd year of high school, which means they were concluding their basic education studies by the end of the school year of 2020.

We conducted the research in a private school with a bilingual curriculum, Portuguese and English languages, in the south region of Brazil. The setting was chosen because the author 1 of the article is an English teacher at the institution. Therefore, the teacher/researcher had access and authorization from both the school and the participants to conduct this study. The activity was proposed in person at the beginning of the 2020 school year, before the establishment of the remote learning classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposal happened during the English language classes. In those classes, students are divided into levels according to their proficiency level in English, since the school's bilingual curriculum finishes in the 9th year of elementary school (student's age ranges from 14 to 15 years old). During elementary school, students have ten 50-minute periods of English per week. Five of those periods are dedicated to Language Arts, the study of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, literature of English, and the other 5 periods are conducted through the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology, with subjects such as Science, Philosophy, Programming, and Financial Education being taught in English. Moreover, high school students have two 50-minute English classes per week, once the bilingual curriculum finishes in elementary school.

It is necessary to clarify that the reality being described in this article is considered a privileged one in Brazil. Public (free) bilingual schools in Brazil are rare to find. Additional languages education in public schools does not offer enough time/opportunities for students to develop a new language besides Portuguese. In

most public schools, students start learning English by the 6th year of elementary school (when they are around 12-13 years old) and in most realities they have one or two 50-minute periods of English per week. Therefore, most bilingual schools are private, attending a fraction of the society. Furthermore, most of the families opt for the Portuguese/English curriculum, once English is considered a prestige language, carrying the promise of a brighter future for its speakers. Besides that, the school described in this study provides wireless internet connection to all their students and teachers, computer labs and laptops that can be used inside the institution, which is far from the reality seen in Brazilian public schools.

The class in which the activity was conducted consisted of 18 students, 6 boys and 12 girls, with ages ranging from 16 to 18 years old. Most of the students, 15 of them, have joined the institution's bilingual curriculum at the age of 4 in kindergarten. Their current proficiency level in English varies between B2 and C1, according to the Common European Framework. The class had an advanced level of English in reading, writing, speaking, listening enabling the performance of the activities to be conducted in the target language, both by the teacher and the students. This was the main factor when choosing the participants for the study, besides their high English proficiency level, the group was also very participative and engaged in proposals that require discussion and writing productions.

Since 15 of the participants have previously studied in the bilingual curriculum of the institution, they are used to reading literature books in English, engaging in debates and discussions about the most varied topics while using English as a tool to learn content from various subjects. Also, the level of digital literacy of the students is high, once the school is well equipped with technological appliances to be used in classes and teachers are trained to incorporate digital tools in their planning. Moreover, most of the participants have been instigated throughout the bilingual curriculum to be critical thinkers not only in the activities being proposed in Portuguese classes, but during the classes ministered in English as well. With all that in mind, we justify the selection of this particular group for the present study.

The intervention

The COVID-19 outbreak was in its beginning in the first days of March 2020 in the south of Brazil. The classes at the school described previously started on February 17th for the beginning of the school year. Television newscasts and social media were reporting about COVID-19 and as abruptly as the virus arrived in Brazil, so did fake news about it. They were spread with false information about the risks of COVID-19 and its methods of prevention, especially on social media and on WhatsApp. Since there was not much official information by that point, many people were fooled by the misleading reports, arriving from the most varied digital

platforms, while some people denied the arrival of the virus and its seriousness altogether. Consequently, the task described below was developed with the students because the teacher saw an opportunity to bring reality into English classes by verifying the ability of the students to critically analyze a widely spread piece of news in the format of a WhatsApp video, later producing their own informative articles. Moreover, in the beginning of the school year writing tasks are requested in L2 classes so that teachers can monitor the evolution of the students throughout the year. The intervention happened for 2 weeks and a half, involving 5 classes of 50-minutes each.

Firstly, the teacher started a conversation with students about the amount of information related to COVID-19 which had been circulating in the most diverse media and its main focus. After that, she asked students to gather in pairs to analyze news about COVID-19 in several international online newspapers, there were 9 pairs in total. Each pair was responsible for the visualization and brief analysis of a website such as Telegraph (United Kingdom); NY Times (United States), NZ Herald (New Zealand), The Australian (Australia), Aljazeera (Qatar), Japan Times (Japan), China Daily (China), The Moscow Times (Russia). Different places in the world were chosen so that students could get an overview of how news about COVID-19 was being presented globally. The teacher did not specify which news articles the participants were supposed to analyze in the international websites, the instruction simply required the reading of 2 or 3 news articles in which the main topic was COVID-19.

When viewing and analyzing the news articles on the websites, students should make notes in a document shared with the teacher (Google Docs) about the two points highlighted below that would later be shared orally with the entire group:

- a) *What do all news articles about COVID-19 have in common?*
- b) *Who is the intended audience?*

Secondly, the teacher presented a video to the class that has circulated widely through WhatsApp groups, the instant messaging application. In the video, a man who called himself a self-taught chemist, stated that the best form of prevention against COVID-19 was through the application of vinegar. The man affirmed that the encouragement to the usage of hand sanitizer was nothing more than a way to generate profits for the manufacturer companies. The man also claimed that in the composition of hand sanitizer, there were only 30% of alcohol, being the other 70% composed of water, among other information.

Although the video was in Portuguese, the questions about it were answered in English, as well as the discussions promoted during the class. Before showing the video, the teacher asked students to make notes on a Google Docs, individually, answering the following questions:

- a) *Do you believe in the information being said in the video? Why? / Why not?*
- b) *What evidence is there in the video that proves its veracity?*

After showing the video and giving some time for the students to answer the questions on a Google Docs, the teacher started a discussion about their responses regarding the information provided by the man in the WhatsApp video. Four answers, to each of the questions, with the most frequent content written by the students were selected for analysis.

Finally, after the discussion, in the same pairs that analyzed the news on the websites, students were challenged to write a journalistic article demystifying one or two fake news that circulated on the internet about COVID-19. Writing journalistic articles is a recurring practice in this class, so the teacher briefly recalled, together with the students, which elements compose the journalistic article genre and which steps should be followed in the writing process. The students also based themselves on the structure of the online newspapers articles firstly analyzed at the time of writing their productions. Two texts, written by two different pairs, resembling more like the journalistic article genre in their layouts and structures were selected for analysis.

Findings

Initially, the pairs analyzed news from global journalistic websites about COVID-19 and answered the following questions:

- a) What do all news articles about COVID-19 have in common?*
- b) What is the purpose of the news articles? Who is the intended audience?*

All of the pairs (9) answered question (a) stating that the authors of the articles have mentioned infectious disease physicians and other health and science professionals to reinforce their arguments. As an answer to question (b), 6 pairs said that all articles had in common the intention to inform and alert the reader about the ways of contagion and prevention of the virus having the general population as the target audience. Two pairs said that the articles were intended to address the possible causes of the disease and 1 pair said that the news referred to measures being taken by that country in particular to reduce the spread of the virus, with the residents of that specific location being the target audience.

The second step of the proposal was the exhibition of the widely spread WhatsApp video. Eight of the most frequent contributions on the viral video shared by the students were as follows in Table 1:

Table 1

Written contributions about the WhatsApp video

a) Do you believe in the information being said in the video? Why? / Why not?
Answer 1: No, because how can you be a self-taught chemist? You can be a self-taught cook or artist, but not a chemist.
Answer 2: There's no way you can be a chemist without going to university or a technician course at least.
Answer 3: Chemistry is a very specific subject for you to learn by yourself, it can even be dangerous, because it deals with chemicals and stuff. You can't believe this man; he has no qualifications to claim the things he is saying.
Answer 4: I can't believe it, first because of the fact that the man does not have a degree in Chemistry, and also because there's no scientific proof on what he is saying, no one else is saying that vinegar is effective. But it is possible to understand why some people believe it, once it is a natural solution and most people have no understanding of scientific proofs and how important they are for health issues.
b) What evidence is there in the video that proves its veracity?
Answer 1: Everything is fake! The self-taught thing to begin with, then the fact that there is scientific proof all over the place now saying that hand sanitizer is the best way to prevent from the virus, doctors are saying that. How can vinegar save us?
Answer 2: He keeps saying that he has worked for many companies and he has many companies of his own, but which companies are those? He doesn't mention names, it makes us believe they are fake and imaginary. It's all fake news.
Answer 3: He says that is 70% of water in hand sanitizer 70%, our chemistry teacher said a completely different number, way lower. They only put some water on it so the alcohol will not evaporate and our hands won't get dehydrated.
Answer 4: We need to use hand sanitizer 70% because the others that are lower do not disinfect, they only clean dirty stuff or dust when we clean the house, or something like that. So how can he say 70% of the composition is water? There is scientific evidence showing its effectiveness, quite the opposite of what he is saying, there is no scientific proof on the things he says in the video.

Note: Table created by the author using the data generated by the participants, 2020.

The students also complemented orally stating that many had already seen the video before. Most said they had seen it in family groups on WhatsApp and claimed they understood why some people believed the self-taught chemist's information, affirming that most of these people had not been at school for a long time and seem to have forgotten the importance of scientific evidence for believing in the information available online. Some students claimed to have warned parents and family members about the non-veracity of the information in the video.

Finally, for the third and last stage of the results, excerpts from two journalistic articles written by two pairs were selected for analysis. The texts which presented more similarity to the genre journalistic article were chosen.

Figure 1

Screenshot 1 of the article written by pair 1

Fake news, the real pandemic

Coronavirus is a type of virus. There are many different kinds, and some cause disease. A newly identified type has caused a recent outbreak of respiratory illness now called COVID-19, and in the last few days it became world news due to a pandemic being declared by the world health organization. Because of that the coronavirus subject has become very present everywhere on the internet, together with news of real importance we managed to find a lot of fake news, that are being widely spread on the internet.

A news that has spread widely through the media in Brazil is that marijuana can immunize a person against the new covid-19, A print screen simulating being from a report circulates on social media that says a study in the United States concluded that people who smoke marijuana are immune to Covid-19.

The text says that cannabis users, unlike those who smoke ordinary cigarettes, have been resistant to the coronavirus. but this is just a big lie, not a study has been done on marijuana that proves that it generates any benefit that can cure the coronavirus, these fake news can be very dangerous and usually spread very quickly, there have been recorded cases of deaths due to self-medication that was passed through a fake report.



Figure 1 shows the article written by pair 1. The duo selected two fake news that circulated on the internet. The title of the article, as shown in Figure 1, indicates the theme to be addressed, combining the health problem with the spread of fake news. The introduction of the article contextualizes the reader on the topic of the journalistic article, as well as the placement of an image denying the news being discussed in the text.

Figure 2

Screenshot II of the article written by pair 1

Fake news and conspiracies at a time like this are so obviously reprehensible that the most interesting issue is the challenge of the news itself. In periods of public panic, people do not seem to care much about the truth of the news they are spreading on social networks, and this has become an even bigger problem thanks to the globalization of the modern world, where you can pass on information to thousands of people in the matter of seconds. We must bear in mind the obligation to check if the information we pass on is real. If we do not do this we may have to deal with several problems at the same time.

Figure 2 shows the conclusion of the article written by pair 1, in which students wrote about people's behavior in times of panic and the responsibility we have in our hands when sharing content online.

Figure 3

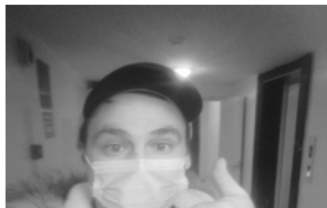
Screenshot I of the article written by pair 2

Popular fake news and why they are not true

The fake news surrounding the Coronavirus epidemic and why they are easily disputable

Coronavirus is a disease that has been spreading in large proportions in the last few months, causing great repercussion and, surely, panic. In this scenario, many fake news are being spread and because the authorities do not have a lot of information yet, most people believe them. One of the most popular fake news is that the virus can be cured by lemon and honey and that vinegar works as a hand sanitizer. We will tell you why they are not true.

One of the cases that got a lot of attention on the news was of the British man, Connor Reed, who was living in Wuhan when he caught the virus. The English teacher refused to take any medication and claimed to cure his disease with "hot toddy", a combination of whisky, lemon and honey. Newspapers like Reuters told this story and explained why this is not true. "According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there is no specific cure yet for the new Coronavirus".



Pair 2 explored the journalistic article genre and made use of a title and subheading, as shown in Figure 3. They also mentioned the World Health Organization (WHO) to help explain why the news presented was false. Pair 2 also analyzed two fake news from the internet.

Figure 4

Screenshot II of the article written by pair 2

Although lemon and honey can be beneficial for increasing for your symptoms, they are not capable of curing a disease by themselves. According to The Sun, honey can ease the pain of a sore throat and lemon can decrease phlegm. However, COVID-19 is a newly discovered disease which unfortunately does not have a cure neither a way of prevention yet. The infected have only their symptoms treated and that is all the doctors can do for now.

“There are no specific treatments for COVID-19 and treatment is based on clinical presentation. Most cases are mild and self-limiting, and treated symptomatically”, a WHO spokesperson told Reuters.

Once again, pair 2 used information from the WHO to support their arguments. In Figure 4 is possible to see that pair 2 used a recurrent strategy in journalistic articles, highlighting important chunks of information from the researched source in the body of the text.

Figure 5

Screenshot III of the article written by pair 2

To make sure that the information is true, it is fundamental to check the sources. There is a limited number of high level journalism papers or virtual papers that can be trusted, as well as government websites. The platform where the news are being shared is also a form of indication. Most links being shared on WhatsApp and Facebook contain debatable information. Finally, it is important to look for those news in more than one location.

The conclusion of the article written by pair 2, as seen in Figure 5, reinforced the need to verify sources and information, especially those that are available on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The article from pair 2 also indicated reliable websites for the consumption of information, such as recognized newspaper websites and government websites.

Discussion

The initial activity of analyzing journalistic articles at a global level made students realize the general objective of the articles concerning COVID-19: to propagate ways of prevention and to inform the general population about the virus and its symptoms. The pairs were able to verify the informative character of the articles and the selection of doctors and specialists to support the arguments presented by the authors.

The second proposal, which consisted of showing and discussing a highly shared video on WhatsApp with a self-taught chemist promoting the ineffectiveness of hand sanitizer in preventing COVID-19, presented relevant information on how students analyze news they receive from WhatsApp interactions. Students acknowledged that one of the main factors that denounced the lack of veracity of the information in the video is the fact that the speaker says he is a self-taught chemist. Students were emphatic in arguing that it is impossible to one learn a profession of such complexity alone.

Other factors, emphasized by the students, indicate their critical analysis regarding the video, as stated in the comments: “He says that is 70% of water in hand sanitizer 70%, our chemist teacher said a completely different number, way lower”, and, “There is no scientific proof on the things he says, portraying the use of previous knowledge seen in disciplines such as Chemistry when interpreting the information being provided.” In addition, students also comment on the lack of scientific evidence to prove and support the information given by the speaker in the video, showing understanding of the importance of scientifically supported arguments in journalistic articles, especially in those regarding health issues. In these comments, we noticed the usage of some analysis cues in order to make the credibility evaluation decision regarding the content of the video. Students have critically analyzed the credentials of the author to decide whether the information was true or not. Besides that, some of their characteristics as receivers of the content in the video helped them evaluate its lack of veracity. By activating their previous knowledge from Chemistry classes, for instance, students were able to identify the misleading information provided by the speaker. Finally, students could perceive how relevant it is to observe the sources being used to support scientific information, applying the site and source cue when consuming online content (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015).

When producing the journalistic articles in pairs, students showed an understanding of the genre and produced relevant considerations when discussing the non-veracity of fake news about Coronavirus. The title of the article written by duo 1, “Fake News, the Real Pandemic”, reveals the association between the COVID-19 pandemic and the amount of false information about the virus circulating in the most varied online platforms. Meanwhile, duo 2 opted for a more

indicative title, “Popular Fake News and Why They Are Not True”, for what they intended to debate in their journalistic article.

Duo 2 activated more resources related to the journalistic article genre than duo 1, such as headings, highlighted striking phrases, images and they mentioned worldwide recognized sources in the healthcare area, such as the WHO. Meanwhile, duo 1 did not make use of specific scientific sources to demystify the fake news discussed in their article, but they affirmed the non-recognition of studies that proved the content of the fake news, adding an image representing the news addressed in the text.

Both pairs concluded their articles with the recommendation of checking information before sharing, according to duo 1: “We must bear in mind the obligation to check if the information we pass on is real.” Furthermore, pair 2 warns: “To make sure the information is true, it is essential to check the sources, also stating that There is a limited number of high-level journalism papers or virtual papers that can be trusted, as well as government websites.”

Authentic materials in ESL classrooms can make language learning much more meaningful and connected to students' reality (Jiménez & Gutiérrez, 2019). Thus, the use of real international websites is an instrument not only to develop reading and comprehension skills in English, but also to develop critical media literacy and news literacy, since we are referring to real news, on current and relevant facts to the students' lives within their society. Furthermore, by being in touch with different authentic materials, students have the chance to interact with different English varieties and specificities of other countries.

Duo 1 claimed that the topic for debate became the veracity of the news, since, according to them: “People do not seem to care much about the truth of the news they are spreading on social networks, and this has become an even bigger problem thanks to globalization.” Critical media literacy brings with it the importance of analyzing ideologies intrinsic in all types of text and their relationship with power and domination, agreeing with what duo 1 explores in their discussion (Kellner & Share, 2007). Students acknowledge globalization as the main factor for the spread of online content, since it allows more people to have access to the internet and, consequently, to information. Once more, duo 1 complemented their text with prior knowledge and opinions on the subject. Another example of this resource is the alert from duo 2 stating that “Most links being shared on WhatsApp and Facebook contain debatable information.”

Working in pairs has also facilitated the writing process of the journalistic articles. Students were often seen plotting and organizing ideas and strategies for their texts. Writing collaboratively can enhance students' productions, once they are able to evaluate different points of view making the writing task easier and more pleasant (Leu et al., 2017). Through writing collaboratively, students were

practicing one of the most important skills for the 21st century (Zammit, 2010), brainstorming and supporting their arguments before writing them.

Through the answers of the analysis that the students made of the video of fake content from WhatsApp groups, it is possible to realize that they understood the relevance of verifying sources in videos and articles with great online circulation. It is also remarkable to notice their comprehension on the importance of scientific evidence for supporting information, especially regarding health issues, as shown by the statements made after the video was exhibited: “there is no scientific proof on the things he says in the video.” The fact that duo 2 mentioned in their text the World Health Organization, as a reference when explaining the non-veracity of news in their journalistic article, reinforces the understanding of the importance of consulting recognized and reliable sources.

In order to better analyze the level of critical media literacy and news literacy of the participants, adopting a framework of analysis can be helpful, once that measuring news literacy levels is not an easy task. Unfortunately, for our study, we could not find a suitable framework to base upon, once our data generation proposal followed three different formats of activities. However, such methodology was adopted by Maksl et al. (2015), in a study which aimed at measuring the levels of news literacy in 500 teenagers from an urban area of the United States. The age range of the respondents varied from 14 to 17 years old, similar to the participants in our study. The authors used a news scale based on Potter’s (2004) model of media literacy adapted to news literacy. The research was conducted through phone calls in which a series of questions were asked to the participants, regarding their level of news literacy. As for the results, highly news literate teenagers were found to be more motivated to consume news and to be more skeptical towards their readings, being more informed about current worldwide events in comparison to the less news literate participants. Although the research was conducted in a monolingual scenario, some similarities with our study appear, such as the high level of news literacy from our 3rd year high school students who are more frequently exposed to proposals which require news reading and critical assessment. Besides that, their experiences as bilingual students over the years have given them the opportunity to be in contact with materials in both Portuguese and English languages, widening their scope to online content which may have contributed to the positive results of the proposal described in the article.

Since no study is without limitations, it was not different with ours. Unfortunately, we were not able to record the oral discussions about the WhatsApp video shown to the students, some interesting data could have been captured during this moment. Also, the interactions between the pairs when writing the journalistic articles collaboratively were not recorded, due to the lack of time of the teacher/researcher to organize the gathering of data in this format. It would be interesting to further research how 3rd year high school students select websites to

research for written assignments or presentations, analyzing their criteria for the selection and the language they choose to interact to one another when writing in pairs during ESL classes. The study could also benefit researchers and educators from bilingual communities. Moreover, the creation of a framework to measure the level of news literacy of bilingual students with authentic materials would be an interesting way to continue and expand this research.

Conclusion

In the critical classroom, the student becomes an agent in the development of their knowledge and the teacher becomes their assistant (Freire, 1970). In the proposal developed with the students, they were invited to analyze news articles, assuming the role of evaluators, instead of being evaluated, as usually occurs. In addition, they were challenged to argue and reflect about the veracity of the content of a widely shared video on a platform that is very familiar to them, WhatsApp. Finally, they were the writers of a journalistic article demystifying fake news related to COVID-19 while spreading the importance of verifying information before sharing it. In other words, they were able to be active agents in their own learning process, while the teacher played the role of assistant in provoking and guiding them in their discussions.

Through the records and discussions in relation to the WhatsApp video of dubious content, it was possible to perceive the students' ability to identify the factors that made the video fake. In addition, their productions of journalistic articles in pairs demonstrated understanding of the genre, mastery of the English language and a high level of critical media literacy and news literacy by suggesting ways of verifying sources and the possible consequences of fake news in our society. Besides that, we think students discussing and plotting strategies for their own articles to counter dominant ideologies, is a great form to develop criticality and collaboration, therefore being one of the most important contributions of this piece to the field.

Critical media literacy practices can enlighten students on the importance of being committed to moral and ethical issues when consuming and posting online contents, especially regarding topics with a great impact in our society. Those practices can make them aware of the importance of their role as critical and ethical citizens in the digital era, causing impacts on real life deeds.

The schools which are compromised with the required literacies to develop 21st century citizens have the duty to promote activities that develop students integrally. Without question collaboration and criticality are two of the most

relevant skills in times of increasingly online connection. The construction of equity and social justice will happen through collaboration.

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