

# A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH FOR READING CRITICALLY IN ENGLISH

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the collaborative process established by an in-service and a pre-service teacher within a continuing education program developed at a public school in the city of Santa Maria, RS. The results show that the teachers engaged themselves in the collaborative teaching practice and successfully oriented the students in the development of the proposed activities. In this sense, the teaching of English based on critical approaches can broaden the students' engagement into social practices, contributing to their development as citizens (SCHLATTER, 2009).

**Keywords:** collaborative research, critical reading, English teaching.

## Introduction

This investigation is part of the umbrella project called *Representações Sociais no Contexto Escolar* (TICKS *et al.*, 2013). The umbrella project was developed in a public school (henceforth called NELL) located in the suburb of the city of Santa Maria, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The project aimed at constructing a continuing education program that intended to improve the qualification of the teachers that worked at NELL, providing them a space for critical thinking about their practices, and developing a collaborative way of acting in that context. Dialogically, this investigation can also be seen as a learning process for the researchers from the project, in terms of problematizing and improving the development of collaborative processes within public schools' contexts.

More specifically, one of the first actions developed by the project was to raise discussions about learning theories, namely, behaviorism, constructivism and sociocultural theories. In addition, in order to establish a relation between theory and

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practice, a workshop on Critical Reading was developed to help with the production of pedagogical activities by the teachers at NELL school.

The development of the workshop on Critical Reading took into account the premise that “teachers should prepare their students for life”. This premise was highlighted by the teachers during the theoretical discussions about learning theories. Thus, we believe that it is through the construction of reflective thinking in classroom that the participants have an opportunity to develop a critical view concerning the social practices they are surrounded with, leading to the constitution of citizenship (FREIRE, 2001).

During the workshop, the teachers, from different disciplines, designed their own pedagogical materials based on the concept of Critical Reading. For this paper, we focus on the English activities produced within the workshop, which were ultimately used with a 6<sup>th</sup> grade class at NELL during the development of this particular research investigation.

In this way, this investigation focuses on describing and explaining the interactions established between the English teacher at NELL and a member of our research group, a pre-service teacher from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), in the development of the pedagogical material designed, collaboratively, by both of them. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to evaluate to what extent the teachers managed to put into practice the concept of Critical Reading, which guided the construction of the pedagogical activities.

### **Collaborative Research**

The continuing education has received increasing attention in the last years due to teachers’ need of updating (MELLO; DUTRA, 2011). Concerning this need, Magalhães (2002, p. 39) states that it is necessary to have a continuing education based on the context of knowledge construction that allows participants of an investigation to be constantly searching, reflecting and being critical with their own practices and beliefs.

Regarding this current panorama, the project *Representações Sociais no Contexto Escolar* aimed at developing a continuing education program based on collaborative practices. These collaborative practices intended to construct new ways for teachers to construct knowledge with their students, by becoming researchers of their own practice. Moreover, the participation of an outside researcher, who would work together to negotiate issues put into debate, in order to problematize their own practices (MAGALHÃES, 2002, p. 52), the participant's and also the researcher's practices.

In other words, a collaborative process, in order to achieve its goals, needs to be meaningful for both participants (NININ, 2006, p. 21). A collaborative activity exists when, consciously, the people involved in its realization find a motive that impels them towards the object and the result of the activity. In summary, a collaborative research comes to raise changes in the education panorama as it focuses on the process of reflection and not uniquely on the results (MAGALHÃES; FIDALGO, 2008, p. 109).

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Fairclough (2003, p. 124) sees discourse as “ways of representing aspects of the world – the process, relations and structures of the material world, the ‘mental’ world of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world”. Through discourse people build different perspectives of the world, according to their position in the world, their social and personal identities, and their social relationships (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003). That is, “discourse is rather a social practice than a purely individual activity” (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992, p. 63).

A social practice is understood “as articulations of different types of social elements which are associated with particular areas of social life” (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003, p. 25), in our case, the social practice of teaching in a public school in the city of Santa Maria/RS. This social practice, as well as all others, articulates particular ways of using discourse with the social relations of the classroom. That is, in a classroom, language is constructed through the interaction among students and teacher, within their

specific context. In this sense, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) helps to construct a particular perspective on the social world by denaturalizing common sense assumptions through the implementation and development of critical educational processes (FAIRCLOGH, 1989, p. 17).

Fairclough (1992, p. 11) also argues that CDA has three dimensions: *description* of the text; *interpretation* of the interaction processes, and their relationship to the text; and *explanation* on how the interaction process relates to the social action. Therefore, CDA can be related to collaborative research as it comes as a social change in contemporary society by raising awareness that may transform the context researched.

Furthermore, we can relate CDA to the approach of Critical Reading, as this approach is based on the premise that reading constitutes a social practice because it is through the development of this competence that readers can take the first step to transform their contexts (HEBERLE, 2000, p. 119).

### **Critical Reading Approach**

According to Paulo Freire (1988), reading is not only decoding a text, but it also includes the perceptions about the relations between text and context, because language and reality are dynamically tied together. In this sense, reading critically means to learn how to search for clues in a text leading to the perception of the existing dialectical relation between social practices and language (MEURER, 2000).

Taking into account reading as a social process, the Critical Reading teaching approach can connect the reader's individual experiences to its social ones (WALLACE, 1992, p. 39). In this perspective, in order to foster critical readers, teachers should encourage, in their students, abilities that allow them to "see" texts as a whole (MOTTA-ROTH, 1998, p. 26). By taking this approach to school environments, researchers (WALLACE, 1992, 2003; MOTTA-ROTH, 1998, 2008a) have argued about a class plan that considers three distinct moves: pre-reading, reading and post-reading. According to these authors, the pre-reading moment is characterized by activities that lead students to activate and promote their background knowledge

(SINGHAL, 2006; MOTTA-ROTH, 2008a), or existing schematic knowledge (WALLACE, 1992) in order to make predictions about the text analyzed.

The reading move involves activities of skimming and scanning. Skimming is a strategy of reading peripherally (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008a), that is, to look quickly at the text with the purpose of grasping the general idea of it. On the other hand, in scanning activities, the reader searches for specific information in the text, such as dates, names, etc. In the reading move, the student is also motivated to identify keywords in the text, to recognize meaning produced by different lexico-grammatical elements, to establish a semantic map of the text and to recognize functional and structural stages of the genre (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008a).

At last, the post-reading move is when the reader engages into evaluative discussion (SINGHAL, 2006), gives its opinion about the text (ARNT, 2012) and also analyzes the text in relation to its conditions of production and consumption (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008a).

Taking into account the Critical Reading approach, we can see the importance of teaching reading at schools, due to the fact that it gives space for students to position themselves in class. In addition, to notice how they can foster their comprehension about the place that they occupy in their society (BRASIL, 2006).

### **Context of investigation and participants**

The school where the project *Representações Sociais no Contexto Escolar* was developed is located in the suburbs of Santa Maria city. The school has a group of almost 1.800 students distributed in 56 classes in three different shifts. The school staff has 120 professionals, among teachers, supervisors, coordinators, etc. The participants of this investigation are<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> All the names are fictitious.

1) The pre-service teacher: Helena is an undergraduate student of English Language and Literature attending the 8<sup>th</sup> semester, and also a research-participant of the project. In the analysis, we will also refer to her as PT (pre-service teacher).

2) The in-service teacher: Regina has a Major in English and Portuguese, and also a Post-graduation in Linguistics. She teaches Portuguese at another public school in Santa Maria. In total, she has 20 hours of English classes, which are distributed in approximately 9 different classes in the school we developed the project. In the analysis, we will refer to Regina also as IT (in-service teacher).

3) The students: All of them are 6<sup>th</sup> graders. They are around 10 and 12 years old, with some exceptions. The students generally live in the school area and belong to low income families. In the analysis, we will refer to the students as S1, S2, S3, and so on.

### **Procedures of investigation and data collection**

The teachers, Regina and Helena, have designed together an English class plan for students of a 6<sup>th</sup> grade class at NELL school. Afterwards, the teachers went to the classroom in order to put this pedagogical material into practice and also to notice the development of the activities with the students. Thus, the *corpus* of this work is comprised by the transcriptions of three video recordings from three classes developed with the 6<sup>th</sup> graders and taught by Regina and Helena. The topics and the genres approached in each class are described in Table 1.

Table 1 – Topics, genres and dates of the classes

<i>Classes developed</i>	<i>Main topics</i>	<i>Genres</i>
Class 1	Friendship	Comics
Class 2	Solidarity	Video clip and song lyrics
Class 3	Solidarity	Video clip and song lyrics

## Categories of analysis

We analyzed how the teachers developed their pedagogical material and put it into practice concerning the concept of Critical Reading, once this perspective pervaded the production of the activities at NELL. It is important to mention that all the pedagogical materials designed by the two teachers were developed within the three classes (Table 1), except for the closing activity: the production of a comic strip by the students. This closing activity began to be developed in the last class, but the students finished it in the following one, in which the pre-service teacher was not present.

The categories of analysis are related to the three moments of a reading class and their steps in each moment. These categories highlight what steps of the pedagogical material were and were not developed in class with the students.

Table 2 – Categories of analysis

<i>Moves of a reading class</i>	<i>Categories of analysis: Steps throughout a reading class</i>
Pre-reading	1.1 Background knowledge promotion 1.2 Genre Structure analysis 1.3 Non-verbal text assessment
Reading	2.1 Key-words identification 2.2 Recognition of meaning produced by different lexico-grammatical elements 2.3 Recognition of functional and structural stages
Post-reading	3.1 Relation between the text and students' lives 3.2 Student's text production about the topic discussed

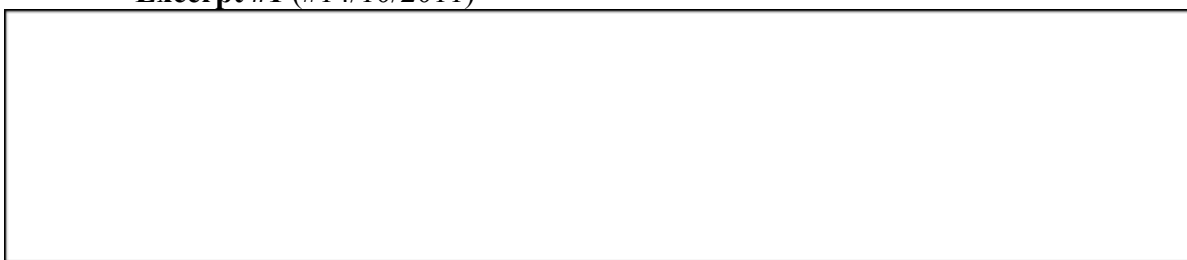
## Critical Reading approach and the pedagogical material developed in class

In the first moment of the reading class, the Pre-Reading, we can identify three distinct steps. In Except #1, the step *Background knowledge promotion* (category 1.1) is being constructed with the students. Motta-Roth (2008a, p. 251) argues that this

pre-reading moment is when the readers are ‘activating’ their mental schemata by means of their personal experiences in order to develop their abilities of foreseeing a topic of a text. Thus, this moment is also called before reading, in which the students’ previous knowledge is brought to consciousness.

In Excerpt #1, Regina is introducing the class about the genres video clip and the song lyrics. Then, she asks the students if they are used to listen to songs in English and if they try to understand what is being sang in this language. Hence, these questions help the students to scan their background knowledge for relevant information that may help them understand the text.

#### **Excerpt #1 (#14/10/2011)**



In Excerpt #2, the step *Genre Structure analysis* (category 1.2) is being promoted in class. In this activity, the students were already more acquainted with the comics, which made them more aware for skimming the text structure, specifically for illustrations and other visual presentations that could reveal clues about the text.

#### **Excerpt #2 (#10/10/2011)**

IT: Então hoje, ó pessoal, hoje nós vamos trabalhar com uma história em quadrinhos diferente. Talvez os personagens vocês não conheçam [...] Vocês vão conhecer novos personagens, que não é comum em revistinhas por aí.

PT: E o quê que teria em uma história em quadrinhos? Hein pessoal, o quê que vocês acham que tem em uma história em quadrinhos? Tem imagem, que mais que tem?

Students: fala [...] personagens [...]

PT: Onde que ficam essas falas?

Students: nos balõezinhos.

PT: E esses balõezinhos são todos iguais?

Many Students: Não!

S1: Tem um balão do pensamento [...]

Students: do cochicho [...] do choro [...] do sonho [...] quando ele tá pensando [...]



In Excerpt #2, Regina introduces the activity, and Helena asks the students about the characteristics of the genre comics, “E o que teria em uma história em quadrinho?” (PT). Then, by analyzing the text, the students were able to point out some characteristics that a comic story presents, such as characters and speech balloons. Moreover, they could identify different speech balloons in the genre, “do cochicho, do choro, do sonho [...]”. Therefore, we noticed that this previous analysis of the visual structure of the text is of a great importance when reading in a foreign language due to the fact that these intertextual characteristics can give support for teachers and students, making the ‘entrance’ in the text easier and determining the reading strategies to be privileged (MOTTA-ROTH, 1998, p. 12).

Excerpt #3 is an example of the step *Non-verbal text assessment* (category 1.3). In this activity, the students first saw the video clip of the song *Pray*, by Justin Bieber, and then they were asked to relate the images with the possible content of the song. The video clip conveyed images of war, natural disasters, as well as people living in disadvantage conditions, with no home, no food etc.

### Excerpt #3 (#14/10/2011)

PT: Que será que essa música dele tá falando? Já tinham ouvido antes?

Students: Não.

PT: Conheciam essa música do Justin?

S1: Já.

PT: Que vocês acham, pelas imagens, que que tá falando?

S2: Pobreza, fome.

PT: Pobreza, fome.

S3: Lixo.

PT: Lixo.

S4: Dificuldades.

PT: Por que dificuldades? O que mostra ali que te fez pensar em dificuldades?

Students: que ele tá doente [...] não tinha onde morar [...]

IT: Ela está entregando as tirinhas dos desenhinhos da aula passada. [...] Ah, tu pesquisou? Que legal! [...]

Gente, a pergunta é “Vocês costumam ouvir música em inglês?”.

Students: Sim!

IT: E vocês procuram entender o que eles estão falando ou não?

Students: Sim!

IT: Ah, que legal! E qual é o tipo de música? Qual o tipo de música que vocês mais gostam?

Students: Justin Bieber! [...] Rock [...]

According to Motta-Roth (2008a, p. 251), we can firstly explore the non-verbal text because, for our senses, it is the most explicit visual part of the text. Concerning the impact that the visual text produces to our senses, Regina and Helena decided first to play the whole video for the students, analyzing afterwards the images with them. By

analyzing the images in the video, the students were able to predict the topic of the text, “Dificuldades” (S4).

In the second move of the reading class, the Reading itself, we could identify two steps throughout the development of the activities. The *Key-words identification* step (category 2.1) can be related to the strategy of scanning, in which the reader analyzes the text in the sentence level, focusing on the lexico-grammatical choices in its discursive dimension (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008a, p. 257). For example, in Excerpt #4, the students should analyze the title of the comics *Tropeçando em uma nova língua* in order to notice what the title could suggest in relation to the content of the text.

#### Excerpt #4 (#10/10/2011)

S1: “O que o título da história sugere? E o que você entende por “língua”?”  
PT: O quê que vocês acham? O quê que esse título sugere? O quê que o título vai nos dizer?  
S2: Que ele vai aprender uma nova língua e não vai conseguir aprender direito.  
PT: Isso [...] Que língua essa? É essa língua aqui que a gente pega?  
Students: Não!  
PT: Que língua que é então?  
Students: Inglês!

By analyzing the word *língua* and relating it to the context of the comics, the students were able to understand that the author of the comics chose the word *língua* not as a part of the human body, but as the English language that the character from the comic, Ptix, was trying to learn in class.

Excerpt #5 brings another step of the second move of the reading class, the *Recognition of meaning produced by different lexico-grammatical elements* (category 2.2). In this example, the students are relating the image of a ruined house from the video clip to some extracts of the lyrics. Then, they affirm that the correct sentence to that image should be “letra D”, due to the fact that they could relate the image to the word “home”, and further to its correspondent in Portuguese, “casa”. They also point out that “people” is the same as “pessoas” and the auxiliary “don’t” refers to a negative sentence.

### Excerpt #5 (#14/10/2011)

PT: A casa destruída [...] E quais dessas frases podia colocar para a casa destruída?  
Students: É a D! [...] A letra D!  
PT: E por que vocês acham que é a D?  
Students: Porque tem home [...] Porque tem casa [...]  
PT: Isso, tem "home". Muito bem! Diz lá ó "some people don't have a home", o que quer dizer isso, olhando para essa casa destruída? O que é "people"?  
IT: Hein, gente, o que quer dizer "some people"?  
PT: vocês sabem que home é casa e a casa parece destruída.  
S1: Pessoas?  
Students: Pessoas!  
IT: Don't?  
S2: "Don't" é não.

According to Motta-Roth (1998, p. 16), the reader should interact with the words and sentences, constructing a coherent representation of the ideas and propositions in the text. Therefore, we can notice that the students could disclose meaning from different lexico-grammatical elements presented in the sentence in order to make it understandable for them.

In the third and last move of the reading class, the Post-Reading, we could also identify two steps throughout the development of the activities. The *Relation between the text and students' lives* (category 3.1) step is concerned with the reflection about the social and historical human condition that recontextualizes texts (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008b), that is, in this step, students are invited to relate their own lives to the content of the text. In Excerpt #6, after analyzing how the character Ptix was assisted by his language neuron cells in order to understand English language, the students were asked about their own ways to ask for assistance when having problems with English.

### Excerpt #6 (#10/10/2011)

IT: [...] Então aqui ó, “De que forma você procura ajuda para compreender melhor esta língua? Você recorre aos seus amigos, família, professores, livros para aprimorar seu conhecimento?”.

S1: Aos cadernos e a professora.

IT: E por quê? E em casa, se vocês estão estudando em casa e vocês tem alguma dúvida, tem alguém que ajuda?

Students: Sim! Não! [...]

IT: Tem irmão? Tem alguns que já tem irmão.

S2: Ô sora, eu tenho um livro de inglês lá da 7ª série.

IT: Tem livros, tem alguns que tem dicionário né.

S3: Sôra, a Natália diz que vai no tradutor no computador.

IT: Tem gente que vai no tradutor, no Google que eu sei. [...] Vamos lá pessoal, alguém mais quer falar? De que forma vocês aprendem inglês quando tão com dificuldade? Hein?

S4: Estudando.

IT: Jogando, aprende inglês jogando também.

In the students’ answers, we can notice that some of them seek for help by studying other books, they use Google translator, and also count on family assistance.

Excerpt #7 is an example of the step *Student’s text production about the topic discussed* (category 3.2). According to Cope and Kalantzis (1993, p. 11), in this final move, students can write their own reports, that is, they can construct their own exemplar of the genre being analyzed. Thus, in the post-reading activity of our class, the students were asked to produce an exemplar of the genre comics. Their production should be based on the themes proposed in the pedagogical material, friendship and solidarity.

### Excerpt #7 (#17/10/2011)

IT: Assim gente, nós temos que fazer o que nós programamos, senão a gente não vai terminar nunca essa atividade. Qual é a próxima atividade depois do número 10? Produzindo, em duplas, esse trabalhinho já vai valer nota. Vocês vão criar uma história em quadrinhos em inglês que tenha como temas amizade, solidariedade, esse tema da música. É o tema da história em quadrinhos que nós vimos, tá? Vocês podem se organizar em duplas. Vocês já fizeram uma história em quadrinhos este ano né? Então vocês vão observar os balões, não precisa ser um vocabulário muito rebuscado e nós estamos aqui para orientar. Vocês vão iniciar na aula, se puder terminar em casa. Quem trouxe dicionário? (alunos organizam-se em duplas e iniciam atividade, logo o sinal bate).

As already mentioned in the *Methodology* section, this activity was developed in the following classes, in which only Regina was present. With the aim of illustrating how this production was performed in class, we attached one exemplar of a comics produced by the students (Figure 1). These comics were sent to the pre-service teacher by Regina after the class.

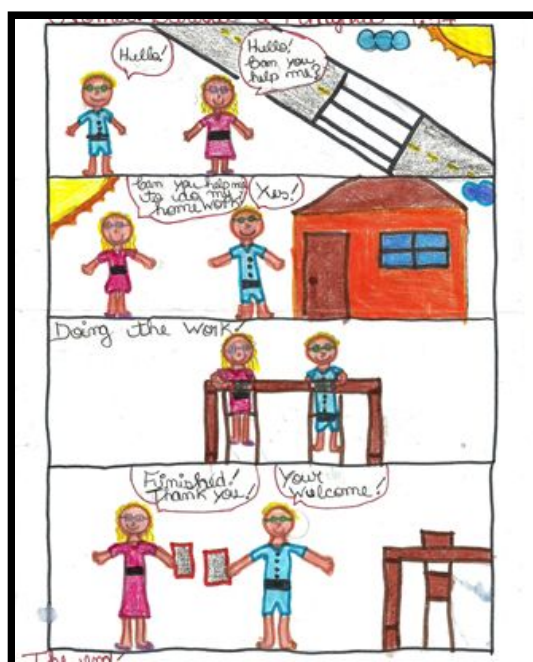


Figure 1 – Example of a student's production on the genre comics

To conclude, the three moves (pre-reading, reading and post-reading) could be identified in this analysis of the reading class enacted by Regina and Helena. However, it is important to point out that the steps of each move were also encompassed throughout the pedagogical material, except for the *Recognition of functional and structural stages step* (category 2.3, in the reading move. We believe that the teachers could not achieve this step because, in their activities, they did not ask the students to analyze the rhetorical organization of the text. They focused on the relation between verbal and non-verbal text, by raising questions on how the text was visually organized, for example. Thus, they may have lacked activities that could lead to an analysis of the text's macrostructure, and to achieve this, they should have explored more than one

comics in order to highlight the textual recurrence within this genre. This kind of activity could have been explored in the following classes.

Despite the fact that the teachers did not achieve this specifically step, the students were able to produce their own exemplar of the genre comics (Figure 1). We believe this production could be done because of the students' familiarity with the visual structure of the text and also, due to their background knowledge on how to tell a story, that is, how to write a narrative.

### **Final considerations and implications of this investigation**

This research had as main objective to evaluate to what extent the pre and the in-service teachers manage to put into practice the concept of Critical Reading used by them to prepare the pedagogical activities. To develop this part of the analysis we took into account that, currently, there is a concern in the language teaching field to promote students' engagement in literacy practices, in order to foster their reflective abilities and help them to become collaborative in social practices (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008; SCHLATTER, 2009).

We could notice that the teachers succeeded in guiding the students through the three moments (pre-reading, reading and post-reading) as well as through the steps in the critical reading classes. Only one step could not be developed with the students. In other words, the teachers did not focus on the rhetorical organization of the genre comics because they only worked with the comics text once, and in order to identify and explore the recurrences of the text macrostructure within this genre, they had to analyze other samples of it. Despite that, the students manage to construct their own sample because of their familiarity with the visual structure of the comics and also, due to their previous knowledge on how to write a narrative.

Concerning how Regina and Helena manage to put into practice the concept of Critical Reading, we believe that the development of their critical reading activities could provide students' active and reflective involvement (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008) towards the texts analyzed. Accordingly, through critical reading and teacher's

mediation, the teaching of a foreign language can broaden the participation of the student in social practices in their language and culture, contributing to their development as citizens (SCHLATTER, 2009).

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# UMA ABORDAGEM COLABORATIVA PARA LER CRITICAMENTE EM INGLÊS

## RESUMO

O artigo discute o processo colaborativo desenvolvido entre professoras de inglês em serviço e em pré-serviço durante um programa de formação continuada em uma escola pública da cidade de Santa Maria, RS. Os resultados indicam que as participantes se engajaram na prática colaborativa de ensino e realizaram e orientaram, com êxito, as atividades propostas aos alunos. Dessa maneira, acredita-se que o ensino da língua inglesa a partir de uma abordagem crítica, pode ampliar a participação do aluno nas práticas sociais em sua língua e em sua cultura, contribuindo para o seu desenvolvimento como cidadão (SCHLATTER, 2009).

**Palavras-chave:** leitura crítica, pesquisa colaborativa, ensino de Inglês.

Recebido em 26/06/2017

Aprovado em 30/08/2017