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Education, language and society: interfaces for critical formation in the 21st century

Abstract

Education, language, and society are interconnected fields that shape human development and social relations. This article aims to analyze how educational practices, mediated by language, contribute to the construction of identities, critical thinking, and social participation. The study adopts qualitative bibliographic methodology, based on interdisciplinary research from Education, Sociology, and Applied Linguistics. The results highlight three dimensions: (i) language as a structuring element of social relations, (ii) education as a space for inclusion and democratization of knowledge, and (iii) the challenges posed by contemporary contexts marked by inequalities, digital platforms, and new forms of literacy. It is concluded that the articulation between education, language, and society demands pedagogical strategies that foster autonomy, dialogue, and citizenship.

Keywords: education, language, society, critical thinking, citizenship

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Introduction

Education, language, and society are historically and conceptually interwoven. Education cannot be understood as a mere act of transmitting content; it is a social practice that enables subjects to access, interpret, and transform reality. Language, in turn, is not only an instrument of communication but also a symbolic system that structures social relations, legitimates knowledge, and mediates the construction of identities.[1]

From a sociological perspective, authors such as Basil Bernstein[2] emphasize that linguistic codes operate as mechanisms of social inclusion or exclusion, determining the way in which groups access cultural and educational capital. In this sense, schools play a dual role: they can either reinforce inequalities through the imposition of hegemonic discourses or promote democratization by valuing linguistic and cultural diversity.

Paulo Freire[3] situates education in a critical and emancipatory framework, where dialogue is the essence of pedagogical practice. For him, language is the medium through which subjects read the world, interpret their experiences, and project transformative actions. Education, therefore, is inseparable from society, because it reflects the contradictions, tensions, and possibilities of the historical moment in which it takes place.

In contemporary times, digital platforms and new literacies reconfigure the relations between education, language, and society.[4] On the one hand, technologies open opportunities for collaborative learning and global interaction; on the other, they impose challenges related to data control, information overload, and the commodification of educational processes.

This article seeks to analyze the articulation between education, language, and society, highlighting their theoretical intersections, empirical implications, and challenges for the construction of critical and participatory citizenship.

Methodology

This research is qualitative and bibliographic in nature. It consists of the analysis of scientific works in the fields of Education, Sociology, and Linguistics, with emphasis on authors such as Paulo Freire, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Basil Bernstein. Institutional reports and contemporary studies on digital literacies and inclusive education were also consulted. The sources were selected based on their relevance to the theme and on the contribution to the reflection on the interfaces between education, language, and society. The analytical procedure involved categorization of themes, comparative reading, and synthesis of findings, with the objective of identifying convergences and tensions in the selected literature.

Results

The bibliographic analysis revealed three main dimensions:

1) Language as a structuring element of social relations: Language functions as a symbolic system that shapes identities and mediates social interactions. In educational contexts, linguistic practices can reinforce power relations (by privileging standard varieties and excluding others) or, alternatively, foster inclusion by recognizing plurality.

2) Education as a space for inclusion and democratization of knowledge: Critical pedagogical approaches highlight that education can break cycles of exclusion by ensuring access to knowledge and promoting social justice. Dialogue and recognition of diversity appear as central strategies for inclusive education.

3) Challenges in contemporary society: digital platforms and new literacies: Digital platforms create new possibilities for access to knowledge but also pose risks, such as dependence on private corporations, surveillance, and the standardization of educational practices. Critical digital literacies emerge as essential for enabling students to act consciously in this environment.

Discussion

The results indicate that the articulation between education, language, and society is complex and multidimensional. Language is not merely a communication tool but a determinant of access, participation, and identity construction. When schools ignore linguistic diversity, they contribute to the reproduction of inequalities; when they embrace it, they strengthen democracy and social justice. This perspective is aligned with Bakhtin's[1] notion of language as a dialogical and polyphonic space, in which meanings are constantly negotiated and re-signified within social interactions. In addition, Gee[5] argues that discourses shape not only communication but also

ways of being in the world, which makes language a central element in processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The emancipatory potential of education depends on pedagogical strategies capable of overcoming traditional trans missive models. Paulo Freire[3] highlights the importance of dialogue as an ontological condition of the human being and as a pedagogical principle that empowers students to critically read the world. Thus, the development of autonomy and critical thinking cannot be detached from the recognition of students' linguistic repertoires and life experiences, which serve as starting points for educational practice. In the same line, Giroux[6] emphasizes the role of critical pedagogy in resisting neoliberal trends that reduce education to mere preparation for the labor market, reaffirming its role in the construction of democratic citizenship.

From a sociological lens, Bernstein[2] demonstrates how linguistic codes structure power relations in school contexts. Restricted or elaborated codes determine the degree of access to cultural and educational capital, thereby reinforcing or reducing social inequalities. The findings of this study confirm Bernstein's claim by showing that linguistic diversity, when devalued, intensifies exclusion; when recognized, it becomes a powerful tool for social inclusion and democratization of knowledge. Complementarily, Bourdieu[7] points out that language embodies symbolic power, legitimating certain forms of expression while marginalizing others, which makes the recognition of multiple voices in education a political act. This perspective highlights that schools are not neutral institutions; rather, they operate as spaces where struggles for legitimacy and authority of discourses take place. By privileging the so-called "legitimate language" – often associated with dominant social classes – schools reinforce symbolic hierarchies that exclude students whose linguistic practices diverge from standardized norms. Consequently, linguistic capital becomes a mechanism of reproduction of inequalities, since mastery of the dominant codes opens doors to academic and professional opportunities, while other forms of expression are devalued or silenced. Recognizing and legitimizing diverse linguistic practices in education, therefore, is not only a pedagogical choice but also an ethical and political stance, as it challenges structures of domination and affirms the right to difference as a condition for genuine democratic participation.

In contemporary contexts, digital platforms represent both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, they expand access to content and global dialogue, contributing to new forms of learning and interaction. On the other hand, as Srnicek[4] argues, platform capitalism reconfigures education under logics of commodification and data extraction, subjecting teachers and students to mechanisms of surveillance and control. Selwyn[8] also warns that educational technologies are not neutral but embedded in ideological and economic interests that may deepen inequalities rather than overcome them. This duality requires the development of critical literacies[9] that enable subjects to navigate these environments consciously, resisting the reduction of education to market logic and affirming its role as a public good.

Therefore, the articulation between education, language, and society demands not only pedagogical innovation but also theoretical and political awareness. By integrating Bakhtin's dialogism, Freire's critical pedagogy, Bernstein's analysis of linguistic codes, Srnicek's critique of digital platforms, and complementary contributions such as Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, Giroux's critical pedagogy, and Selwyn's critique of educational technology, it becomes evident that education must simultaneously foster inclusion, critical consciousness, and resistance to processes of exclusion and commodification.

Conclusion

The relationship between education, language, and society reveals itself as a dynamic and complex field, essential for understanding the challenges of contemporary times. The results discussed in this study reinforce that language is not only a means of communication but also a structuring element of social interactions, a space of power, and a key mediator for the democratization of knowledge. When linguistic plurality is recognized and valued within educational contexts, the possibility of constructing more inclusive, democratic, and socially just environments is expanded.

Education, in this sense, transcends its instrumental role of knowledge transmission and becomes a critical and transformative practice. The pedagogical approaches grounded in dialogue and participation enable the development of autonomy, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. The Freirean perspective shows that it is not enough to 'teach contents'; it is necessary to foster an educational practice that allows students to read and reinterpret their social world, contributing to its transformation.

At the same time, the growing presence of digital platforms poses new challenges and opportunities. On one hand, these tools broaden access to information and facilitate new literacies; on the other, they expose education to risks such as surveillance, data commodification, and the standardization of teaching practices. The tension between democratization and control highlights the need for critical digital literacies as a central element of education in the 21st century.

Therefore, it is concluded that the articulation between education, language, and society requires strategies that go beyond technical adjustments and point toward ethical and political commitments. Teachers, researchers, and policymakers must work together to promote inclusive, dialogical, and critical educational practices, capable of empowering individuals as autonomous and participatory subjects. The future of education depends on the ability to balance tradition and innovation, valuing diversity and ensuring that language, in all its forms, is a bridge to citizenship and not a barrier to social participation.

Acknowledgments

Conflits of interest

There is no conflicts of interest.

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