

# Encouraging Critical Thinking Development in an EFL Classroom through Urban Legends<sup>1</sup>

Estimulando el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico en una clase de inglés mediante las leyendas urbanas

Estimulando o desenvolvimento do pensamento crítico numa aula de inglês por meio das lendas urbanas

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## Abstract

We live in a society in which social conflicts such as violence, crime, and lack of values, among others, have become a constant reality. These problems are not disconnected from school life. For this reason, this article describes an action-research study conducted in an EFL classroom, which sought to develop eleventh graders' critical thinking skills through the discussion of social issues related to their lives. To accomplish this task, American urban legends were implemented as a means to develop critical thinking skills. Data were collected from the students' opinions and class work as well as from the researchers' observations (field notes) during the pedagogical intervention. Findings reveal that the students enhanced in a greater or lesser degree critical thinking skills, naming *evaluate*, *critique*, and *create*, while they developed their language skills simultaneously in the foreign language.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking skills, critical learners, EFL education, urban legends, social issues.

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## Resumen

Vivimos en una sociedad en la que los conflictos sociales como la inseguridad, el crimen, y la pérdida de valores, entre otros, son parte constante de la realidad. Estos conflictos no están desligados de la vida escolar. Por ello, este artículo describe un estudio de investigación-acción llevado a cabo en una clase de inglés como lengua extranjera que exploró el desarrollo de las habilidades de pensamiento crítico de estudiantes de grado once mediante la discusión de temas sociales relacionados con sus vidas. Para tal efecto, se utilizaron varias leyendas urbanas estadounidenses como medio para desarrollar el pensamiento crítico. Se recogieron datos de las opiniones de los estudiantes y de sus trabajos en clase así como de las notas de campo escritas por los profesores investigadores durante la intervención pedagógica. Los hallazgos revelan que los estudiantes desarrollaron en distintos grados las habilidades de pensamiento crítico, tales como *evaluar*, *criticar*, y *crear*, mientras que mejoraron las habilidades comunicativas en la lengua inglesa.

**Palabras clave:** Habilidades de pensamiento crítico, educación en EFL, estudiantes críticos, leyendas urbanas, conflictos sociales.

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## Resumo

Moramos numa sociedade na que os conflitos sociais como a insegurança, o crime, e a perda de valores, entre outros, são parte constante da realidade. Estes conflitos não estão desligados da vida escolar. Por isso, este artigo descreve um estudo de pesquisa-ação levado a cabo numa aula de inglês como língua estrangeira, que explorou o desenvolvimento das habilidades de pensamento crítico de estudantes de grau de ensino onze, por meio da discussão de temas sociais relacionados com suas vidas. Para tal efeito, utilizaram-se várias lendas urbanas norte-americanas como meio para desenvolver o pensamento crítico. Recolheram-se dados das opiniões dos estudantes e de seus trabalhos em aula, assim como das notas de campo escritas pelos professores investigadores, durante a intervenção pedagógica. Os resultados revelam que os estudantes desenvolveram distintos graus de habilidades de pensamento crítico, como avaliar, criticar e criar, enquanto que melhoraram as habilidades comunicativas na língua inglesa.

**Palavras-chave:** Habilidades de pensamento crítico, educação em EFL, estudantes críticos, lendas urbanas, conflitos sociais.

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## Introduction

This research aimed at enhancing eleventh graders' critical thinking at a public school in Bogotá through the incorporation of American urban legends in an EFL<sup>4</sup> classroom. The interest in doing research in the field of critical thinking and with the support of urban legends came from the notion that teaching EFL should not only be the study of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Educators cannot disregard the necessity to go beyond traditional methodologies to help students to develop critical thinking skills while learning the language. Mastering the foreign language is important, but it must not be the simple end of EFL education.

The purpose of the study was to involve the students in the discussion of social topics such as violence, delinquency, and the lack of values in big cities; topics that are the core of urban legends and that are closely linked to learners' reality and social conditions. The urban legends were accompanied with speaking and writing tasks that encouraged learners to deal critically with those topics while practicing the foreign language.

## Statement of the problem

Based on systematic observations and on a diagnostic interview carried out on February 2013 to eleventh graders at a public school, it was detected that these learners were affected by three main limitations in their foreign language learning process. First, English was taught with an emphasis on traditional grammar-based syllabus with an emphasis on the study of linguistic structures (E. g. simple tenses and perfect and progressive tenses) rather than from a communicative perspective. The syllabi at this school reflected what some authors like Cameron (2001) and Richards (2006) have said that grammar-based teaching is not interesting for the students because they do not see the language as a means of social interaction, but as formulas to be learnt by heart. Consequently, there was a need to break the traditional grammar lessons in this classroom

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in order to offer the learners a new communicative teaching methodology based on critical issues that could involve them in the discussion of personal and social contexts of their own lives.

Students' second limitation was the lack of appropriate critical thinking skills in reading practices. Most of them did not understand the contents and possible meanings of the texts they read, and could not give any opinion about the reading material assigned in class. It was very difficult for learners to go beyond the literal content or to provide enough reasons to support their ideas because they did not have full understanding of what the texts contained. In this way, it was evident that most of the students had limited abilities and negative attitudes towards critical reading in English.

The third limitation responded to the low socio-economic condition of the participants involved in this research. They lived in the fifth area (Usme) of Bogotá. This community has to face many social and economic problems, some of which are juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, displacement, and poverty. Some of the students come from dysfunctional families, and parents make a great effort to send their children to school. Because the students were affected by all these situations, they were unmotivated with the English class and other classes in general since they had many other worries to think about.

With these problems in mind, the main concern was to change traditional teaching practices in order to give more meaningful and motivating classes for learners by implementing authentic materials such as urban legends in order to help them become critical readers of social conflicts presented in the texts and their own social context.

## Theoretical background

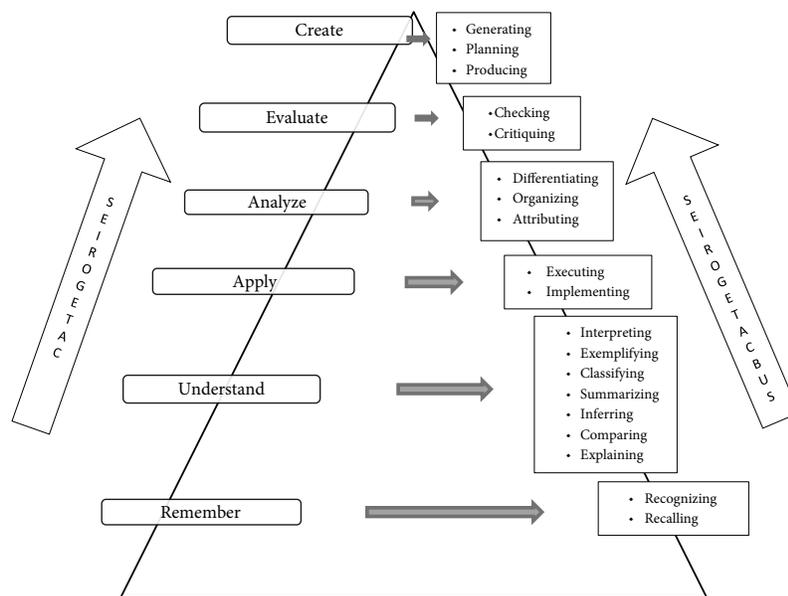
### Critical thinking

Critical thinking is understood as a mental and rational activity than involves different processes: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating, among others. Paul, Elder,

and Bartell (1997) define Critical thinking as the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication. Thinking critically implies thinking carefully and reacting upon the information received by listening or reading, being able to assimilate that information, judging, and evaluating it from different perspectives.

Facione (2007) provides a fuller vision of critical thinking by clarifying that it is “about how you approach problems, questions, or issues. It is the best way we know of to get to the truth” (p. 10) in common situations of real life. This vision indicates that critical thinkers stop being passive learners who are used to accepting and believing every piece of information they receive. In this sense, becoming a critical thinker is very useful to not only face academic spaces, but also situation of everyday life. That is why schools must promote critical thinking. Most importantly, critical thinking is considered as a group of mental abilities that people, including students, gradually need to enhance by doing problem-based activities (Paul & Elder, 2007) due to the fact that they are not inborn abilities in the human brain.

Forehand (2005) explains that originally Bloom (1956) created a taxonomy considering six main cognitive levels: *knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation*. Nonetheless, those categories, which were named as if they were nouns, seemed rigid and static to many critics because they did not completely represent the skill they implied. That is why Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) modified that taxonomy in order to keep in mind processes rather than rigid states. This change in the nomination of the categories from nouns to verbs denotes action. In other words, it suggests that each skill can be upgraded with constant practice and by doing challenging activities that require more efforts and more complex mental processes. The modified taxonomy includes these skills: *Remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create* (see Graph 1). These cognitive skills are organized in a hierarchical order according to the complex mental processes in the human’s mind. As can be observed, on the top of the pyramid *create* has been classified, as the most complex mental skill in the list while *remember*, in the bottom, is the most basic one. Likewise, *apply* is believed to be more cognitively complex than *understand*, and so on. Thus, some critical thinking skills are more complicated to develop than others.



**Graph 1.** Anderson & Krathwohl's taxonomy of Critical Thinking Skills

The taxonomy also shows that critical thinking skills are subdivided into several subcategories. For instance, the skill *evaluate* embraces *checking* and *critiquing*. Very briefly, each critical thinking skill can be defined as follows:

*Remember*: this less complex skill is used “to promote retention of the presented material in much the same form as it is taught” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 66). It denotes to recover information or knowledge from long-term memory.

*Understand*: suggests that learners “are able to construct meaning from instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communications” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 70). Students can make connections between previous knowledge and the new one.

*Apply*: entails putting into practice the knowledge gathered through *executing* or *implementing* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Students are able to understand and also to use the information to do tasks based on their own purposes.

*Analyze*: is a more complex process in which a division of the components of a subject or concept into single parts is required by defining the relationships among its constituent parts. Analyze implies the relation that exist among all the single parts (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

*Evaluate*: one of the most complex of the six cognitive levels refers to “making judgments based on criteria and standards” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 83).

*Create*: consists of reorganizing all the knowledge and information in a coherent way to produce new knowledge. In other words: “Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 84).

### **Critical thinking in EFL education**

There are multiple reasons for helping EFL learners improve their critical thinking. First, they become better readers and critics of what they read in English. Second, critical thinking can improve learners’ writing and speaking abilities when they

have to give their opinions and arguments in the foreign language. Third, being a critical thinker is an advantage to be successful, not only in academic contexts, but also when solving real life tasks. Fourth, learning a foreign language implies using language within communicative contexts in which learners can think critically in order to achieve communicative goals. Otherwise, language could be seen as a useless code to be learnt by force. Pineda (2003) states, “combining the learning of a language with critical thinking may result in a more meaningful learning experience” (p. 44). Thus, working on critical thinking development in the EFL classroom could become a useful strategy to learn the language in a meaningful way.

EFL education should not only include linguistic topics in the curriculum as if the only concern were to teach grammar forms. It must contain social issues and real life situations that enable learners to enhance their cognitive skills while learning the foreign language by means of different communicative processes. Pithers and Soden (2000) affirm that students are expected to learn not only the specific contents of a discipline, but also, “to develop ‘generic’ abilities which can be deployed flexibly in a wide range of work and life context” (p. 238).

### **Urban legends**

This research considers that one possible way to build critical thinking in the EFL classroom is through the incorporation of urban legends. At a first sight, urban legends might be considered trivial material for many readers. Nevertheless, they seem to possess pedagogical, social, cultural, and moral value. Brunvand (1981), Cortázar (2008), and Heda (1990) assert that urban legends are a set of short contemporary literary texts, a form of modern folklore that reflects human beings under dangerous and complicated circumstances. Hence, characters are dominated by emotions of fear, frustration, and panic and by moral dilemmas naming disrespect, dishonesty, and irresponsibility. Being part of the pop culture, urban legends have become a popular literary expression among many genera-

tion because they depict children's, adolescents', and adults' lifestyles and experiences, and present weird, but possible situations that might happen to them in contemporary societies. Young people write them for young generations to enjoy. They are supposed to be true situations that might happen to citizens and can be modified day by day as each person retells the story and adds or omits some information orally or by the media (Cortázar, 2008; Henken, 2002). One interesting characteristic of these legends is that they usually start with the sentence "this is a story that happened to a friend..." It means that the weird situations that happened to some people might also happen to us. Brunvand (1999) says that urban legends "describe presumably real (though odd) events that happened to a friend of a friend, and they are usually told by credible persons narrating them in a believable style because they do believe them" (p. 19). Accordingly, these tales could become attractive to EFL learners by virtue of their component of mystery within a realistic environment, and because learners may want to know what happened to people like them.

Deception, danger, robbery, juvenile delinquency, kidnapping, cheating, murder, and personal immoral conflicts are the main topics addressed in this type of genre. Characters are victims of psychopaths, thieves, blackmailers, murderers, kidnappers, strangers, and even close friends; and danger can happen in the street, in a park, at school, at discos, and even in the social networks found in the Internet. In fact, although urban legends are considered as containing imaginary situations, they actually depict contemporary realities of human beings who live in a modern world, facing social problems in urban contexts like big cities or popular neighborhoods. As it is said by Best and Horiuchi (1985), "urban legends, like collective behavior and social problems construction, are responses to social strain, shaped by the perception of the threat and social organization" (p. 488).

Moreover, urban legends become exemplary stories because they ultimately attempt to educate and warn readers about the possible dangers of living in

society and how people can easily find themselves doing immoral and irresponsible actions due to the influence or manipulation of others. Furthermore, urban legends are authentic materials that enable the learners to deal with real language in use. In this sense, EFL education should consider the inclusion of urban legends in the classroom so that the students can critically analyze and understand the complications that regular citizens have to face in cosmopolitan cities and in modern life. That is why the purpose of this research study was to use urban legends to help the participants have critical positions about those conflicting situations and develop their communicative abilities.

By the agency of this reading material, and for the purpose of this article, three American urban legends (See Table 1) were selected to be read and discussed, as it will be explained in the pedagogical intervention.

## Context and methodology for the research study

### Setting

This research was carried out at a public high school located in Usme, fifth area of Bogotá, which is mostly inhabited by displaced, unemployed, and/or working class people. Part of this population is immersed in different social problems associated with alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, thieving, etc. In general, this community is characterized by having socio-economic constraints due to impoverishment, poor opportunities to improve their living conditions, and social injustice.

The school prepares students in their individual, social, and cultural dimensions by the conjunction of cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal processes. The academic program is supported by "Programa de Convivencia," promoted by Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá named Hermes, which aims to educate students with topics of no-violence so that they learn to solve social conflicts founded in dialogue. This research was in part tuned in the interests of the institution as it envisioned to building critical

thinking in the English classroom for young participants to solve common social dilemmas and problems. The English classroom then became a site that enabled learners to gradually become critical learners through the use of the target language.

### **Participants**

The participants involved in this study were 32 EFL eleventh graders, 14 males and 18 females, ranging between 15 and 18 years old. Most of them took English classes because it was a requirement. Some of them would have preferred to quit school and get a job in order to earn some money, help their parents, and/or become independent. Most of the students lacked a traditional model family integrated by parents and siblings. Academically, they had a low English level due to the fact that they did not study English in primary school, and in secondary school they only had English classes two hours per week. As a result, the students had poor knowledge of vocabulary and grammar rules, and they did not feel confident speaking in English. Although students had limitations to read and speak in the English class as described in the statement of the problem, they were friendly and cooperative. Furthermore, most of these students made a great effort to submitting well-presented assignments, doing the activities proposed in class, and going to school, despite the fact that some of them had to work in the afternoon or were immersed in conflicting situations as mentioned in the setting.

### **Research type**

This project is a qualitative research study. According to Wallace (2006), qualitative research is dynamic, multiple, and holistic because the researcher does not take into account numbers and statistics, but observes and collects data to analyze humans' behavior in a specific context during a considerable period of time. The researcher's main goal is to comprehend and interpret the reality and/or a phenomenon in a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this sense, this qualitative approach allowed the researchers to observe describe, and analyze EFL

students' opinions and behaviors and to compare and contrast different information that generated in the classroom when they read and discussed urban legends as a means to enhance critical thinking and communicative abilities in an EFL class. Considering this, this qualitative research study described in a deep way each one of the events observed during a pedagogical intervention.

### **Research approach**

This was an action research process, since it identified a problem in a specific educational context. "Action research is an approach which is appropriate in any context when specific knowledge is required for a specific problem in a specific situation" (Bell, 2005, p. 8). It is a form of investigation in which teachers attempt to solve problems and improve professional practices in their own classrooms. It involves systematic observations and data collections that are later used to make decisions in order to generate the development of more effective classroom strategies (Parsons & Brown, 2002). Thus, this study aimed at solving the academic limitations previously mentioned in the statement of the problem. The drive was to observe if learners were able to give opinions and reflect on certain social constraints that they lived or faced every day in their school, community, and city by virtue of the discussion of urban legends in the foreign language. The goal was to intervene or act in order to transform the reality by improving it during a pedagogical intervention.

### **Research question**

Supported by the theoretical framework and the academic problem identified in the EFL classroom, this study was directed by the following research question: What critical thinking skills might EFL eleventh graders build through the discussion of American urban legends at a public school in Bogotá?

### **Pedagogical intervention**

The research was supported by a pedagogical intervention that took place from March 6th to May 31th,

2013. Three urban legends were selected as the basis to present the findings in this article (see Table 1).

During the intervention, students read the urban legends with the support of worksheets (see Appendix 1) in the classroom. In the introductory part (pre-reading stage) students were asked to answer orally some questions about the contents of the stories based on their prior knowledge, they were required to make predictions about the readings, or were given activities to review and learn vocabulary that they found later in the reading material.

After that, the students were asked to read the urban legend individually and by pairs so that they could help each other with the understanding of the stories. The reading process was slow as a result of the low English level they had. However, they put great effort to understand the vocabulary, the

sequence of the events, and the message the stories contained. They usually used the dictionary to cope with the reading. The teacher was always there to assist them and encourage them to express their opinions in the target language.

In the post-reading activities, the students were organized in small groups to discuss the urban legends based on some open questions presented in the worksheets to stimulate critical thinking as can be seen in Appendix 1. Students also wrote their personal critical reflections and opinions about the stories. Then, they reported their thoughts with the whole group and discussed the topics portrayed in the material. Later, in the concluding part, the students were motivated to create or modify the urban legends involving the topics discussed with their classmates (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Urban legends used in the pedagogical intervention

| Urban Legend               | Summary  | Topics discussed in class  |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| "The Kidney Thieves"       | A young man who has drunk several beers in a bar suddenly accepts and invitation from a strange pretty woman to go to a more private place. The next day, the man wakes up in a hotel room. He is naked in a tub and on the mirror there is a note that says that his kidneys have been removed.   | Trusting unknown people<br>The effects of alcoholism<br>Crime and deception<br>Trafficking organs<br>Taking advantage of naive people<br>Self-safety from injury in the city<br>Personal responsibility<br>Human values (prudence, self-care, caution, respect for the family) |
| "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" | A man drives his car late at night. On the road, a woman asks him for a ride to take her home. When she gets out of the car she leaves her scarf in the back seat. Then, the driver goes to the woman's house again in order to return it, but her parents tell him that she had been killed a few years ago down the road where the man had just met her. | Trusting unknown people<br>Risks of hitchhiking/giving a ride to strange people<br>driving late at night<br>Self-safety from injury in the city<br>Human values (the importance of protecting one's and others' life)  |
| "The Fatal Hairdo"         | A girl wants to have a fashionable haircut. So, she decides to apply a homemade product (bread dough and sugar-water) on her hair, but does not wash it. Insect eggs (maggots and larvae) grow in her hair and she finally dies because of an infection.   | Being influenced by vanity, materialism, and physical appearance<br>Applying on the body substances without safety rules or medical prescription<br>Personal irresponsibility for causing one's own actions and problems<br>Human values (life protection and safety tips)     |

## Data collection instruments

### Field notes

According to Burns (2003), field notes are “descriptions and accounts of events in the research context which are written in a relatively factual and objective style” (p. 87). Thus, this instrument provided reports about the participants’ interactions when incorporating urban legends during the pedagogical intervention, and about how possibly learners implemented the critical thinking skills proposed by Anderson and Krathwohl’s model. In this way, field notes provided rich data that were very useful to answer the research question. They were collected daily during the whole pedagogical intervention. Short notes were written in class sessions and extended notes were taken right after class as the researchers reflected on the experience. They were transcribed immediately and saved in computer files in order to assure confidentiality and safety of the data.

### Student Artifacts

Merriam (1998) claims that artifacts refer to all possible materials worked by the participants along the research process; they can be assignments, worksheets, evaluations or objects in the classroom. This instrument enables the researcher to be reflexive, interactive, systematic, and analytical. Hence, the concrete artifacts with which participants worked in this research project were worksheets (see Appendix 1) that facilitated the reading process and the discussion of the urban legends during the pedagogical intervention. Each worksheet consisted of an urban legend accompanied by pre-reading questions, key vocabulary, and some open questions that guided the critical discussion on the reading. Some more free activities were included to stimulate students’ creativity. Artifacts registered students’ written answers, thoughts, and ideas about the readings, the topics involved in those readings, and other experiences that came to participants’ minds when reading the material. Those artifacts were collected at the end of the classes, photocopied, and saved in

a personal folder to assure confidentiality and safety of the data.

### Data analysis

Patton (2002) states that the mission of a researcher in a qualitative analysis is to “transform data into findings” (p. 432). Therefore, the approach used for data analysis was grounded-theory approach. It implies that theory was built from the basis of raw data in a process of assemble, analysis, and interpretation of the data itself (Bell, 2005, Merriam, 1998, Patton, 2002). First, a detailed microanalysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was done by reading word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence, and paragraph-by-paragraph in the field notes and the artifacts, thanks to a process of triangulation. Repeated words or expressions were identified as they were considered relevant facts related to the critical thinking skills students had used. This initial step was taken based on the claim that “word or code frequencies can help researchers to determine the importance of words and ideas” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 510). Those codes were marked with different colors to identify repetitions. From this analysis some initial patterns emerged.

The next step was to do an “open coding” analysis, proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2008), as it was observed that participants repeatedly made evident the use of some critical thinking skills when they read and discussed urban legends. So, patterns were grouped according to different colors, as it is the main strategy in the open coding. After a deeper analysis, important pre-categories emerged as the data showed that most of the times the participants, for instance, were able to understand the plot of the story, to go beyond the literal content of the urban legends, to evaluate ethical aspects and humans’ behaviors, or to create new versions of urban legends, these being clear instances of critical thinking skills.

The data were finally displayed in a process of axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). At this point, final categories were stated as they represented the patterns and the pre-categories previously identi-

fied. For instance, the concept *evaluate*, which represented one of the most used critical thinking skills in the experience, was written in relation to what participants had mainly evaluated during the discussion of the urban legends. It was seen that although the students were able to evaluate, they evaluated in different ways, using different strategies, and evaluating different aspects as reported in the findings.

## Findings

The findings of this research study are presented in terms of three main categories that emerged along the data analysis. They answer the research question. Even though students used the basic critical thinking skills, *remember*, *understand*, and *apply*, during the pedagogical intervention, which are obviously necessary to develop more complex skills, the following analysis focuses on the complex ones, since they became salient findings in the data. These skills included *evaluate* and *create*.

### First category: Students used examples to evaluate human values

This category deals with the skill evaluate because students were able to make critical judgments about human values according to the characters and situations that appeared in the urban legends. Students also related them to examples of their own life. In Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) taxonomy, evaluate is in the second order of the pyramid of the highest critical thinking skills (see Graph 1). It embodies the ability to judge a situation, information or events based on one's knowledge about the world (Pineda, 2003; Facione, 2007). Thus, after reading the American urban legends, the students evaluated the characters' systems of values. So, they mainly used examples as a valid strategy to argue and express their ideas. Initially, they did not provide solid argumentation, but as they read more urban legends, they gradually developed more elaborated opinions. However, defending a point of view with the support of examples was a remarkable finding in this study as participants fostered the thinking skill evaluate.

In this sense, when students read "The Kidney Thieves" (see Table 1), they talked about the risks of trusting strangers, deception, and one's responsibility for detecting if a new person we meet can actually be reliable. This can be noticed in the following sample:

[...] the student also said that it is possible to know if a person is reliable because of his or her clothes and his or her age: "for his intentions and the form of the dress, age," they said that for example, talking with old people and kids in the street could be more reliable than talking with two men riding a motorcycle (Field notes. N° 2, March 8th, 2013)

"For his movements, for his form of dress, for age"<sup>5</sup> (Student artifacts. Student N° 2, March 8th, 2013)

The students were able to evaluate personal human values, in particular caution and the care of oneself, as important to trust or suspect of strangers. They said that they relied on physical appearance, age, and body movements to determine if a stranger had good or bad intentions. With these examples, they were able to give their personal opinions about safety measures. Therefore, they became aware that there are many dangerous people in the city and that they needed to learn about how to avoid any assault because they did not want to have a similar situation to the man in the story whose kidneys were removed.

Right after reading and discussing the second urban legend, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" (see Table 1), the students wrote more elaborated critical reflection in which they had to consider if they would give a free ride to an unknown person:

I [will] not pick up to a unknown person because he can be a criminal, I love my life. The criminal [could] do the paseo millonario." (Student artifacts. Student N° 1, March 15th, 2013).

5 Some of the data taken from the artifacts have grammar mistakes due to the fact that students were in the process of learning the language. Spanish sometimes interfered with learning the target language, English, like in this example. The data taken from artifacts are verbatim samples produced by students. Here the student tried to say that trusting a stranger can depend on his/her movements, his/her way of dressing, and his/her age.

I must be careful because strangers can to be assassins and take my money and *herirme*. My life vale mucho. Strangers are danger in this city (Student artifacts. Student N° 8, March 15th, 2013).

These samples show that the students evaluated the circumstances of risking one's life when one trusts strangers. Interestingly, one student made a critical comment by referring to the example of "el paseo millonario," a criminal activity that is very common in Bogotá city. This crime happens when a group of thieves kidnaps a person, forces him/her to get in a taxi, robs him or her, gets his/her debit cards to withdraw money from their saving accounts, sometimes rapes women, and some other times kills the victim. With that example, the students argued that they would be very careful with strangers because they "valued their own life and their family" (participants 8 and 15), implying that their family would suffer if they were in danger. Hence, they referred to the importance of values, namely trust and responsibility for one's integrity and the family's. Participant 18, for example, argued that one way "to respect and love the family is to take care of my life." Several participants pointed out that they should avoid causing the family pain and danger as a consequence of their "irresponsible decisions" when "going to discos with strangers," hitchhiking, or "drinking alcohol" without appropriate safety rules (Field notes, March 15th, 2013). In this occasion, they evaluated those values more critically and argumentatively. Data suggest that in this reflection students also used examples from real life as a main resource to express their reactions about whether trust or have doubts about strangers.

Students' evaluations of protecting their life from danger also happened when they read the story "The Fatal Hairdo" (see Table 1) and addressed the dangers of vanity and materialism. They found it dangerous that sometimes young people like the girl in the story, do odd beauty treatments to their bodies, or just follow fashion trends or unreliable advice from friends without thinking about the fatal consequences. One student said that the story encouraged her to think that "honest feeling, values, and the way

of being" are more important in a person than "the physical appearance." Another student added that "the form of think" (he meant the way of thinking, the intellect) was more important than the physical part. Another student expressed that a person is beautiful if he or she is natural, "not superficial," and that we should not worry about following vain fashion trends (Field notes, April 19th, 2013). Also, in the artifacts two students wrote:

"I learned that be neatness is important, does not care the fashion, but the way people think is important" (Student artifacts. N° 13, April 19th, 2013).

"Never is good to follow the fashion without thinking in the consequences, till the point of 'afectando' her health" (Student artifacts. N°2, April 29th, 2013).

In light of Facione's (2007) and Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)'s critical thinking skills, students were able to evaluate human values such as responsibility for our body care, our family, and our safety. They thought it was imperative to avoid getting influenced by shallow and superficial lifestyles easily found in the big cities. They addressed these issues as they related them to the characters in the stories. This important finding in the study relates to Perelman (1997) who claims that arguments are related to socially and psychologically determined situations based on individual experiences.

### **Second category: Students critiqued wrong human behaviors and risky-decision making**

This category closely linked to the previous one as human actions and behaviors highly depends on the system of values that each person adopts in life. However, this category focuses on describing students' ability to criticize mistaken behaviors and risky actions of human beings rather than just focusing on values. *Critiquing* is one of the categories that belongs to the category *evaluate* (see Graph 1), and it refers to the way people think critically by judging a situation based on external criteria and on providing well-supported arguments, as explained by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001).

Accordingly, data reveal that when students discussed urban legends they made critical judgments about the unsafe way in which people sometimes act. They not only critiqued the characters that appear in the urban legends, but also people from reality as they related the characters' wrong actions and risky-decisions making to similar actions and decisions that people do in real life. For instance, when students discussed "The Fatal Hairdo" (see Table 1), they talked about Jessica Cediél, a famous Colombian model. They said that she had a cosmetic plastic surgery, but unfortunately the surgical procedure caused her an infection (Field notes, April 12th, 2013). Another student said that it was crucial to be careful with the beauty procedures we do to be in fashion or look pretty/handsome; she said that she had listened to a story about a woman who used a permanent lipstick that eventually caused her cancer. Another student participated in the discussion by saying that she knew a lady who used to dye her hair frequently, but unfortunately the chemicals caused her cancer (Field notes, April 12th, 2013). Accordingly, the students not only talked directly about fashion and hairstyles as depicted in the urban legend "The Fatal Hairdo," but also recalled similar situations that they had heard about in order to criticize that some excesses with fashion and unsafe beauty cares could be fatal as in the story. Thus, they judged the fact that people sometimes do unhealthy and damaging beauty treatments, influenced by vanity and the physical beauty standards imposed by the media and by social pressure. Those comments reflect learners' ability to criticize those people who do not distinguish between being healthy and looking just attractive.

Likewise, when reading the urban legend "The Kidney Thieves" (See Table 1) the students critiqued the man's risky decision in the bar for having trusted a strange woman.

"He was in a party and he go with a woman to her apartment, she stolen his kidney, because he trust in a strange woman, we should no trust in strange people" (Student artifacts. N° 14, March 6th, 2013).

"The man trust in unknown people, we should not believe in strange people because it is a danger" (Student artifacts. N° 3, March 6th, 2013).

As can be seen, the students' criticized the man's irresponsible action for going out with a woman he had just met without verifying if she actually had good intentions with him. They became aware of the fact that meeting strangers at discos or bars bring harmful consequences for young people, mainly deception, robbery, physical injury, and even death. They mentioned that the man was naïve, and since he was already drunk, the attractive woman and the organ traffickers who were waiting for him outside took advantage of him:

"The man speaking with her is OK, but going with her to other place is dangerous. Is difficult know and trust in a strange person in the present" (Student artifacts. N° 8, March 8th, 2013).

The story also encouraged them to critique the man's incapacity to drink alcohol with moderation because after getting drunk, he easily accepted the invitation of a stranger. As a result of his actions, he was a victim of deception. In the same way, in class discussion, students referred to several cases of people they met or close friends being crime victims of scopolamine, a drug that has been embraced by thieves and rapists in Bogotá City (Field notes, March 8th, 2013). Basically, critiquing people's inaccurate behaviors became a major finding in the pedagogical intervention, and it shows that learners were able to develop critical thinking. One of the salient aspects in the data is that the participants were able to produce all this critical thinking in the foreign language, another major finding of this study. Despite the existing debates of the accuracy versus fluency levels in communicative language teaching for tasks involving critical thinking, it is a striking achievement that these learners who did not care too much about the English class and who were reluctant to speak in English before the experience, ended up constructing meaning and giving their personal opinions in the foreign language. This intervention has enabled learners to speak without fears and hesitation regardless of their grammar mis-

takes and slow speed of discourse, and has provided a motivating shift to continue working on their language correctness and fluency in future experiences and projects that they might get involved with.

### **Third category: Students planned on how to write urban legends and produce them**

This category refers to the students' ability to *plan* a writing task (to write a new urban legend) based on the previous reading of other urban legends, and to *produce* them on stage by acting them out in front of the class. As stated by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), the skills *planning* and *producing*, which are located at the top of the pyramid (see Graph 1) as two of the most complex cognitive processes, embody the ability to relate the new information gathered to previous knowledge, reorganize it, and produce something new, coherent, and functional. Thus, the students were not necessarily expected to create original stories or texts, but to modify the events in the urban legends they had read based on their knowledge and personal experience. The modifications included updated written versions and role-plays that students produced in class. These original variations verify the fact explained in the theoretical framework that urban legends could easily go from one person to another, having further adaptations because different readers and storytellers collectively construct them.

The following fragment evidences how students planned their writing process of the texts after they had read the urban legend "The Fatal Hairdo."

[...] In small groups, the students started to think about how to modify the story. I observed that they had various ideas to share so that they could make decisions to write the new version of the legend. In one group a student said that they could write about a woman who used to put lemon juice in her hair, and because of this some ants nested on her hair and bit her severely (Field notes, April 12th, 2013)

As can be observed, the students' first steps in the planning process were to discuss and brainstorm. Interestingly, they discussed, listened to each

other, and accepted various ideas to *create* new versions/imitations of the urban legends by taking into account their experiences and knowledge. These mental processes indicate that they actually used critical thinking abilities as seen in the following examples when they wrote a story, inspired by the events in "The Fatal Hairdo":

Paula loved fashion. One day she decided to go to a party with her friends. She wanted to be pretty for the party. She decide to make hairdo using "king soap"<sup>6</sup> to support her hair rigid, the next day she suspiacion (suspected) that her hair was falling, she started to brush her and she see that she was (becoming) bald. (Student artifacts. Student N° 10. April 12th, 2013)

Even though these urban legends were written with grammar mistakes in English, they demonstrate the participants' competence to recreate the original urban legends and to write new ones, inspired on the material they had read before. Learners wrote about people's excesses of vanity when being influenced by standards of beauty and physical appearance. Besides, they judged those situations from their own perspective, since they not only described the characters' wrong behaviors, but also included the fatal effects or the moral consequences convoluted in their written productions, a central feature of the original urban legends.

Even more, they not only planned on how to write stories, but they also role-played similar situations of danger and crime. It happened when they read "The Kidney Thieves," a story about human organs trafficking:

Most of the students wrote down the script they wanted to act out, they made decisions about what roles each member was going to assume. Later, the first group came in front of the class to act out the scene they had rehearsed: The situation was at a party. A girl was dancing with an unknown boy who suddenly invited her to go to another place. She asked him to wait a minute. She went to tell her friends about the stranger's invitation.

6 "King Soap": Here the students translated the words "jabón Rey," into English which is the name of a popular bar soap in Colombia.

One of them said: "Yes, go, he is good-looking." Another friend said: "No, don't go, it is dangerous." Finally, another friend said: "Take advantage of this opportunity." So the girl left the party with the boy she had just met. Later, in a street, the strange boy put a handkerchief on the girl's face and she fainted. Finally, the guy made a phone call and said: "I have the victim, come quickly." (Field notes, March 8th, 2013)

In this role-play the students recreated the content of the urban legend in a context more related to their own lives, a party. They demonstrated that they had a critical perspective about trusting strangers and the dangerous effects of following others' advice. They questioned critically that although we often ask close friends for good advice, they are not always the best advisers, pointing out that each individual must be careful when making personal decisions or decisions based on others' influence. Most importantly, this creative role-play indicates that learners were concerned about making their classmates aware of the fact that they, as young adolescents, are likely to be targets of social dangers, including deception, fraud, and crime in their neighborhoods and the city in general, and that they should be cautious even with their own friends. As it is possible to see, students *planned* and *produced* their versions of urban legends. They showed their ability to *create* stories in the foreign language by using their knowledge, experience, and creativity, and by assuming a critical position about those stories.

## Conclusions

Based on the findings, it is possible to make the following conclusions:

In regards to critical thinking, it was evident that in this EFL class the students were guided by question and problem solving tasks that required them to go beyond the literal meaning of the reading of the texts. They actually produced complex critical thinking skills, specifically *evaluate*, *critique*, *create*, *plan*, and *produce* with which they supported their opinions about the content discussed in class. As Paul and Elder (2007) mention, every person has

some thinking skills that must be trained and developed to raise the maximum critical level as possible.

This action research study shows that students were able to evaluate human values and behaviors as depicted in the stories by means of giving examples of crime and of situations of real life. The use of vivid examples as a strategy to express their critical position about the contents is a significant finding. Still, learners need to develop stronger arguments and more solid explanation rather than just giving examples. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that this study did not expect the students to become fair-minded critical thinkers right away in the target language. In fact, the pedagogical intervention showed that the development of critical thinking is a slow, gradual, and a never-ending process that demands time and effort (Paul, Elder & Bartell, 1997). Because of this, it is required that teachers promote students' critical thinking in EFL classrooms and in other school subject.

Instead of developing grammar-based classes, teachers should opt to teach the foreign language by designing tasks that enhance critical discussions and reflective position regarding topics that are closely related to students' interests and realities such as the ones presented in urban legends. This can be possible by encouraging students to use the language as a means to construct meaning, rather than learning grammar structures in isolation.

Urban legends were useful and interesting authentic material that encouraged learners to take part in the critical discussions of topics concerning their own lives and interests, particularly fashion risks, unsafe beauty treatments, and crime victims. Equally, students addressed human values and became aware of the morals that these stories brought to guide their present and future lives. As a popular literary expression created for young generations, urban legends can become an appealing and motivating material in EFL education as observed in this study. One of the main achievements is that learners were able to negotiate meaning and use the English language as a vehicle to communicate their thinking in the EFL classroom, despite the several mistakes they made.

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## Appendix 1: Worksheets “The Kidney Thieves”

### COLEGIO EL CORTUJO – VIANEY WORKSHOP N° 1

TEACHER: *Mariela Leal Hernández*

OBJECTIVE: To identify and talk about dangerous situations in the city.



ENGLISH READING ACTIVITY  
ELEVENTH GRADE 11<sup>th</sup>

#### BEFORE READING



- > Watch a video-clip : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfLx3pJi7QQ>
- > Predict what is going to happen at the end of the video.
- > Give your opinion: Do you trust unknown people?  
Do you usually talk to strangers?

Let's read the story now!



#### URBAN LEGEND 1: *The Kidney\* Thieves\* (Austin)*

##### **"Reason to not party anymore"**

This guy went out last Saturday night to a party. He was having a good time, had a couple of beers and some girl seemed to like him and invited him to go to another party. He quickly agreed and decided to go along with her. She took him to a party in some apartment and they continued to drink, and even got involved with some other drugs (unknown which).

The next thing he knew, he woke up completely naked in a bathtub\* filled with ice. He was still feeling the effects of the drugs, but looked around to see he was alone. He looked down at his chest, which had "CALL 911 OR YOU WILL DIE" written on it in lipstick.

He saw a phone next to the tub, so he picked it up and dialed. He explained to the EMS operator what the situation was and that he didn't know where he was, what he took, or why he was really calling.

She advised him to get out of the tub. He did, and she asked him to look himself over in the mirror. He did, and appeared normal, so she told him to check his back. He did, only to find two 9 inch slits on his lower back. She told him to get back in the tub immediately, and they sent a rescue team over. Apparently, after being examined, he found out more of what had happened. His kidneys were stolen. They are worth 10,000 dollars each on the black market.



Taken from: <http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/bk/kidney.htm>

\*Kidney:



\*Thief / thieves:



\*bathtub:



**DISCUSSION**



**1. Discuss in groups:**

a. What happened to the guy of the story? Why?

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b. What was the main mistake the guy made?

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c. What would you do in a similar situation? Why?

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d. What are possible risks of going out with strange people? Explain

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e. How can you know if a strange person is reliable?

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f. What is the message of the story?

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g. Has a similar situation happened in Bogotá? Tell us about it.

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**2. Share your answers with the whole group.**

**3. Role play:** Act out one of the situations proposed by your teacher.