

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: Rethinking the Spanish Classroom through Critical Pedagogy: A  
Critical Ethnographic Study

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In the U.S. Latinos are one group that tends to be stigmatized by stereotypical images that transcend the walls of the language classroom. Consequently, it is necessary to create alternative ways of teaching the target cultures in the foreign language classroom. My guiding hypothesis is that applying critical pedagogy to the study of Spanish raises cross-cultural awareness and does not hinder language learning. This study investigates this phenomenon in an Intermediate-Advanced Spanish classroom at Midtown University (a pseudonym) during the fall semester of 2001. Using strategies characteristic of critical pedagogy, students actively participated in the development of the curriculum, maintained and shared journals with their peers, studied the grammatical structures of Spanish in the context of cross-cultural activities, and interacted with members of the Latino community in Baltimore.

A critical ethnographic approach of the researcher's own teaching was used as the mode of inquiry. Data collection in this study involved observation (gathered by videotaping sessions and the teacher's personal journal), and primary documents (students' questionnaires, journal entries, and written assignments).

The analysis of the findings was organized in three major categories: the process of creating a critical classroom; the ways in which participants challenged cultural values;

and the language progress tracked through a re-writing process. The findings revealed that in their quest for understanding their new roles, participants navigated the tightrope of insisting on behaviors that were familiar and testing unfamiliar ways of relating to each other and to the course content. Furthermore, as a learning strategy, participants related the course content to their own worlds and realized the extent of their exposure to the Latinos that live among them. Finally, the re-writing process had the double purpose of informing the teacher of students' needs, and of enabling students to find strategies to facilitate their learning process.

Through critical pedagogy, participants in this study learned Spanish and interrupted conventional ways of perceiving the world, experiencing new forms of relating to the course content and to each other, and examining common cultural perceptions, which created new ways of producing concepts of difference.