Chapter

Building Historical Narratives about Controversial Issues on Twitter: An Analysis of Digital Literacy Levels in Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This research analyses the literacy levels of a group of Spanish secondary school history students (*n* = 42) in digital environments (Twitter), with the aim of providing educational clues about the ways in which social discourses are constructed on controversial issues, in particular those generated by the Spanish Civil War. From a qualitative research approach, the most recurrent digital narrative data has been emptied and analyzed, based on three a priori categories of social analysis: gender, historical empathy and social conscience. The results report the predominance of cognitive/inferential literacy skills and, consequently, the need to incorporate new scenarios for teaching-learning history from the theoretical principles of critical pedagogy and education for active, critical and committed citizenship with social participation.

Keywords: historical education, historical accounts, controversial issues, digital literacy, Twitter

1. Introduction

Most school textbooks continue to conform to the traditional narrative provided by positivist historiography [1]. This adjustment is especially evident in the didactic treatment of controversial contents, whose stories continue to reproduce the narrative logic of a political-military discourse contrary to the purpose of education for critical citizenship and, therefore, to the development of critical literacy skills on socially alive historical issues.

Levels of literacy are conditioned by factors such as context, the individual's previous experience, language, pre-determined linguistic resources, text gender and subject matter. According to Cassany [2], reading is a transitive verb and there is no neutral or abstract reading activity, but multiple, versatile and dynamic ways of approaching understanding of each discursive genre, in each discipline of knowledge and in each human community. In this line, Ortega-Sánchez, Ibáñez and Sanz de la Cal [3], and Ortega-Sánchez, Sanz de Cal and Ibáñez [4] distinguish three levels of literacy according to the skills, abilities or competences to understand any

type of text: *literal literacy* (reading the lines): This is a reading practice in which the person is able to recover the semantic value of words and the relationships they establish within the grammatical structure; *cognitive or inferential literacy* (reading between the lines): In this reading practice, the cognitive skills of the reader allow him/her to understand the information; *critical literacy* (reading behind the lines): This level of literacy adds to the two previous ones the conception of reading as a cultural practice inserted in a specific context, allowing action and social commitment. This reading practice is based on the differentiation between facts and opinions; the assessment of the veracity of the information; the identification of the intentionality or ideology of the text; the evaluation of the reliability of the sources; the disruption in the hegemonic discourse; and the decision making for responsible social action. From this conceptual and methodological perspective, we understand school and teachers as a space and agent of social transformation [5]. Consequently, new social stories must be generated, a critical and transforming attitude towards society must be promoted and, in short, schools must be seen as democratic public spheres [6], which favor education for critical citizenship in the face of hate speech.

Studies show that young people's relationship with social networks (SN) and virtual realities is constantly increasing [7]. For this reason, it is relevant to know these relationships and, specifically, to work on critical literacy in the social science classroom. In this sense, students must be able to know, understand and relate the shared contents about the different social realities with which they interact. From a didactic point of view, SN are indeed ideal for analyzing and working on critical literacy. Among its characteristics, we find its capacity to build intra- and interpersonal identities [8], its scarce or null critical capacity of shared and/or elaborated audio-visual contents, the invisibility of subjects or people in particularly sensitive digital socialization spaces, and its contribution to the normalization of hate speech [9].

SN can be integrated into the teaching-learning processes of the social sciences as didactic resources [10, 11] and as multimodal Learning and Knowledge Technologies (LKT) [12], in order to use them to develop critical and creative thinking skills in the interpretation and social use of the textual and iconographic narratives it generates. This approach to hypertext allows us to define the social network Twitter as a complex network of interactions in which it is difficult to discern the reliability and intentions of its contents. As Cassany [2] points out, the electronic literacy goes further. It takes hypertext as the basic structure of discourse: numerous written fragments, brief, monothematic and autonomous, are connected to each other with links in the form of a network or lattice. The result is a suggestive discursive web or a dense network of roads, through which we can move at will. Ted Nelson, one of the fathers of hypertext, characterized it as 'that structure that cannot be printed' [2] (p. 192).

In this context, this research analyses the levels of literacy of a group of Spanish students of History of Secondary Education in digital environments (Twitter), with the aim of providing educational clues about the ways in which social discourses are constructed on controversial issues, in particular those generated by the Spanish Civil War.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participating sample (*n* = 42) consists of 25 boys and 17 girls students in the second year of secondary education in a private school in the city of Burgos (Spain),

aged between 17 and 19 years. The selection of the total sample was made by means of a non-probabilistic sampling for convenience, conditioned to the possibilities of access and proximity of the researchers to the participating students.

2.2 Techniques and instruments

The instruments and techniques used for the collection, emptying and analysis of data consisted of categorical tables of textual (tweets) and discursive (digital discussion groups) quotations, a teaching unit on the History of Spain (Spanish Civil War) and the digital productions of the students from the activities included in the teaching unit.

In order to organize and facilitate the resources available for the correct development of the teaching unit, a website (https://bit.ly/2Lwx3NG) was designed to serve as a virtual classroom. The core of its approach was the virtual cooperative learning methodology, together with the semi-autonomous work of the digital resources [13]. This methodology is aimed at the construction of knowledge through the arrangement of students in mixed and heterogeneous work groups, in order to favor the exchange of previous knowledge, skills and abilities to elaborate meanings with which to solve problems.

Discussions in digital environments have been rare or complementary in face-to-face classes [14]. The reasons for selecting this technique lay in its ability to develop competency-based learning in three interconnected areas: social, professional and academic [15]. The debate sessions were related to a socially alive issue (the Spanish Civil War) and to transversal themes such as historical memory, migrations, gender, and state models. These sessions sought to problematize curricular content on social, economic, cultural and political conflicts from coherent critical approaches, allowing students to approach them through divergent points of view, opinions and perspectives.

2.3 Design and procedure

The study belongs to the non-experimental designs of ex post facto research. The research is positioned in the cross-sectional qualitative methodological principles, which seek to describe the study variables on the manifest content and to make interpretative inferences about its state and relationship at a given time [16].

The data collection was carried out during the 2019/2020 academic year as part of the teaching practices of one of the researchers, included in the studies for the Master's Degree in Compulsory Secondary Education. The teaching program was sequenced in 8 telematic work sessions. On the one hand, different discussion sessions were organized on the digital productions (tweets) of the students, structured in groups of 10–12 people per session [13]. On the other hand, the elaboration of contents through Twitter was carried out by means of cooperative methodologies, in which each group, in an autonomous way, had to work with the indications provided by the teachers and their constant support in the resolution of doubts and telematic supervision. The virtual cooperative activities were directly linked to the historical theme proposed in the debates. In them, the students had to produce two publications or tweets for each activity.

The first publication had to develop historical empathy skills, through the representation of social roles (politicians with different ideologies and voters with different voting profiles) or specific professionals (group of social researchers). The effectiveness of this methodology (role-playing) has been verified in the teaching-learning processes of the social sciences by both the University Association of Teachers of Social Science Teaching (https://bit.ly/37f8Sfe), and by recent studies

in the area of knowledge [17, 18]. In the second publication, students were to read the historical narratives critically, based on the aspects addressed in the debate and in the proposed activity.

In this research, the results obtained in an initial activity on the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) are analyzed. In it, he proposed to carry out a historical reconstruction work using primary sources (https://bit.ly/2JOyXJ9) and to publish its results in the form of a tweet. Each group was to construct an account of the situation described in the sources provided and dated between the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and the end of 1936 in the province of La Rioja (Spain). The sources selected represented the reality of the "hot terror" in the rearguard of the summer of 1936 and the institutionalization of this terror in the autumn of 1936.

2.4 Data analysis

After a careful reading of the tweets generated by the students and their discursive interventions in the debates, we proceeded to its emptying and analysis. To do this, we used the technique of qualitative content analysis, based on the categorization and labelling of the information obtained. This categorization distinguished three levels of literacy around three structuring concepts: gender, historical empathy and social awareness.

Considering the tripartite praxis of the analysis of the discourse by Íñiguez [19] (delimitation of the social process under analysis, selection of the relevant material, and data analysis) and, in accordance with the general phases of the analysis of qualitative content and of the thematic analysis proposed by Kuckartz [20, 21] (**Figure 1**), we proceeded to make a deductive codification of the data linked to the theoretical dimensions corresponding to the three aprioristic categories.

The total number of codes generated was gathered in categorical families concomitant to the conceptual constructions of gender, historical empathy, and social consciousness, three thematic-structural axes widely evidenced by the
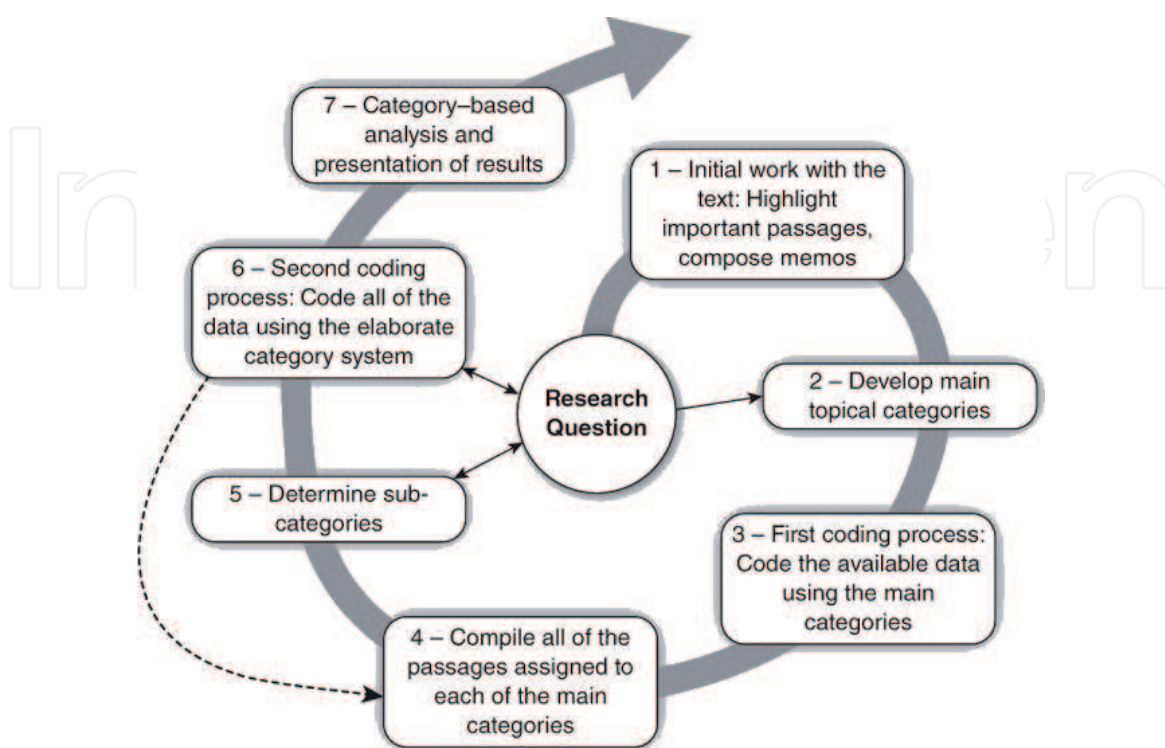

Figure 1.
Thematic qualitative text analysis process. Source: Kuckartz [21]. p. 70.

scientific literature on education historically, and specifically directed to education for democratic citizenship. In a second phase of categorization, the informational contents associated with the three theoretical categories were again grouped, through constant comparison of the data [16], into one of the three levels of literacy defined and applied by Ortega-Sánchez, Ibáñez and Sanz [3], and Ortega-Sánchez, Sanz de la Cal and Ibáñez [4]: *literal literacy* (reading the lines), *cognitive or inferential literacy* (reading between the lines), and *critical literacy* (reading behind the lines). The results of the interpretation and analysis of this last categorization are those presented in this research.

The selected textual extracts presented below have been selected for its explanatory capacity of the majority category identified in the students' digital discourses (cognitive or inferential literacy). However, in order to clarify the difference applied between the levels of cognitive/inferential and critical criticality, other narrative extracts, belonging to the critical literacy category, are also included on historical episodes related to the Franco dictatorship, as a result of the implementation of the rest of the activities of the teaching program (https://bit.ly/398ABh9). In this sense, in order to avoid interpretative redundancies, the digital narratives associated with the literal literacy category have been omitted, since they constitute the textual bases on which the level of cognitive or inferential literacy is based, in which descriptive procedures of the social and historical reality under study are also included.

3. Results

According to the results obtained, predominance (75%) of cognitive or inferential literacy levels can be confirmed in the sample studied. Part of this sample (18%) only describes the problematic information in the three categories of analysis (gender, historical empathy and social awareness), while a minority group of students, in addition to understanding the information they are handling, is able to criticize it in order to define specific lines of social action (7%). The digital extracts presented below respond, in fact, to the reproduction and uncritical understanding of historiographic narratives ascribed to warlike-positivist approaches (cognitive or inferential literacy):

> *July 1936, a date in Spanish history that needs no introduction. It was the beginning of a long and bloody civil war, and the origin of a dictatorship that lasted almost forty years. (G2_S3).*

> *In many towns in La Rioja, there were repeated celebrations of the arrival of the new regime. The participants in those celebrations could not have imagined how quickly the first conflicts would come. (G2_S15).*

> *The alfareños put up resistance but, thanks to numerous bombings on the bullring, they were able to destroy it. The next day, after the capture of Cervera, the province of La Rioja was left in the hands of the insurgents. (G2_S4).*

> *2000 murders whose only crime was to have different political ideas and to be part of parties opposed to the insurgents. Without trial or law or respect, they were led to mass graves without names. This is how the insurgents treated life. (G2_S18).*

The stories are coherent and the spatial–temporal references are correct. However, it can be seen that there are no descriptions or interpretations after July

1936, when the Spanish Civil War broke out. Although the sources on which the story was to be built were provided through the website of the educational unit, the stories are usually built from great military milestones headed by illustrious characters. In this sense, the social invisibility of the murdered, persecuted and/or politically stigmatized women can be seen:

> *On July 19, 1936, at 9 a.m., the military governor of the province of Logroño, Víctor Carrasco Amilibia, proclaims the State of War. The military forces, infantry, artillery and aviation took control of the city assisted by Falangist volunteers and the first requetés arrived from the nearby villages of Navarre. (G2_S8).*

> *General Carrasco is dismissed as military governor, civilian governor Adelardo Novo is arrested and artillery captain Emilio Bellod is appointed in his place. The mayor of Logroño, Basilio Gurrea, and, among others, the lieutenant colonel of the Guardia Civil, Manuel Fernández Valdés, are also arrested. (G2_S9).*

> *On 21 July the García Escamez column is split. Some of the fighters went to calm down and control Alfaro, which is situated in the southern part of La Rioja. (G2_A20).*

Although the activity aimed to get students to adopt historical perspectives in relation to the "death squads", the narratives do not notice any difference between the first months of the so-called "hot terror" and the institutionalization of this terror during the autumn and winter of 1936.

However, in the following digital text, the information is correctly interpreted, taking into account the position adopted by the historical character. The tweet approaches the content with great respect, empathizing with the victims of Francoism. In the phrase "memory is not synonymous with resentment, nor is forgetting reconciliation", the critical and transforming thought of the reality in which one lives is condensed.

> *In memory of Rosauro Gil Martín, a socialist militant in Burgos who was cruelly murdered by the fascists on October 20, 1936. It is suspected that his body was thrown into the mass graves of Estepar. Despite the exemplary and legitimate interest of his daughter Anastasia, his body has not yet been found. Memory is not synonymous with resentment, nor is forgetting reconciliation. In memory of you and all the victims of Franco's repression (G2_S17).*

In the tweet, G2_S17 develops two fundamental aspects of historical empathy. On the one hand, the affective dimension, where we could highlight imagination, compassion or open-mindedness. On the other hand, the cognitive dimension, considering to approach the content from different perspectives, distinguishing evidence about the past or discerning between different behaviors or past and present beliefs. Consequently, the student not only understands the information on the issue, but also manages to relate this historical information to his/her political and social present.

A minority of tweets incorporate the category of gender in its social analysis. These discourses make a correct interpretation of the gender construct in the context of historical explanation, and even propose its deconstruction assuming the cultural nature of the category. As can be seen in the following tweet, in the statement "we are manipulated", the student expresses his/her disagreement with the social hierarchization based on gender and accuses the patriarchal system of influencing our ability to make critical readings of historical knowledge.

> *Gender roles pigeonhole us in a preconceived thought based on our sex, manipulate*
> *us, create submissive and moderate women, and dominant and extreme men.*
> *Although it is complicated, it is necessary to blur the limit that divides us in order*
> *to find ourselves and advance in the knowledge of this warlike conflict from a non-*
> *hegemonic and non-androcentric perspective (G2_S2).*

In the category of social awareness, the way in which the arrival of the new regime is legitimized stands out. Indeed, the Spanish Civil War appears in the short digital stories as an inevitable event, presented as a static war between two antagonistic sides and not as a coup d'état against the legitimately established government. Similarly, the adjective "insurgent" is used on only three occasions. Despite the fact that the use of this term increased as the didactic unit advanced, the stories usually use instead the term "national side", thus assuming the politico-military connotations that legitimize the armed conflict.

The digital speeches also mention the murders that took place in La Rioja and, specifically, define the number of dead or missing people. This recognition is certainly anecdotal in extension and importance to other accounts. However, the types of violence unleashed by both the rebels and the Republican militias are not specified.

A clear example of critical literacy in the category social consciousness can be found in the tweet written by G2_S26:

> *The media has always had a lot of power and a clear local example is the influ-*
> *ence of Méndez Pozo, who controls both the newspaper and the local and regional*
> *television to silence them (G2_S26).*

In this case, the tweet connects with the activity developed within the framework of the mass media as agents of socialization and generators of opinion. The student connects the holistic vision of the media with his/her own history, through the linkage of the activity dedicated to the press during the Second Republic with the local reality of his/her most immediate environment, the city of Burgos. It alludes to one of the city's oligarchs, the businessman Méndez Pozo, and correctly analyzes the social reality lived in the city, as well as the relationship of power between businessmen and the media. It also includes the clear relationship between both spheres of power and the way they relate to society and local environment in order to maintain a tacit balance of power.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained inform the educational permanence of a traditional historiographic conception, based on the technical reproduction of conflict, on the absence of skills for the explanation and interpretation of the historicity of contemporaneity, and on the denial of the temporality and multiplicity of postmodern social narratives [22]. Historical narratives (re)produced under these conditions strengthen current power relations, and the consolidation of the positivist approach, androcentric and historical determinism.

Today, and especially since the emergence of the extreme right-wing parties, the resurgence of hate speech in the public sphere is a fact. These narratives are disseminated in social spaces to reach the young generation, and are easily (re) produced in the NS. In contrast to the political uses of history, the aim of historical education must be to promote social justice and education for critical, democratic, active and participatory citizenship [23]. From this perspective, Giroux [24] states

that learning should be based on enquiry, on the understanding that knowledge is naturally problematic. In this sense, there is ample evidence that the application of the theoretical principles of critical pedagogy helps teachers and students to act as *transformative intellectuals*.

Many studies argue for prolonged exposure and/or overexposure of digital natives to the digital tools and virtual environments of NS [7]. Over the last decade, SN have established themselves as agents of socialization, and as constructors of personal and social identities [25]. In this sense, we believe it is necessary to implement SN in teaching-learning processes [26], making visible its educational potential, and promoting the responsible use of technologies [9]. Likewise, it is necessary to work on competences, skills and abilities that are characteristic of the critical analysis of discourse in the teaching of social problems or socially alive issues, and to provide students with the tools and resources to face combat and deconstruct hate speech.

Incorporating gender and historical empathy as categories of analysis in the teaching of history would allow progress towards a more inclusive, committed and democratic social conscience. Including these categories in the teaching-learning processes, through the curricular problematisation of historical-social content or the treatment of controversial topics, would favor the development of civic and social competencies and critical literacy skills. Consequently, it is necessary to make a greater effort in the didactic transposition of contents linked to controversial issues, to avoid the generation of hate speech and to promote the construction of counter-narratives that repair and reinterpret hegemonic narratives, in order to (re) incorporate into the democratic collective memory elements that, until today, have been forgotten [27].

As opposed to rote learning, based on traditional expository-reproductive methodology, and the permanence of curricular content still attached to positivist approaches [28], the need to design, implement and evaluate strategies aimed at active learning and the promotion of socio-critical approaches in the construction of school historical knowledge seems evident. This redirection of historical education would allow students to generate their own narratives in a critical way, to develop and acquire social skills, and to understand and adopt the multiple perspectives in the interpretation of their social reality.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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