

A Critical Approach to the Teaching of English: Pedagogical and Identity Engagement¹

Uma abordagem crítica ao ensino de inglês: engajamento pedagógico e identitário

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an attempt to show how our research group has been putting into practice a critical approach to the teaching of English. We started this work in 2005 and since then we have been reflecting collaboratively on it in order to better comprehend what we do and who we are as individuals and language teachers in this world of possibilities. Two aspects that stand out in the studies we have done are the teachers' pedagogical and identity engagement. These two types of engagement will be shown here by means of a discussion on Andrade's (2011) *Letras (Licenciatura em Inglês)* final paper, which focused on the theme *race/racism*.

KEYWORDS: critical teaching, English teaching, race/racism, identity.

RESUMO: Este texto é uma tentativa de mostrar como o nosso grupo de pesquisa tem colocado em prática uma abordagem crítica no ensino de inglês. Começamos esse trabalho em 2005 e desde então temos refletido colaborativamente sobre ele, a fim de compreender melhor o que fazemos e quem somos como indivíduos e professoras/es de inglês neste mundo de possibilidades. Dois aspectos que se

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destacam nos estudos que temos feito são o engajamento pedagógico e o identitário das/os professoras/es envolvidas/os. Esses dois tipos de engajamento serão mostrados aqui por meio da discussão do Trabalho de Final de Curso (Letras – Licenciatura em Inglês) de Andrade (2011), que focalizou o tema *raça/racismo*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ensino crítico, ensino de inglês, raça/racismo, identidade.

1. Introduction

First of all, it should be made clear that by *approach* I simply mean *the way we do things*, that is, the way our research group has been doing critical English teaching. We started it in 2005 and since then we have been reflecting collaboratively on it in order to better comprehend what we do and who we are as individuals and language teachers in this world of possibilities.

As problematization is a key word in Critical Applied Linguistics, I would like to start off by posing these questions: what is a man? What is a woman? What is class? What is race? What is emancipation? What is language? What is education? What is power? What is Critical Applied Linguistics? What is most important about these categories is that they should be seen as contingent, shifting and produced in the particular. That is why Critical Applied Linguistics is not intended to be a method, a canon of texts, a series of techniques but rather a shifting and critical way of thinking about questions to do with language (PENNYCOOK, 2001).

A critical perspective on language and language education is proposed by Makoni and Pennycook (2007, p. 28), in the book *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*, based on what the authors call “translingual language uses”. They contend that, though language classification has been a construct to control variety and difference, language practices are always mixed or hybrid. They also affirm that “languages were, in the most literal sense, invented, particularly as part of the Christian/colonial and nationalistic projects in different parts of the globe” (p. 1), so we must observe closely the way in which people use language and base our pedagogical practices on that use. This conception is important here for two reasons. Firstly, I will make use of a translingual language practice, not only because my English is a mixture of different *Englishes* and different *Portugueses*, but also because I will quote texts in the language they were written: different uses of English and Portuguese.² Secondly, it has inspired us to focus less on language as an object and to draw our attention to how we use language and how this use affects the world.

² The quotes in Portuguese are translated into English in the footnotes.

I will illustrate this view of language by quoting a classroom event taken from a final paper of the *Letras* course done by a student of mine. Estêvão (2011) did an action research in a 6th grade class of a public school in Goiânia, consisting of a set of six lessons focused on the theme *identity*. At the end of this set of lessons, she asked the students to write down all the things they considered to be part of their identity, such as name, age, nationality, race, their likes, dislikes, possessions, etc. While doing the activity, a black student called her and said:

Student A: Professora, eu quero falar sobre a minha raça, mas eu não sei qual é.

Teacher researcher: Bem, você tem a pele negra e o cabelo crespo, certo? Então, sua raça é a negra.

(Students B and C started laughing.)

Student B: Nossa, teacher! Para de xingar o cara!³ (Diary, 09/08/2011) (p. 28)

In her paper, Estêvão (2011) argued she had found curious the fact that the two boys (Students B and C) did not have white skin. Thus, being aware that acting in a critical way means problematizing “historically accepted discourses, leading students to rethink their values, beliefs and practices, as well as to understand how these categories contribute to the maintenance of prejudice and discrimination” (p. 15), she asked them if people’s skin color is a matter of laughing and making jokes. A bit embarrassed they answered “no”. Then, Student A reacted “Eu também não vi graça, *teacher*. E vocês (talking to his colleagues) também têm que colocar que vocês são *black* aí no papel de vocês. Ou vocês acham que vocês são *white*? Vocês são *black* também, igual a mim”⁴ (Diary, 09/08/2011) (p. 28).

Saying that “black” is a “swear word” is a clear example that difference is not deemed neutral; on the contrary, it is, most of the time, a reason for reinforcing inequality. One could explain this event of prejudice in terms of

³ **Translation:** “Student A: Teacher, I want to talk about my race, but I don’t know what it is.

Teacher researcher: Well, you have black skin and curly hair, right? So, your race is black. (Students B and C started laughing.)

Student B: Gosh, teacher, stop swearing at him!”

⁴ **Translation:** “I didn’t find it funny either, teacher. And you (talking to his colleagues) have to write down that you are black, too. Or do you think you are white? You are also black like me.”

individual behavior, but in Critical Applied Linguistics it is seen as representative of how certain racial groups are systematically oppressed and discriminated against in institutions and society. Language, in this sense, not only reflects hegemonic ideas but also produces it. However, it is important to understand that these ideas can be confronted and different meanings can also be created. This is what we believe that both the teacher and student A do, the first by means of her question and the latter by means of his reaction.

Problematizing hegemonic ideas and naturalized constructs is what our research group has been trying to do in our language lessons and in our teacher education work. Our research group is composed by teachers who take part in critical lessons as undergraduate students or attend my graduate course on critical teacher education, choosing to write their *Letras* course final papers, dissertations and theses on critical language teaching or on critical language teacher education. *Critical language teaching* is defined here as a political-cultural tool that treats seriously the notion of human differences, particularly those associated with race, class, and gender (KAMPOL, 1994), while *critical language teacher education*, in our view, aims at relating micro-relations of applied linguistics to macro-relations of social reality and tries to problematize not only the inequitable relationships of power and social reality but also language neutrality.

The contexts we have researched are public schools, language schools and universities. The implementation of this critical work varies according to the context: a) complete courses on social issues (60 hours), b) a set of lessons focusing on a social issue, c) activities about social issues inserted in regular curriculum, and d) critical events or moments.⁵ The issues usually focused on the lessons are *identity, race/racism, sexuality, gender, and class*. Up to now, 16 *Letras* course final papers, 7 dissertations and 2 theses have been written on this critical perspective, all of which are qualitative studies. As Denzin and Lincoln (2008a, p. viii) suggest, we have tried to perceive qualitative research as a “generative form of radical democratic practice” since, with Greenwood and Levin (2008), we believe scholars have a responsibility to do work that is socially meaningful and socially responsible. Denzin and Lincoln (2008b, p. 46) also point out that “the relationship between researchers, universities, and society must change” and that “politically informed action research, inquiry committed to praxis and social change, is the vehicle for accomplishing this transformation”.

⁵ Pennycook (2004, p. 330) defines a “critical moment” as “a point of significance, an instant when things change”. He adds that these are moments “when we seize the chance to do something different, when we realize that some new understanding is coming about”.

The main objective of this text is to discuss how a teacher has engaged in this critical work. The analysis of the 16 *Letras* course final papers, the 7 dissertations and the 2 theses have shown that they have engaged in this work both pedagogically and personally, that is, their engagement has been made in terms of lesson planning and their identities. By lesson planning, we mean the development of activities and materials focusing on social issues, which are devised by the teacher instead of being taken from textbooks; and identity is used here to describe “the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (DENG, 1995, p. 1). According to Hall (1996), identity is a process, it is split, it is an ambivalent point instead of a fixed one, and it is also the relationship of the Other to oneself. In this article, I will discuss a *Letras* course final paper (ANDRADE, 2011) to show what I mean by these two types of engagement, but before that a brief theoretical discussion will be made.

2. A social issue in language teaching: race/racism

The critical event described in the previous section shows that language and the classroom cannot be seen apart from people and society. Neither can they be seen apart from relations of power. That is why Pennycook (2001) asserts that Critical Applied Linguistics should find ways to relate aspects of Applied Linguistics (classroom utterances, translations, conversations, genres, second language acquisition, media texts) to broader social, cultural, and political domains (concepts of society, ideology, global capitalism, colonialism, education, gender, racism, sexuality, class). However, he argues this relation *per se* is not enough; it is necessary to engage with questions of power and inequality and, more important, to problematize how language perpetuates inequitable social relations.

It is not enough, for example, to present race statistics in Brazil, showing the preliminary results of the last *IBGE* census (2010), according to which the sum of blacks, mulattoes, yellows and indigenous (99.7 million) outnumbers the white population (91 million) in Brazil (UOL NOTÍCIAS, s./d.). Instead, we should ask questions such as: why do 70% of marriages happen between people of the same colour and why are black women (7% of the population) the ones who least get married (JORNAL DO COMÉRCIO, 2012)? Why in 2007, among the 1% richest population of Brazil, were only 12% blacks and mulattoes, while whites constituted 86.3% of the group? Or yet why among the 10% poorest were 73.9% blacks and mulattoes, and 25.5% whites (UOL NOTÍCIAS, 2008)? By asking questions like these, we can challenge

not only the myth of the high degree of Brazilian miscegenation but also the fallacy of Brazilian racial democracy. These statistics explain why the boys in Estêvão's (2011) research do not want to acknowledge they are black. The same attitude can be seen in a study carried out by Sheriff (2002, p. 223) in a primarily black shantytown in Rio de Janeiro. Aiming at exploring the inhabitants' view of race and racism, she found out that the word "black" carries "negative moral qualities" and is used as "offensive", "a dirty word", "a word used to humiliate", "a word used to criticize", "a prejudiced word", and "a word used by racist people", besides being associated to "slavery".

Souza (2011) points out that inequality in Brazilian schools rests on a number of identity aspects, such as class, gender, ethnicity, regionality, sexuality, race, but it is more acute for people of African descent whose phenotypic features are a cause for prejudice and discrimination, not always expressed verbally, but reported in many educational studies. She quotes the data from the 2007 School Census, analysed by the *IPEA* (Institute of Applied Economic Research) in 2008, which indicate

a falta de equidade quando mostram que entre os jovens brancos de 15 a 17 anos, 70% haviam concluído o ensino fundamental, enquanto entre os negros, apenas 30%. No ensino médio, 62% de jovens brancos, de 15 a 17 anos, estavam na escola, enquanto o percentual de negros na mesma faixa etária era de 31%. Considerando-se o grupo de estudantes na faixa etária dos 19 anos, 55% de brancos concluem o ensino médio enquanto apenas 33% de negros conseguem o mesmo. Além disso, da população acima de 25 anos, 12,6% detêm diploma de curso de nível superior, enquanto dentre os negros a taxa é de 3,9%.⁶ (SOUZA, 2011, p. 44-45)

⁶ **Translation:** "an unfair disparity between young blacks and young whites of the 15-17 year old age group in the school attendance tables. The statistics disclose that the young blacks appear clearly as underachievers in the school educational system with only 30% completing their basic education, while 70% of young whites completed their basic education. This is also reflected at secondary school (ensino médio), where 62% of young whites from the 15-17 year old age group attended school, compared to only 31% of young blacks from the same age group. Examining the figures related to 19 year olds, a disproportionate number of white students have finished secondary school opposed to black students finishing secondary school. The actual percentage of white students finishing is 55%, in comparison to only 33% of black students finishing secondary education. Regarding higher educational achievements in the adult Brazilian population, the statistics show only 3.9% of black adults hold university degrees compared to 12.5% of white adults."

The author asserts there are many reasons why there is a great disparity in relation to years of schooling between blacks and whites in Brazil, some of which are: difference in treatment and affection distribution towards black and white children; shortage of pedagogic materials that address positively the Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture; little importance given to conflicts that involve nicknames and jokes; and even the silencing or fear of the name *black* (*negro ou preto*), which is a drama in school life.

Together with the governmental measures that have been implemented in Brazil in order to transform the reality of black population, such as the *Lei Federal* n. 10.639 (BRASIL, 2003), which requires the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture in the school curriculum, and the quotas for black students at federal universities, it is important to problematize the issue of multiculturalism in every classroom, but especially in language classrooms, since we should avoid excluding discourses and build alternative discourses that can lead to diversity and to multiplicity of human experience. Multiculturalism is not seen here as simple respect for cultural difference, appreciation of ethnic traditions and artifacts, or promotion of cultural sensitivity. These characteristics are referred to as “liberal multiculturalism” by Kubota (2004, p. 31), since it “endorses the idea that all individuals, regardless of their background, can socially and economically succeed as long as they work hard”. She adds that “in this logic, racial and other types of differences often get blinded and erased” (p. 31). Being a professor of colour (Japanese) in the US, Kubota (2004) affirms she herself has already faced challenges in her interactions with white students and colleagues. However, she says that these challenges had never been understood as racism by her white women colleagues.

Kubota (2004) examines liberal multiculturalism in order to defend “critical multiculturalism”, which “recognizes that social and economic inequality does exist and it critically examines how inequality and injustice are produced and perpetuated in relation to power and privilege” (p. 37). It also “examines how certain social racial and other groups are systematically oppressed and discriminated against in institutions and society” (p. 37), and “focuses on how certain groups of students are disadvantaged in educational decisions such as tracking, testing, funding, curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and language of instruction” (p. 37-38). So,

[c]ontrary to liberal multiculturalism, which tends to represent the culture of the Other as homogeneous, traditional, and static, critical multiculturalism views culture as diverse, dynamic, and socially, politically, and discursively constructed. (KUBOTA, 2004, p. 38)

Concerning multicultural education, Kubota (2004) argues that it is much more than including visual images and narratives of people with different skin colours in the curriculum or celebrating the Black History Month once a year. Instead, it should have an antiracist aim through exposing issues of race and racism as well as critically examining discursive constructions of our knowledge on culture and language. She highlights that “social transformation involves a two-way process; that is, not only should the people on the periphery generate insurgent voices, but the center should also attend to such voices” (p. 47). In other words, marginalized and mainstream students should be engaged in critical learning about cultural and linguistic diversity. Besides, we should call into question the limits of our own understandings of democracy, rights, and equality and the reasons why we are defending multiculturalism.

An education with an antiracist aim is what Ferreira (2006) proposes in her book *Formação de professores: raça/etnia*, in which she claims that the content “racial issues” be inserted in all subjects and in teacher education courses. She believes that the school is also responsible for the construction of citizenship, so a critical relationship should be drawn between the school system and racial and ethnic inequalities. The author uses the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, even though she defines “race” as normally associated with phenotypic differences and “ethnicity” as referring to groups that share the same cultural identity, such as language, religion, and history. She argues that, if these terms are needed, it is because racism and racial inequality are very much present in our social relations.

In another article, in which Ferreira (2007) examines the way some English as a foreign language teachers understand and address the issue of cultural plurality as a cross-curricular theme and issues of race/ethnicity in a city in the South of Brazil, she uses the words “black” and “white” to describe her informants because there are racialized discourses of colour in Brazil. Nevertheless, Ferreira highlights that

[t]here is a potential problem with this because it constitutes a single black-white binary identification in a country in which people have self-identified 136 gradations of colour. The gradations of colour were identified by IBGE in the census used by Brazilians when they had to self-identify in 1976. (SCHWARCZ, 1998 cited in FERREIRA, 2007, p. 215)

According to Ferreira’s (2007, p. 228) findings, her nine informants (3 black teachers, 4 white teachers, and 2 mulattos) seem to believe that cultural plurality as a cross-curricular theme

is associated with learning about the cultural aspects of the “other” related to English as Foreign Language, the celebration of ‘diversity’ in Brazil, rather than challenging and deconstructing the racism that exists in Brazilian society.

She concludes by affirming that teachers should have an adequate understanding of issues specific to race/ethnicity so that they can be addressed in the classroom. This conclusion is expanded by Pennycook’s (2001) assertion that teachers should be careful about their pedagogical choices concerning curriculum development, content, materials, classroom processes, and language use, since they are inherently ideological in nature, with significant implications for learners’ socioeconomic roles. In fact, classrooms are sites where identities are produced and changed, but at the same time are sites of cultural struggles, in which different versions of the world are battled over. Canagarajah (1993 cited in PENNYCOOK, 2001) asserts that the cultural struggles are not reducible to only two ideologies, the dominant and the dominated, but rather encompasses a whole circulation of different ideas, cultural forms, ways of thinking, being, and speaking.

In the following section, I will discuss how Andrade (2011) makes her pedagogical choices and how they are related to her own identity, which suggests that what we do as researchers and in the classroom is about changing the worlds we live in but is also about changing ourselves. As Simon (1992, p. 42) puts it, Critical Applied Linguistics is “a continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action”.

3. A sample of our critical approach to the teaching of English: pedagogical and identity engagement

Andrade (2011) started her action research aiming at making students more motivated and more autonomous by means of a social issue related to the students’ reality. Drawing on Pennycook (1999), she defines critical teaching as the approach of themes in which power relations and inequality are latent and as the problematization of naturalized notions in everyday life, such as the representation of women, the myth of racial democracy and gender roles. She quotes Moita Lopes (2003) to highlight three aspects in the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais de Língua Estrangeira (PCN-LE)* which are relevant to build anti-hegemonic discourses in language lessons: the promotion of students’ discursive engagement, the development of students’ critical consciousness in relation to language, and the focus on transversal themes which cut across contemporary social life, such as ethics, work, cultural plurality, environment, sexuality, consumption and health.

The theme the teacher researcher chose to focus on was race/racism and she affirms that in the beginning it was chosen because she thought it would be easy to deal with it (ANDRADE, 2011). This statement shows that, before starting the research, she saw it simply as a social theme to be discussed in her language lessons. However, she added that during the research she found out that this choice was purely personal and a challenge for her. It seems that, as she began reading about race and racism, she started a process of assuming her identity as a black woman. In fact, this identity of hers is mentioned for the first time only in the second section of the theoretical background, entitled “Raça e Racismo”. Her readings about race and racism (GUIMARÃES, 1999; SANTOS, 2005; FERREIRA, 2006; MUNANGA, 2003) must have been the trigger to understand that problematizing these issues was talking about one of her most important identities. More than that, she realized: “Eu como professora negra descobri ao longo desta pesquisa que muito há para se fazer a fim de estancar a perpetuação de discursos mantenedores de desigualdades sociais”⁷ (Final paper, p. 13).

In the end, she also realized that the choice of this social theme made all the difference for her work. Andrade’s process confirms one of Moita Lopes’s (2002) basic assumptions in the book *Identidades fragmentadas*: the relationship between reading and the construction of social identities. He argues that reading is a social practice, that is, when we engage in the reading practice we are acting in the social world, constructing ourselves and the others.

Andrade’s (2011) research was done in a 7th grade group of a private school in a small city in Goiás. The school is near the city centre and the students come from upper-middle class families. The group was composed of 18 students from 11 to 14 years of age. In the initial questionnaire, 14 students defined themselves as being white, mulatto or black, but 4 of them did not answer because they were in doubt if they were white or mulatto. Here is a chart with answers about how they declared themselves in terms of “race” (term used by IBGE):

CHART 1
Participants’ declared race in Andrade’s (2011) research

	Black	Mulatto	White	No answer	Total
Female students	1	3	4	1	9
Male students	1	3	2	3	9

⁷ **Translation:** “As a black teacher, I’ve found out by doing the research that there’s a lot to be done in order to stop the perpetuation of discourses that maintain social inequalities”.

The teacher researcher prepared a set of five lessons aimed at raising students' awareness about racism. The first three lessons were developed with 20 pictures of people. Out of the 20 pictures, 10 were of men (5 black and 5 white) and 10 were of women (5 black and 5 white); all of them had fictitious names. The students worked in small groups, and in each of them there was at least one student who had a better command of the target language. Four activities were developed with the pictures. In the first one, the students had to choose, among the people in the pictures, two people for each superlative: the friendliest, the nicest, the most intelligent, and the most beautiful. The whole group had to agree with the choices. In the second activity, they had to choose, among the people in the pictures, the least intelligent, the ugliest, the dirtiest and the least honest. In the third, the students had to imagine a hypothetical situation of being the owners of a big company and having to choose, among the people in the pictures, the engineer, the doctor, the cleaner, and the cook of this company. In the fourth activity, they had to make couples with the people in the pictures. The fourth lesson was a discussion on the poem "I, Too" by Langston Hughes, and the fifth was the students' production of a poster with pictures and sentences against racism. All the activities were carried out in the target language, but the students sometimes resort to Portuguese.

The first challenge the teacher researcher faced was that some students had never thought about their race and did not know what their race was. However, the biggest challenge took place at the very beginning of the activity with the 20 pictures:

A partir do início dessa atividade foi que percebi o quão desafiador seria trabalhar com essa temática em sala de aula. Julguei a princípio, pela minha inocência, ser um tema simples de ser discutido, porém, ao me deparar com a falsa democracia racial que autores como Santos (2005) e Guimarães (1999) discutem, minha reação foi de choque, fiquei aterrorizada.⁸ (Final paper, p. 22-23)⁹

⁸ **Translation:** "At the beginning of the activity I noticed how challenging it would be to work with this theme in class. At first, I, in my innocence, judged that it would be a simple theme to be discussed, but, when I was faced with the false racial democracy discussed by Santos (2005) e Guimarães (1999), I was shocked, I was terrified".

⁹ Although most of our students write their *Letras (Licenciatura em Inglês)* final papers in English, Andrade decided to write hers in Portuguese due to the fact that she found it difficult to write academically. However, she had good communicative competence.

This state of shock resulted from the students' reaction to the pictures:

“Esse (rapaz negro) não pode ser o mais inteligente, ele é o assassino isso sim”. “A professora não perguntou quem é o mais feio, mas com certeza é esse aqui (rapaz negro)”.¹⁰ (Diário referente ao plano de aula do dia 31 de agosto de 2011). (Final paper, p. 23)

According to her, this “black guy” (Lucas), who had the most pronounced features of the black race or who was the most distant from the “white standard of quality” (SANTOS, 2005 cited in ANDRADE 2011) – thick lips, flat nose and kinky hair –, was the one that caused the most racist reactions, but the black women were also cause for jokes and racist comments. This reaction leads us back to the fact, discussed by Munanga (2003), that naturalists in the 18th and 19th century not only classified human groups according to their physical characteristics, but they hierarchized them, that is, they established a scale of values among the races by drawing an intrinsic relationship between biologic features (skin colour, morphologic traits) and psychological, moral, intellectual, and cultural qualities. As a result,

os indivíduos da raça “branca” foram decretados coletivamente superiores aos da raça “negra” e “amarela”, em função de suas características físicas hereditárias, tais como a cor clara da pele, o formato do crânio (dolicocefalia), a forma dos lábios, do nariz, do queixo, etc. que segundo pensavam, os tornam mais bonitos, mais inteligentes, mais honestos, mais inventivos, etc. e conseqüentemente mais aptos para dirigir e dominar as outras raças, principalmente a negra mais escura de todas e conseqüentemente considerada como a mais estúpida, mais emocional, menos honesta, menos inteligente e portanto a mais sujeita à escravidão e a todas as formas de dominação.¹¹ (MUNANGA, 2003, p. 5)

¹⁰ **Translation:** “This one (black guy) can't be the most intelligent, he is rather the murderer.” “The teacher didn't ask who the ugliest is, but it is certainly this one (black guy)”. (Diary about the lesson of 31st August 2011)

¹¹ **Translation:** “‘White’ individuals were decreed collectively superior to ‘Black’ and ‘Yellow’ individuals due to their hereditary physical characteristics, such as their light skin colour, the shape of their skull (dolichocephaly), the shape of their lips, nose, chin, etc. It was believed that these characteristics made them more beautiful, intelligent, honest, inventive, etc. and, accordingly, more able to lead and dominate the other races, especially the darker one, considered the most stupid, the most emotional, the least honest, the least intelligent and, hence, more subject to slavery and to all forms of domination.”

The teacher researcher had not planned to interrupt the students at that moment, so she just listened. However, she wrote in her diary:

Quando olhei aquelas crianças de 11, 14 anos dizendo que o Lucas era o assassino, o ladrão, quando eles começaram a brincar com as fotos me lembrei de minha infância, me lembrei que o racismo existe e que tudo que não se enquadra no ideal branco é discriminado. Cabelo crespo, lábios grossos, nariz achatado não é bonito neste mundo. Sei que não me viam como mulher negra, não me viam como *Black teacher*, me viam como *teacher*. Por alguns anos, longe da escola regular eu não percebia o quanto a democracia racial é falsa, as crianças negras na escola continuam a ser discriminadas como eu era na minha infância. (Diário referente à aula do dia 31 de agosto de 2011).¹² (Final paper, p. 23)

In this first lesson, it is possible that the students saw the teacher researcher just as an English teacher proposing a grammatical activity to practice *the superlative*, that is, that her identity as a teacher was prevalent, but being black was the strongest reality for her though it seemed to have been dormant for some time. And it was her identity as a black woman that made an idea cross her mind: “on this day I cried, and sincerely thought of not returning to that classroom” (p. 24). However, as a black teacher who had the aim of proposing a critical discussion about race/racism and/or who had to finish the research, she decided to follow her plan of problematizing the students’ reactions, comments and answers.

Here, as in Estêvão’s (2011) class mentioned before, it is also obvious that classrooms are not neutral sites of pedagogical transactions and that they function “as a kind of microcosm of the broader social order” (AUERBACH, 1995, p. 9), that is, the political relations in the world outside are reproduced within the classroom. However, drawing on insights from poststructuralism, Pennycook (2001) argues that this context also operates in a more dynamic way than this: though structure may limit or produce (rather than absolutely

¹² **Translation:** “When I looked at those 11, 14 year-old children saying that Lucas was the murderer, the thief, when they started to play with the photos, I remembered my childhood, I remembered that racism exists and that everything that doesn’t fit the white ideal is discriminated against. Curly hair, thick lips, flat nose are not beautiful in this world. I know that they didn’t see me as a black woman, and they didn’t see me as a black teacher; they saw me as a teacher. Being far from regular school for some years, I did not notice how racial democracy is false; black children at school continue being discriminated against as it happened to me in my childhood. (Diary about the lesson of 31st August 2011)”.

determine) human agency, human agency may work in fairly complex oppositional ways (but never outside some domain of power). In a few words, “both macro and micro (and all the levels in between, for these labels are but convenient fictions) produce each other” (PENNYCOOK, 2001, p. 127). So, we should understand that the smallest words and actions, such as a classroom utterance, an activity, a picture, the arrangement of seats, or the configuration of groups, may have major implications for class participants.

According to Andrade (2011), the students’ questionnaires about the lessons show they did not realize what the aim of the four activities with pictures was, which confirms that teachers have an important role in critical teaching and should have an adequate understanding of issues of race/ethnicity so that they can be addressed in the classroom (FERREIRA, 2007). Andrade’s procedure was to show the results of the activities with pictures to all the students: white people won in positive characteristics (the friendliest, the nicest, the most intelligent, the most beautiful/handsome) and were chosen to occupy the most prestigious professional positions. An exception to this was that two black people (a woman and a man) were chosen to work as doctors. Andrade (2011) affirms that it was glaring the fact that three black women were chosen as cleaners. As to the couples, out of the 20 couples formed by the students (5 per group), 19 were formed by people of the same colour. This result is in keeping with the *IBGE* statistics shown previously and brings us back to the myth of the high degree of Brazilian miscegenation.

The teacher researcher chose to problematize the students’ answers by saying sentences which opposed theirs, such as “and if I say that Lucas is the most beautiful?” and “and if I say that this black man is married to this white woman?”, but the students maintained their point of view, though not participating much. According to the researcher, their refusal to participate may have been because they did not like the pairs she told them to work with or because their attention was drawn to the fact that she was black: “Nesta aula eu era *teacher*, mulher negra, falando sobre racismo”.¹³ Thus, we can say that in the same “social field”¹⁴ (BOURDIEU, 1993), that is, the school, Andrade’s

¹³ **Translation:** “In this class, I was a black woman teacher talking about racism”.

¹⁴ In Bourdieu’s work (1993), a field is a social arena in which people maneuver and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources. It is a system of social positions (for example, the classroom) structured internally in terms of power relationships (such as the power differential between teacher and students).

identity may have been seen in different moments as an English teacher proposing a class activity and a black teacher problematizing racism. At the same time, the students' racist remarks made the researcher see them not only as students, but as agents occupying a social position that reproduce the larger field of power and class relations.

In the following lesson, there was more participation on the part of the students, and they understood the theme *racism* was being focused on. Nevertheless, the teacher researcher had to deal with the fact that some students' conceptions, expressed in their answers to the question "Why is there prejudice against black people?", were racist, since they said that it is because blacks are different from whites both physically and cognitively. The answers that made her understand that it is in the level of language that we express our racism were:

Pois as pessoas acham que os negros não vale nada, que não conseguem fazer coisa nenhuma e eles estão enganados, pois os negros **em certas horas** são mais inteligentes do que vários brancos. (Taylor, handout aplicado no dia 5 de outubro de 2011).¹⁵ (Final paper, p. 27, author's emphasis)

Eu não sou racista, mas eu não me casaria com uma mulher negra.¹⁶ (Final paper, p. 27)

In the last lesson, the teacher researcher perceived that some students were showing a more critical view on the theme by complaining that they could not find black people in the magazines they had. On the other hand, others refused to stick pictures of people with more pronounced features of the black race in their posters. At this moment, the teacher researcher seems to be more comfortable with her role as a teacher who is willing to deal with a teaching approach that has to do with who we are, who the others are and who we should be in this world:

Notei que desconstruir esses discursos (racistas) dentro da sala de aula é um processo longo. Fiquei feliz em dar um pontapé inicial.¹⁷ (Diário, referente à aula do dia 5 de outubro de 2011) (Final paper, p. 28)

¹⁵ **Translation:** "Because people think Blacks are worth nothing, and they can't do anything, but they are mistaken because Blacks **in certain moments** are more intelligent than many Whites. (Taylor, students' handout from 5th October 2011)".

¹⁶ **Translation:** "I'm not racist, but I wouldn't marry a black woman".

¹⁷ **Translation:** "I have noticed that deconstructing these (racist) discourses in class is a long process. I was glad I had kicked it off. (Diary about the lesson of 5th October 2011)."

Sei que muitos alunos ainda voltaram para casa com seus preconceitos, contudo meu trabalho possibilitou uma reflexão (ainda que superficial) sobre como o Brasil lida com o racismo e como nosso racismo cordial se manifesta.¹⁸ (Final paper, p. 29)

At the end of the paper, she shows she understands the research was about preparing a set of lessons focusing a social theme, but it was also about herself and the world she lives in:

Este trabalho me fez crescer como indivíduo, me fez ver que ser professora é educar, é quebrar preconceitos, é trazer ressignificação para discursos mantenedores de poder naturalizados pela sociedade. Eu aprendi que eu posso. Eu posso fazer a diferença.¹⁹ (Final paper, p. 30)

In a few words, her paper involved both pedagogical and identity engagement. It was about learning how to address a theme critically and learning how to construct and negotiate her identity as a black teacher. In fact, we can say that the border between the pedagogical and the personal was erased in Andrade's research.

4. Final reflections

Andrade's (2011) research was chosen to illustrate the critical work our research group has been doing. The theme she focused on was race/racism, but it ended up not being just a class theme. We can summarize her research account into four moments: the disposition and the preparation to work with the theme, the shock of acknowledging racist remarks among the students, the confrontation with her identity as a black teacher and with racism in the classroom, and the understanding of the importance of this critical work in language education.

It seems that both reading the texts about race/racism and putting the activities she prepared into practice made her deal with her identity as a black

¹⁸ **Translation:** "I know many students went back home holding prejudices, but my work made them reflect (even though this reflection was superficial) on how Brazil deals with racism and how our cordial racism is manifested".

¹⁹ **Translation:** "This piece of work has made me grow as an individual and has made me see that being a teacher is educating, breaking down prejudices, resignifying discourses that maintain naturalized power in society. I have learnt that I can. I can make a difference".

teacher, which, in my opinion, was the strongest point in her research, though nothing related to her identity as a black woman is mentioned in the introduction or in her research questions. At the end, she discusses the importance of addressing such theme and problematizing how language perpetuates racism. Her research seemed to have been more than anything a (self)discovery process. She not only made use of critical reflection, but she became it, that is, she was constituted by it, definition which is attributed to the teacher as a “critical intellectual” by Contreras (2002).

We know what Andrade (2011) did in 5 lessons is far from Kubota’s (2004) idea of multiculturalism in education or Ferreira’s (2006) conception of an anti-racist education. Also, we can doubt if the way she problematized the theme was enough to make students’ aware of racism in our society. Nevertheless, contrary to Ferreira’s (2006) informants, her paper shows that she had the opportunity to reach some understanding of race/ethnicity issues both by reading about it in order to write her theoretical background and by observing the students’ reactions to the activities she had prepared. Besides, she was also able to see her classroom as a site of identity production and cultural struggle, in which at least two different versions of the world are battled over (PENNYCOOK, 2001): the white and the black.

As we could notice, it was not an easy process for the researcher and it may not have been easy for the students either. The teacher had moments of despair (wish to give up), of strength (facing the students’ positions) and of wisdom (understanding that the process is long). To Pennycook (2001, p. 138), “doing critical work is dangerous work” and “the effects of what we do may be profound”. That’s why “we need to think very carefully where things may lead and whether we can justify ethically²⁰ what we are engaged in” (p. 138). In some studies, challenges such as the ones faced by Andrade (2011) have made some teachers give up doing critical work (URZÊDA-FREITAS, 2013). It is a choice every teacher has, but

²⁰ According to Simon (1992), ethics should not be understood as part of a fixed moral code that guides the behavior of the individual but rather as part of a contingent way of thinking and acting that is always in relation to social, cultural, and political relations. Besides, it should privilege “diversity, compassionate justice, and securing of the conditions for the renewal of human life” (p. 30).

for those who say we are just language teachers or just applied linguists and should not involve ourselves with such concerns, I say we are already involved. We cannot bury our heads in the sand as liberal-ostrichist²¹ applied linguistics has done in the past. What we need is better ways of thinking about what we do. (PENNYCOOK, 2001, p. 138)

As a matter of fact, we cannot go on seeing education as an autonomous or neutral activity. We can choose to contribute to reproduce social relations, but we can also believe in alternatives for this “patriarchal, homophobic and racist world increasingly governed by the interests of multinational business” (PENNYCOOK, 2011, p. 127). The author continues saying that “we need to escape overdeterministic, overtotalizing critical analyses to be able to show how Critical Applied Linguistics may make a difference” (p. 27). This is what Simon (1992, p. 27) calls “a pedagogy of possibility”.

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²¹ Pennycook (2001) discusses four positions on the relation of politics and knowledge which make a claim to have potential for Critical Applied Linguistics, which are: “liberal ostrichism, anarcho-autonomy, emancipatory modernism, and problematizing practice”. According to the author, “liberal ostrichism”, a “centrist-autonomous” position, is probably one of the most commonly held in Applied Linguistics and “takes knowledge production to be an autonomous realm that is not connected to more general political views” (p. 29).

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