English Studies and Literary Education in the Era of Media Manipulation: Context, Perceptions, Feelings and Challenges

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Abstract

This article analyses the components of a method of literary education aimed at strengthening critical awareness. It discusses whether the current academic context is hospitable to a literary education that fights against the over-simplification of our epistemological horizons. The popularisation of a utilitarian version of university study, the neglect of reflective practices and the marginalisation of the usefulness of the discipline of literature within the field of English Studies are some of the realities that we currently face. Within this context, a literary education involving activism can play an important role in promoting resistance against the pandemic of media manipulation we are in the midst of. After having examined the views of a group of students at the University of Jaén (Spain) concerning the importance of studying an English Studies degree in contemporary society, it is clear that such an education needs to be based on emotional aspects, paying special attention to the students' feelings and perceptions. The results of our corpus-based study using Sentiment Analysis techniques evidence the emotional disaffection of students from certain subjects, namely literature, which are specifically aimed at encouraging critical thinking. Thus, one of the future challenges that must be faced is to foster positive emotions in our literature lessons, as they are essential to promote the students' critical awareness and activism.

Keywords: academic activism; corpus linguistics; literary education; manipulation; Sentiment Analysis

1. Introduction: Contemporary Pandemics and Academic Activism

The reflections included in this article revolve around the need to focus on the valuable intersection between knowledge, emotions, ethics and activism within the realm of English Studies and, more specifically, within the domain of literary education. These ideas have been prompted by the results of an interdisciplinary analysis of the perceptions and feelings of a group of students at the University of Jaén (Spain) concerning the value of studying an English Studies degree in the current era of media manipulation. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront, with renewed strength, the existence of a parallel pandemic created by the widespread constellation of fake news and populist discourses. These discourses, disseminated through the media and social networks, flourish in the hospitable realm of a society marked by what Heather K. McRobie has described as a "commodification of reality," which has replaced "our true human needs" with those that "the culture industry has taught [us] to want" (2013, 33).

However, COVID-19 has also widely disseminated the frequently undervalued but extremely necessary reflection on the power of discourses to modify reality and generate, as in the present COVID context, social alarm, fear, sadness, hatred and desperation. The citizenship currently seems to be moved by two parallel desires: finding a vaccine and stopping those manipulating discourses that, through a "legitimacy dynamics that pandemic diseases […] have a tendency to bring forth and accentuate" (Aaltola 2020, 5), generate anxiety and misinformation. At a time of extreme sensitisation, the social realisation that the use of language is not innocent is unmasking discourses as generators of either wonderful or pernicious effects. The rapid democratisation of this unmasking—which, while comprising the core of philological activity, has been largely undervalued in comparison with the social praise of the practicality of technology—is giving us, both as lecturers and researchers, an opportunity to be socially fashionable and contribute to activating culturally healthy processes not only within academia, but also beyond its walls.

In an era marked by the domination of an *instagramian* semantics, being 'fashionable' or 'meaningfully visible' is understood by us academics, who militate against manipulation and impoverishing homogenisation, as being both socially useful and humanistically activist. In what could be described as an opportunity to initiate powerfully "transformational times" (Henseler 2020a, 1), we should start by reviewing the answers to a set of vital questions: What can we do to reverse the pandemic of commodification and, consequently, of manipulation? What are we beyond our specificity, beyond our dual identities (irreconcilable sometimes) as lecturers and scholars? What is our role when teaching within the field of English Studies and when conducting our research within this area? Can we contribute to

configuring this very area as a *locus* of resistance? Is academia a permeable *locus* or an aseptic space, impermeable to social realities and problems? Are we carriers of the disease of impermeability and thus facilitating channels for its spread, which is lethal to perceptions of the social usefulness of the humanities? Are we replicating commodifying patterns concerning the transmission of knowledge when we blindly subject ourselves to the exclusivist 'publish or perish' imperative, to the journal impact factor (JIF) tyranny or when we succumb to what Jeffery Frank has described as "careerism" (2019, 21)? Those of us who advocate permeability believe that it is necessary to open powerfully generative horizons, wider than those sanctioned as valid by academia and its evaluative agencies. Activism—understood in our academic context as the willingness to use our knowledge to ameliorate society by creating, from our diverse microcosms, the conditions under which free-thinking can flourish and 'contaminate' wider non-academic areas—must be considered an essential constituent of our dual identities.

2. The Vulnerable Task: Expansive Horizons versus Hostile Contexts

Being an activist lecturer/scholar within the realm of philology—and, more specifically, of English Studies—implies revitalising a noble humanistic task. Some of its most important defining features are the dignification and democratisation of the practice of omnivorous reflective reading and the valorisation of critical and creative writing, along with the activist willingness to disseminate the knowledge of these different ways of feeling, experiencing and intellectualising life as they are reflected in a wide variety of discourses, such as those represented by literary texts. The plurality of these different ways of understanding reality is accentuated by the importance given to transnational human values and interculturality within the field of English Studies, which make it an especially fruitful *locus* from which to fly beyond the authority of epistemological closure. Likewise, our activist work with literary texts must be guided by an "ethics of [the] expansion" of "the readers' ideological and imaginative horizons," which constitutes "a powerful antidote against totalitarian systems which, in their socio-political materialization, make people feel both depressed and oppressed" (Caballero Aceituno 2017, 251-252).

This task could be deemed extremely vulnerable since it has enemies in every corner of what could be described as a powerfully hostile realm. From an ideological point of view, our activist task must confront the widespread perversion of the idea of 'usefulness,' which is coming to be associated with the practicalities of utilitarianism. As Martha C. Nussbaum (2016) has argued, we are immersed in "a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance" (1), by virtue of which "thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies

alive," whilst favouring "the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making" (2). By contrast, "abilities crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world's most pressing problems" (7)—i.e., exactly those that our activist praxis needs to cultivate and revitalise—are being left to one side. These abilities constitute the essential core of the Humanities, a field that, as David Damrosch argues, is currently "under severe strain, buffeted by declining enrollments as STEM fields garner more and more interest from college students and their anxious parents" (2020, 4).

Pressure of work within academia, and also outside it, is not hospitable to the exercise of reflective skills, which must be favoured so as to prompt critical thinking and creativity—creativity being understood as the ability to imagine, generate and validate fresh new solutions to solve contemporary dilemmas and problems. Yet, these skills are succumbing to the irreflexive cult of immediacy, imported from the instantaneous patterns of communication rendered extremely fashionable by new technologies. As Renate Lorenz argues, we are under the tyranny of "chrononormativity," which uses "a whole range of seemingly innocent instruments such as schedules, to-do lists, calendars, deadlines, watches and computers," to favour "maximized productivity" (2014a, 15), which is not compatible with our activist *tempo*. We agree with Jüri Talvet (2005) on the fact that "the curing effects of arts and literature" (11) cannot be instantaneously felt, as they do not "improve life directly, in the material and economic sense. Yet they can definitely contribute to increase society's sensibility" (90). In this respect Christine Henseler advocates "the need for a humanistic turn" which can liberate us from the tyranny of rapid, instantaneous productivity, as we, the humanists, can slowly contribute "to the making of a more inclusive, equitable, caring and kind—yet no less productive and innovative—world community" (2020a, 1).

The curricular spaces available for reflective and activist practices, which are frequently endowed with connotations of (s)low productivity or, more perversely, even of politicization, have also been restricted. Assigning long critical essays to large groups of students may seem suicidal when the requirements are for lecturers to be extremely productive in terms of research output and not to spend too much time on giving valuable feedback to students on their written performance or on expanding their imaginative horizons. The Bologna Process[1],

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1   As stated by the European Commission, the Bologna Process was originally designed "to bring more coherence to higher education systems across Europe. It established the European Higher Education Area to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive and accessible, and to make higher education in Europe more attractive and competitive worldwide." Some of its most important aims were to "ensure the mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad completed at other universities"

described by humanists such as Jordi Llovet as truly "neoliberal" (2011, 178), has packaged knowledge into parcels to be delivered quarterly, thus forcing the pace of reflection to be adapted to a reality of almost-impossible-to-fulfill teaching schedules and ruling out the possibility of creating spaces for the thorough observation of and intervention in what happens beyond the classroom.

We have come to generate highly specialised separations where we should be advocating symbiotic conciliations. As Tilley and Taylor (2014) note, in academia "the production and advancement of knowledge are privileged over […] action connected to the everyday work of fighting for individual and community rights," which is "often very distanced from the knowledge producing priorities of universities" (53). These authors further highlight the fact that whereas "scholarly activity is rewarded with tenure and promotion and research monies […] work connected to activist leanings, can be construed as taking time away from or interfering with scholarly endeavors" (54), which in their view has contributed to institutionalising a "false binary" (56) that must be undermined.

Under the weight of all these constraining factors, is it possible to create in our classrooms microcosms that are hospitable to activism, i.e., to meaningful action to increase social welfare? We believe that it is. One of our most important professional contributions should be to encourage the generation of reservoirs of intellectual dynamism among our students and signpost the paths along which these reservoirs can be directed towards positive social change *via* teaching and research. In the present context the design of these routes should be primarily aimed at combating the impoverishing epistemology of intellectual confinement created by media-diffused manipulation. Within the context of English Studies, where literature is still a core subject, can our literature lessons be considered *loci* that are particularly hospitable to this activist praxis? Which principles should literary education follow so as to enhance this hospitality? An activist literary education must revitalise and develop the understanding of literary texts as potentially life-changing productions in both an intellectual and socio-ethical sense. Likewise, it must also translate this inexhaustible potential of the literary text into a meaningful emotional dialogue with students' innerselves. A reflection on the significance of the students' feelings and perceptions when approaching literature and, by extension, when pursuing English Studies, is a meaningful precondition for generating the aforementioned reservoirs of dynamism in the classroom. This is the reason why the modality of Sentiment Analysis has been

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and "implement a system of quality assurance, to strengthen the quality and relevance of learning and teaching" (European Commission. "The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area." *Policies, Education and Training*, https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_en).

chosen to examine the data that have prompted these reflections and helped us to delineate some future challenges concerning literary education.

3. English Studies, Literature and Students' Feelings and perceptions. The Study

3.1. Participants

Forty-six participants, 70% female and 30% male, took part in this study. The participants were second-year students of the English Studies degree at the University of Jaén (Spain). Although this project was carried out in a Spanish university, not all the participants were from Spain since three Erasmus students also participated: one from Italy and two from the Netherlands.

The interviews we are analysing in this article are part of a teaching innovation project funded by our home university to improve the quality of education. The project is entitled *Generating critical thinking networks: Tools and materials to analyse reality and its discourses* (PIMED09_20192021) and it aims at encouraging students to critically think in a world in which phenomena such as fake news are part of our daily lives. These interviews were part of the final assessment for the Instrumental English 2 module of this degree. The interviewer/examiner was the teacher of the practical part of the module, Yolanda Caballero Aceituno. This part includes the assessment of students' speaking abilities. Although this module forms part of the second-year curriculum, there were also some students who were retaking the module, as well as one who was a freshman[2]. Consequently, the participants' ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old.

3.2. Corpus

The interview, which was done in pairs, consisted of two parts: a prepared part, in which students were asked to describe a person they admire, and a spontaneous part comprising questions related to the topics learned and discussed during the course. The topic of the first part was known to students, who could prepare it at home, and was a monologue presented in front of the teacher. The second part was unrehearsed on the part of students and involved the examiner asking them questions about topics they had covered and reviewed in class. So, although the students knew the topics to be covered, they did not know the exact questions.

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2   It is worth mentioning that, at the University of Jaén, freshmen are able to take modules in addition to those taught in the first year. As there is an Instrumental English 1 subject, some students usually take the second one at the same time.

The examiner asked the questions in such a way that the participants could engage in a dialogue between themselves. Whilst there were various topics involved, in the present article we are focusing on just three of them: manipulation, students' experience of their degree course and their perception of contemporary society.

The interviews were recorded and then automatically transcribed using the webpage Happy Scribe[3]. However, the transcriptions needed to be manually revised to correct for mistakes related to students' pronunciation problems. The corpus consists of 18,534 tokens and 1,135 types.

3.3. *Methodology*

The students were asked a set of different questions revolving around the topics of manipulation, their perceptions about their degree course and their opinions about contemporary society. A compilation of the questions can be seen in table 1.

TABLE 1. Set of questions used in the interviews

Topic	Questions
Manipulation	"Do you think that we are easily manipulated nowadays?"
	"I'd like to know whether you think we live in a society where we are very easily manipulated"
	"Do you think that those students who belong to the area of the Humanities are more critical than other students?"
	"Do you think that people who are studying this English Studies degree are better prepared than others to fight against manipulation?"
	"Do you think that students who decide to take this degree are more difficult to manipulate than students of other degrees?"
	"Do you think that we are trained in this degree to have critical consciousness?"
	"Do you think that it is because you are studying this degree that you are more open-minded than other students?"
	"Do you think we live in a very manipulated society? If so, why?"
Manipulation	"I want to know your opinion about manipulation, do you think we are going through a serious problem?"
	"Do you think that people who study this degree are better prepared than others? Do you think that they are more critical?"

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3   It can be accessed at: https://www.happyscribe.co/es/

Topic	Questions
	"What can you tell me about manipulation nowadays? What is your opinion about manipulation?"
	"I would like you to tell me whether you think we live in a society in which we are very manipulated or not"
	"Do you think that by studying this degree we are more or less easily manipulated than other people?"
	"Do you feel that we are very manipulated nowadays?"
Students' perceptions of their degree course	"What do you think about this degree you are studying? Tell me three reasons why you consider it useful"
	"Do you feel happy about being studying this degree?"
	"I want to know whether you feel happy in this degree and which are the aspects of this degree that you like and the ones you do not like at all"
	"What is your impression about this degree?"
	"I want you to tell me your opinion about your degree"
	"Tell me what you love about this degree and what you do not like at all"
Contemporary society	"In your view, what is the worst thing in this society nowadays?"
	"Tell me a very brief description of society nowadays, how do you see society nowadays? Do you have a positive image or a negative one?"
	"What is your impression about current society?"
	"What about current society? Do you think the society we live in is a good one or a negative one? Do you find more positive or negative aspects in our current society?"
	"How would you describe current society? Would you describe it as a positive or as a negative one?"
	"I am really interested in how you see contemporary society, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the world nowadays?"

For each question the students were asked, they gave their opinion and discussed the topic with their partner. We implemented two types of analysis: the first was based on the interpretation of students' responses and the second was an automatic analysis of students' opinions and perceptions towards the aforementioned topics using a computational program.

Corpus Linguistics was chosen as the methodology for this research because it deals with the study of the language in a corpus. It is worth mentioning that Corpus Linguistics is not a simply quantitative discipline as it also involves the

qualitative interpretation of the data. A study such as that described here generates huge amounts of data, and therefore computation programs are necessary to handle and analyse it. One such computational program is *R*, a high-level programming language and free software environment with a huge community of users who are constantly developing libraries to enrich the analysis of data in various fields, including linguistics (Fradejas Rueda 2019). For example, and of particular interest here, there are lexicons that have been developed to carry out Sentiment Analysis. Liu (2012, 7) explains that Sentiment Analysis deals with the study of people's opinions or attitudes in natural language texts. As in this article we are analysing students' opinions and perceptions towards certain topics, Sentiment Analysis techniques seem eminently suitable. For this reason, we have used two different lexicons: NRC (Mohammad and Turney 2013) and BING (Hu and Liu 2004). The former classifies words according to eight emotions: fear, anger, trust, sadness, disgust, anticipation, joy and surprise, as well as two feelings: positive and negative, whereas the latter simply classifies words as positive or negative.

4. Analysis of the Results

In the subsequent sections, the results will be presented according to the topics addressed in the interview, that is, manipulation and students' perception of their degree and of contemporary society. It is worth mentioning that not all the questions compiled in table 1 were asked to every student.

4.1. Manipulation

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, *manipulation* means "to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage." Nowadays, in our current society, the term manipulation is often associated with information and the media. Consequently, the dissemination of *fake news* has become such a normal practice in our current society that, during the coronavirus crisis, the Spanish government felt obliged to create a guide to help citizens avoid being manipulated by fake news[4].

   In light of current events and taking into account our project, students were asked whether they thought they lived in a manipulative society. Twenty students were asked this question and all answered in the affirmative. Nevertheless, their interpretation of the term *manipulation* was not always related to information

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4   It can be seen at "La policía presenta la primera guía para evitar ser manipulados por las fake news."

and the media. Indeed, when asked about manipulation, students related this concept to five different aspects:

a) Ten students pointed out the impact that social media, mainly Instagram and the emphasis on physical appearance of influencers[5], can have on them. They also mentioned the fact that some people portray a very different life in their online presence to that which they have in real life.

b) Two students mentioned marketing and advertising campaigns where companies, according to them, try to trick their target audience.

c) One student talked about the fact that politicians promise a lot during their political campaigns but do not deliver once they are elected.

d) Four students made reference to fake news.

e) Three students were worried about biased information. They felt that the media just show us what they want us to see and there is always some vested interest behind each news item.

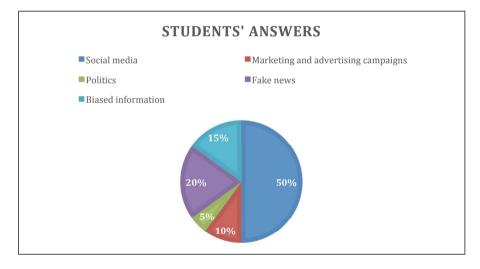Figure 1 shows this information graphically:

FIGURE 1. Aspects indicated by students' responses

Accordingly, the most frequent words used in their responses were *media* (32), *people* (22) and *manipulated* (21), and the most frequent bigrams—a

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5   According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an influencer is "a person who is able to generate interest in something (such as a consumer product) by posting about it on social media".

combination of two words—were *social media* and *mobile phone*.

Applying the Sentiment Analysis technique to the topic of manipulation, it is not surprising that most of the words related to the topic of manipulation are negative. In fact, the students employed 4,792 words with a negative polarity, and 2,027 positive ones, according to the BING lexicon. Table 2 shows the overall score of the positive and negative words in the corpus of responses to this topic.

TABLE 2. Distribution of negative and positive words according to the BING lexicon in the manipulation topic

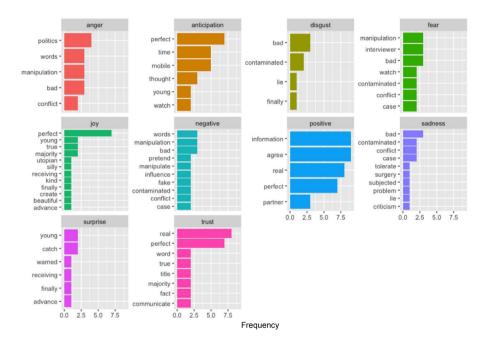| Sentiment	n
Negative	4,792
Positive	2,027

Among the negative words, some of the most frequent were: *manipulation, bad, pretend, manipulate, false* and *fake*. The NRC lexicon also demonstrated that negative feelings were more regularly mentioned than positive ones, the most frequent being negativity, followed by fear and anger, as can be seen in table 3, which shows the quantity of words appearing in the corpus.

TABLE 3. Distribution of words according to NRC lexicon in the manipulation topic

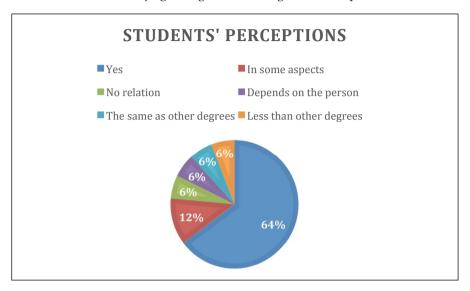| Sentiment	n
Negative	3,337
Positive	2,355
Fear	1,486
Anger	1,257
Trust	1,250
Sadness	1,196
Disgust	1,061
Anticipation	857
Joy	698
Surprise	536

Words like *manipulation, bad* or *conflict* coincide in these three classifications, as can be seen in figure 2, which shows the frequency of the words belonging to each sentiment.

FIGURE 2. Most frequent words used to describe different types of emotions emotion in relation to manipulation according to NRC lexicon

Related to the manipulation questions, students were also asked whether they thought that studying an English Studies degree could help them not to be manipulated or to be manipulated less than students on other degree courses. Seventeen students were asked this question. Their responses can be seen in figure 3:

FIGURE 3. Distribution of students' perceptions of the existence of a relationship between studying an English Studies degree and manipulation

Clearly most students felt that studying an English Studies degree helps them to not be manipulated. However, they gave a wide range of reasons for this. On the one hand, most of them (ten out of eleven who were asked) referred to some specific aspects of the degree. Firstly, three of those ten students explained how, in their view, the degree could contribute to developing critical thinking abilities. Secondly, two students made reference to the fact of speaking more than one language. Thirdly, two others mentioned aspects related to the linguistic part of the degree, such as analysing texts, and two students talked about learning about another culture and how it broadens the mind. Surprisingly, only one student alluded to literature as a beneficial tool to fight against manipulation. In his words—here literally transcribed:

(1) "But I also think literature and culture is like a way of escaping to this manipulation, so in a sense I would say that philologists nowadays are necessary, of course, because they can give an approach to original aspects and to criticism which are lacking nowadays, of course and, you know, when we read, when we read novels or any piece of paper about any historical fact that happened, we are looking at the history of someone else, to his way of thinking and it makes us more tolerate than if we chose to try to go with it, so I think in a sense we are getting

> prepared to be more critical, but I also think that it is just not a matter of what we study but a matter related to our way of thinking."

There were, in addition, responses related to other aspects which were made by only one student in each case although we believe that what they said was worthy of comment.

According to one of the students, being manipulated depends on the person receiving the information, specifically mentioning that it relates to the students' capabilities, personality and behaviour. Two mentioned the fact that it is not only studying an English Studies degree that can contribute to raising a person's critical awareness, with one saying that all Humanities degrees develop this skill, while another felt that studying any degree at all helps people to be less manipulated. From a slightly different perspective, one student claimed that studying a science degree is more useful than studying a humanities degree in this respect, one of the reasons given being that such students would not be manipulated in terms of issues such as climate change.

Apart from this, two other students also saw positive connections between studying an English degree and resisting manipulation, albeit indirectly. They felt that studying such a degree would help them to not be manipulated but as far as social media is concerned, according to them, nobody is safe from being manipulated so, in the end, it does not matter whether you study a degree or not. One student claimed that studying a degree (in whatever subject) has no influence on whether you will be manipulated or not.

As is to be expected, the most frequent words were *degree* (14), *problem, issue* and the word *manipulate* and its corresponding derived, such as *manipulation*, which occupy the third and fourth positions in figure 4. Nonetheless, there are other words, which are less frequent, but also important, such as *difficult* or *critical*.

As far as Sentiment Analysis is concerned, according to the BING lexicon, there are more negative words than positive ones in relation to the degree and manipulation topic, as table 4 shows.

Table 4. Distribution of negative and positive words according to the BING lexicon in how studying an English degree can avoid manipulation

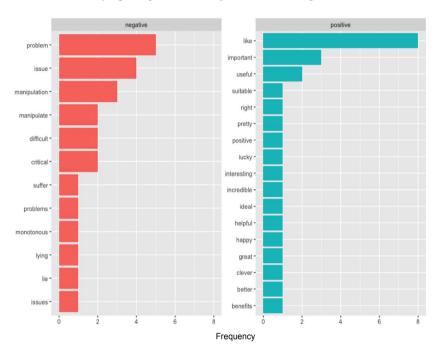| Sentiment	n
Negative	4,793
Positive	2,015

FIGURE 4. Most frequent positive and negative words in the topic of the relationship between studying a degree and manipulation according to the BING lexicon

The analysis based on the NRC lexicon also shows that the prevailing feeling concerning the usefulness of studying this degree to avoid manipulation is endowed with connotations of negativity (3,332 words), followed by the emotions of fear (1,489) and anger (1,249), with words such as *manipulation* and *problem* among those most frequently used. The following emotion in terms of number of words is trust (1,240), as illustrated in table 5.
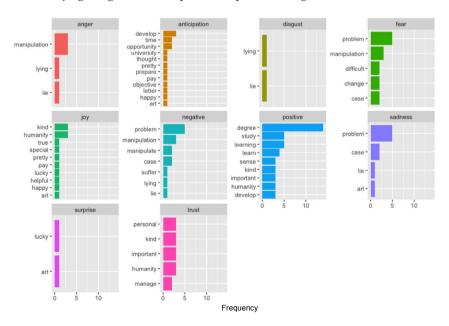
TABLE 5. Distribution of words according to the NRC lexicon in how studying an English degree can avoid manipulation

Sentiment	n
Negative	3,332
Positive	2,349
Fear	1,489
Anger	1,249

Sentiment	n
Trust	1,240
Sadness	1,196
Disgust	1,058
Anticipation	843
Joy	693
Surprise	534

However, great caution is needed here as some words which are classified by the lexicon as laden with a trust feeling are in fact used in a different sense in this corpus. For example (see figure 5), words such as *humanity* and *kind*, the former referring to humanities studies and the latter used as a synonym of *type*, so they cannot be interpreted as carrying the emotion of trust.

FIGURE 5. Most frequent words of each emotion in the topic of the relationship between studying a degree and manipulation topic, according to the NRC lexicon

4.2. *Students' perceptions of their degree course*

This topic revolved around two main questions: on the one hand, what students want to do in the future and, on the other, their perception of the degree and their experience of studying it. We will comment on each aspect separately. Seventeen students were asked these questions.

Regarding the future, ten students were asked about their prospects. Six mentioned their desire to become teachers, two wanted to be writers, one a translator and one did not know what they wanted to do, but being a teacher was not an option.

With regards to their opinion about the English Studies degree they were on, responses referred to a variety of aspects. We collected twelve replies to this question. First of all, it is worth mentioning that there were two students who declared that the English Studies degree was not their first option. They had wanted to study a different degree but mainly for economic reasons, they ended up on the course. Two students reported that the degree was not what they expected. Interestingly, both mentioned the existence of literature modules as the reason for feeling disappointed, arguing that they expected "to learn a lot of English but not literature." In fact, they thought that to be an English teacher, a knowledge of literature was unnecessary. Apart from this, some students mentioned their satisfaction with the grammar modules but not with those pertaining to literature. In the words of one of them (literally transcribed): "I like this career[6], but I have a lot of subjects that I hate, for example, literature. I don't like it. But grammar I love it." In the same vein, another student claimed (literally transcribed): "[…] the negative aspects. There are many subjects that I don't really enjoy as literature." Other students also complained about the different subjects they have to choose between on the degree. For example, there was one student who claimed to hate the Arabic language[7] and not to understand why they had to study it. Likewise, another declared that studying Linguistics in Spanish[8] was not motivating because they were supposed to be studying English. Conversely, five people talked about their happiness when

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6   *Career* is considered a false friend in the Spanish language as it is very similar to the word *carrera*, that is, the one used to refer to *degree*. For this reason, students tend to mistake them for one another.

7   A second language is compulsory and they can choose from various languages, Arabic among them.

8   In the first course of the English Studies degree, students have some subjects related to the Spanish language, such as General Linguistics, Introduction to the Spanish language and Comparative Literature. The information about this degree can be seen at Universidad de Jaén.

studying languages: two alluded to studying more than one language, while three of them mentioned the English language itself. Additionally, one student expressed his satisfaction with the degree since "it provides many things," but was unable to specify.

Accordingly, the most frequent words were *degree* (28), *English* (22) and *literature* (16). Regarding the bigrams, *don't like* (8) was the one most frequently used, exclusively when students talked about their dislike of literature. In addition, as might be expected, *English studies* and *English degree* were also among the most frequent bigrams.
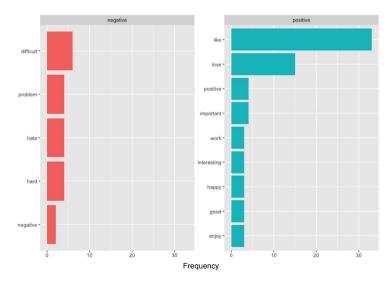
The students' responses to these questions are once again considered more negative than positive by the BING lexicon, as table 6 demonstrates.

TABLE 6. Distribution of negative and positive words according to the BING lexicon in the students' perceptions of the degree topic

Sentiment	n
Negative	4,796
Positive	2,070

Some of the most frequently used negative words were: *difficult, problem* and *hate*, this latter always referring to literature subjects, as can be seen in figure 6.

FIGURE 6. Most frequent positive and negative words used by students to describe their perception of their degree according to the BING lexicon

When analysing the texts with the NRC lexicon, we found that the prevailing sentiment is the negative one, followed again by the feeling of fear, but that responses to these questions are not associated with that of anger as for previous topics. Conversely, the feeling of trust often appears, as table 7 shows.

TABLE 7. Distribution of words according to the NRC lexicon in the students' perceptions of the degree topic

Sentiment	n
Negative	3,334
Positive	2,401
Fear	1,481
Trust	1,262
Anger	1,250
Sadness	1,198
Disgust	1,061
Anticipation	851
Joy	710
Surprise	536

As can be seen in figure 7, words such as *teacher* and *school* are classified as carrying this sentiment of trust, along with words such as *important*, *happy*, *good* and *enjoy*. However, none of these trust words were applied to literature or used in the negative form, such as "don't enjoy".
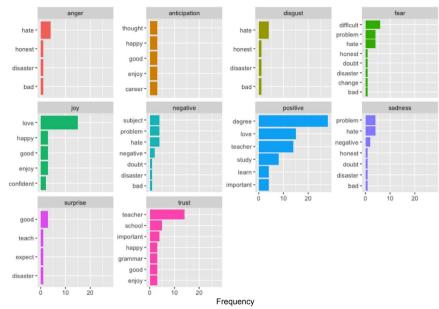
FIGURE 7. Frequency of words related to different types of sentiment regarding students'
perception of their degree according to the NRC lexicon

4.3. Contemporary Society

The contemporary society topic revolved around asking students whether they felt pessimistic or optimistic about current society. They were also asked to discuss negative and positive aspects of this society. These questions were asked to seventeen students. Only one student felt optimistic about contemporary society, arguing that people were aware of environmental problems and they were taking measures to avoid them, such as planting trees. There was another student who admitted that their feeling about society depends on the issue involved and also declared that she felt optimistic about the environmental issue, particularly about global warming-related problems. The remaining fifteen students were pessimistic about contemporary society for a variety of reasons, as can be seen in figure 8.

The two main reasons for students' pessimism about contemporary society were: on the one hand, fake news and social media and, on the other, education. Regarding the former, they talked about new technologies and consequently, about social media, and the large amount of fake news that is encountered there. With regards to education, they felt that it is not only social media that influences society, and that education also plays an important role, although it

is not as socially valued as it should be. For example, there was one student who was very worried about the fact that society pays more attention to a footballer than to a scientist.
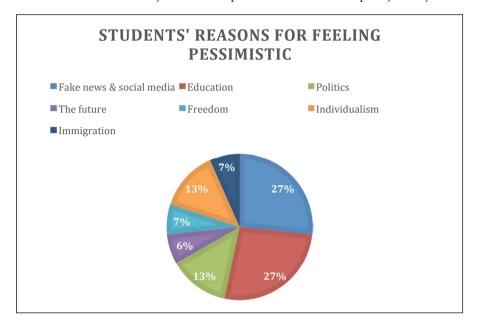
FIGURE 8. Reasons why students felt pessimistic about contemporary society

The two next most important aspects that made them feel pessimistic were politics and individualism. On the one hand, they explained that politicians tend to make many promises before they are elected but once they are in office, they do not keep them. Furthermore, they also felt that politicians lied in order to distract people from the real problems in their lives. When talking about politics, certain trending topics in Spain were mentioned, such as homophobia and the appearance of VOX[9] on the political scene. On the other, they commented on the negative aspects of human individualism, saying that people usually complain about things they do not like but do not make the effort to solve the problems. Interestingly, they mentioned the example of violence against women and how, sometimes, people know it is happening but do not report it to the police. In addition to this, one student was very worried about their future job prospects,

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9   VOX is a new political party which entered Parliament after the April elections in 2019. Since its foundation, this party has been very controversial because some of their policy proposals have been considered extremist.

another voiced the opinion that the most important problem in our society is freedom since most people feel free but they are not, while another talked about the immigration problem our country is currently facing.

The most frequent bigrams used to talk about this topic were *social media, fake news, bad things, big problem, contemporary society, gender violence* and *homosexual people*. Accordingly, this corpus has more negative words than positive ones, as shown in table 8.

TABLE 8. Distribution of negative and positive words according to the BING lexicon in the contemporary society topic

Sentiment	n
Negative	4,809
Positive	2,048

Again, the most frequent feelings were those of negativity, fear and finally, anger and trust, with the same overall number of words, as illustrated in table 9.

TABLE 9. Distribution of words according to the NRC lexicon in the contemporary society topic

Sentiment	n
Negative	3,348
Positive	2,356
Fear	1,495
Trust	1,257
Anger	1,257
Sadness	1,207
Disgust	1,066
Anticipation	854
Joy	716
Surprise	543

After analysing the results, the most striking thing is that although students were asked various questions related to their degree, there is no mention of the literary aspects of their course having any connection with their daily lives, with some even voicing the opinion that literature-based subjects are of no value in them attaining jobs, even teaching, in the future. In fact, the study provides evidence that, for some, literature is something they actually hate. It is surprising, though, that students did not make reference to any literary

aspect of the degree since 30% of the subjects offered in the second year of their course are about literature.

5. The Challenges: an Activist Literary Education and the Role of Emotions

The results of our microcosmic study evidence that the ethical dimension of the Humanities and their potential to ameliorate different aspects of contemporary society emerges as an important absence in our students' cosmovision. Likewise, as discussed in subsection 4.1, literature is a notable component of this catalogue of absences and its potential to widen students' ideological and epistemological horizons is not addressed in their commentaries. Only one of the students interviewed alluded to the usefulness of literature, in the context of fighting against manipulation. Looking at the results of Sentiment Analysis— with negativity standing out in the repertoire of the feelings expressed— manipulation emerges as a distressing reality for our students, but negativity is also clearly associated with literature in that it is clearly not perceived of as in any way beneficial or helpful in minimising the effects of contemporary problems. As demonstrated in subsection 4.2, the feelings permeating the students' opinions about literature—which, paradoxically, is one of the most frequently used words in their responses—run from disappointment to hatred. Literature is not perceived as a *locus* of enjoyment, personal enrichment or emotional self-fulfillment either. For us teachers, who conceive of literature as a source of hope and (re)generation, our primary ethical duty should be to fight against its residualisation, through meaningfully filling the aforementioned absences and working to strengthen not only our students' critical consciousness, but also their positive emotions concerning the role of the Humanities and, especially, of literature. When positive, emotions, which singularise our actions and ideological positionings, are a hugely important weapon with which to counterattack the politics of homogenisation put forward by some leading interests.

Speaking about emotions, the first challenge that we face is to consciously restore in our lessons an appealing notion of literature, such that it can eventually be perceived as a subject designed to particularly foster an intellectual and emotional dynamics that can help to destabilise the imperialist centrality of manipulative messages. As Martínez Serrano notes, students need to perceive the usefulness of literary texts in order to generate "new knowledge that might help us cope with a complex reality where events have an outstanding global dimension and planetary implications" (2015, 186). Students' perception of literature as a potential generator of refreshing new knowledge can be activated if they are shown that its essence is immune to interested mutilations and irreconcilable compartmentalisations, the reductive principles that nurture manipulation.

We must show our students that literature and its textual representations have historically configured an inclusive symbiotic realm "in which the human appears as a whole" (Talvet 2019, 44), in all its complexity, and they are, therefore, an instrument that truly enhances unbounded creativity and imagination. Working with literary texts contributes to activating a vital ability: "the ability to imagine well a variety of complex issues affecting the story of a human life as it unfolds: to think about childhood, adolescence, family relationships, illness, death, and much more in a way informed by an understanding of a wide range of human stories, not just by aggregate data" (Nussbaum 2016, 26). The students' perceptions of contemporary society outlined in subsection 4.3 were mostly negative. They identified some of its most important problems, from homophobia to violence against women. However, they did not consider literature a useful humanistic tool for activating imaginative solutions with which to fight against these distressing realities.

The humanistic ability "to imagine well" without the interference of any imposed ideas that Nussbaum describes is intimately linked to the conscious need to highlight the inexhaustible association of literature with interpretative and/or appropriative freedom. This constitutes a fruitful dimension for personalisation that will enable students to be themselves and not what mass fashions or trends want them to be, and as such they may deem it attractive and useful for destabilising the aspirations to centrality of the reductive epistemology typical of manipulation. Students need to discover the pleasures of interpretative freedom: the semiotic potential of the literary text, which knows no fossilising labels, "can by its very nature migrate across jealously patrolled borders" (Eagleton 2013, 76) and transcend limitations. As Damrosch argues, literary works "take us out of our immediate environment and concerns" (2020, 341) and allow us to intimately validate, within our microcosms, wider horizons of possibility and open spaces alternative to those infected by the pandemic of manipulation. Within the frame of an activist literary education, we must also show students that the expansive potential of literature is not just designed to be safely contained within the realm of individual improvement. It is also designed to invade the spaces of sociopolitical interventions, to ameliorate them and to protect us from some of their perversions. In a context within which, as Ruth Miller (2019) notes, "data mining, as a product of mass democracy, operates comfortably as a democratic practice, even as it calls into question the relevance of classic liberal democratic ideals" (5) and creates the illusion that "the democracy at the center of which it operates is […] a democracy that runs on endless growth" (7), one of our aims should be to deconstruct the validity of this illusion, as we have painful evidence of democratic regression. Working with literary texts trains us to discover different levels of signification, including those that displease the *status quo*. Teaching how

to effect transpositions, from critically examining the complexity of literary texts to scrutinising that of real life, is a noble task.

We need other instruments to emotionally validate in the classroom the activist potential of literature. In this respect, a second challenge should consist in fostering meaningful confluences where clear separations have traditionally been established. Reconciling our duality as lecturers and scholars entails incorporating literary criticism—a largely unexplored discipline in undergraduate environments in Spain—as a valuable oppositional tool in our lessons. At a time when reflective practices are neglected, we must encourage meaningful discussions on how the variety of the critical responses to the corpus of literary texts analysed in the classroom enriches our cosmovision and creates a wonderful endless continuum of dialogue with those texts. This dialogue perpetually revitalises them and updates their messages, whilst always being hospitably open to students' contributions.

Literary criticism can be an illuminating force in our lessons. However, this discipline is also being affected by some current pernicious dynamics. Probably under the pressures of careerism and of the requirements for publication in high-impact journals, literary critics sometimes choose to stay within their comfort zones. They practise 'safe' asepsis, thus contributing to widening the separation between academia and the human complexity beyond its walls, whilst showing a "fatal lack of critical flair and imaginative audacity" (Eagleton 2013, x). In this respect, Jüri Talvet has denounced literary criticism as being "torn away from the living reality around us and establishing its own private reign with its sophisticated language, understandable only for specialised and consecrated people, those sharing the 'language technology' of the guild" (2019, 5). Knut Brynhildsvoll argues that, on occasions, "the theory is not primarily used to shed light on the literary works, but to demonstrate its own applicability" (2017, 235). For Meretoja and Lyytikäinen "the efforts of literary studies as a discipline to acquire scientific status" have sanctioned as valid "an aspiration […] to purify literary research of any considerations of value" (2015, 1). Yet, if we confine their potential within such impermeable boundaries, literary studies "may even be damaging for literature" (Pokrivčák 2014, 168), with the result that "some of the best writing and the most profound thinking about Literature, Culture or Language might well be taking place outside academia" (Martínez Serrano 2015, 181). Asepsis and impermeability minimise the activist potential of literary criticism. In this respect, A. J. Angulo (2016a) concludes that "scholars have ignored ignorance" (3), an "*active* ignorance" that "moves beyond naïveté and passivity and into the territory of active construction, maintenance, regulation and diffusion" (6; emphasis in original) and is therefore indissolubly linked to manipulation.

Our refusal to separate literary criticism from its non-aseptic activist dimension is supported by many critical voices that advocate "an ethical turn in literary studies and in the humanities at large" (Meretoja and Lyytikäinen 2015, 1). This ethical dimension must be exploited in the classroom, by presenting students with valuable models of how through meditating on the depth of significations communicated by literary texts and on the new semiotic horizons that they open, "a leap from […] hypothetical statements of what one would do in imaginary scenarios to actually carrying out concrete actions in the real world" (Meretoja and Lyytikäinen 2015, 4) can be effected. Confluences between the specificity of what we learn and its applicability to wider areas must always be sought. Students need to move beyond the reductive vision of the usefulness of their philological knowledge as evidenced by the responses discussed in subsection 4.2. We must foster the emergence of transformationist creativity and independent critical positionings and exemplify the goodness of the non-prescriptive side of literary criticism, the one which simply unmasks human beings "try[ing] hard to unveil […] the densities of meaning embedded in a work of art," as well as "their universal worth and their irresistible appeal to innumerable potential readers" (Martínez Serrano 2015, 191). In a world deeply influenced by media manipulation, the primary function of literary criticism is to pay homage to the non-controllable boundlessness of the literary imagination: our lessons must be articulated around the attractive precondition that "the Idea of the book is the Idea that there is no end to this very Idea, and that it contains nothing less than its own proliferation, its multiplication, its dispersion" (Nancy 2009, 41). As Eagleton states, books "are inherently open-ended, capable of being transported from one context to another and of accumulating fresh significances in the process" (2013, 75), and students must see themselves as potential creators of these new meanings.

If this precondition is made emotionally functional in our lessons, it will eventually be meaningfully exported to the extra-academic space and will generate creative solutions to contemporary problems. Literature will then be perceived as extremely useful in achieving wider social aims, precisely one of the absences that the students' answers identified. Our English Studies degrees should become microcosms hospitable to healing practices, such as those training students to critically examine non-discipline-specific issues, such as "which companies make texts, physical processes of production and distribution, system of cross-subsidy and monopoly profit making, the complicity of educational canons with multinational corporations' business plans, and press coverage, inter alia" (Miller 2012, 107). Within these microcosms of resistance, we should strive to minimise the effects of the hostile factors that we described in section 2. As Nussbaum argues, "we probably cannot produce people who are firm against

every manipulation, but we can produce a social culture that is itself a powerful surrounding 'situation,' strengthening the tendencies that militate against stigmatization and domination" (2016, 44).

It is here that a third challenge must be set. We must make our students perceive that the intense confluence between literature and literary criticism is not only intellectually rewarding but also emotionally significant. We should discipline ourselves to engage with our students' feelings and emotions beyond the authority of the constraining factors integrating their sometimes hostile academic realms, made up of tight schedules and exceedingly large groups. So far, we have devoted much of our discussion to signalling the ways in which intellectual engagement can be promoted and to demonstrating that, beyond impermeability and asepsis, "*new arguments for reading literature are needed* […] that are constructively and creatively connected both to the cultural heterogeneity and to the new media ecology of our time" (Persson 2015, 202; emphasis in original). In Damrosch's words, we have put forward the notion that it is essential to make our students realise that "today the careful reading of challenging literary works has something of the oppositional force of the slow food movement in a world dominated by artery-clogging fast food" (2020, 5). Emotions must now come to the forefront. Against the distressing background of homogenising fashions and ideologies, the first meaningful emotional connection that must be established with our students revolves around setting revolutionary expectations about their (re)generative capabilities. Students must think of themselves as potential members of an 'elite' that, by reflectively working with literature, will not be an easily reducible entity. Strengthening their positive expectations about themselves is part of an "active *emotional labor*" (Hargreaves 2005a, 280; emphasis in original) that we lecturers have too frequently left aside in many universities, "where the normal mode of teaching involves large lectures with little or no active participation by students and little or no feedback on student writing" (Nussbaum 2016, 56).

Likewise, one of the most important emotional connections that can be established with our students is to tell them that they are our repositories of hope and that they must fight against the paralysing pessimism that permeates their views on contemporary society, as discussed in subsection 4.3. Within a context ruled by commodifying patterns of access to knowledge, we must privilege an educational praxis focused on strengthening their personal, inalienable *ethos* and signal the ways in which this *ethos* can be put to wonderfully transformative uses beyond academia and its sometimes exclusivist pressures to attain curricular excellence. We must encourage students to see themselves as endowed with a portable boundlessness. Beyond the excesses of specialisation and the cold authority of utilitarianism, we must guide them to use their personal meditation

on the message of literary texts to give constructive form to the multifarious components of their humanness, deprecating reductive patterns of social acceptability. We must motivate them not to neglect their non-evaluable or non-practical side because it may be the key to the (re)generation we crave, lost amidst negativity, enforced uniformity and manipulation. Our literature lessons should be, in sum, spaces where students are given the possibility of "exploring their identities and multiple positionings" and of rejecting "the processes of marginalization and the privileging of particular kinds of knowledge and experience" (Tilley and Taylor 2014, 57). We must not only trace in our lessons the history of literature and its productions, but also archaeologically exhibit the interested production and dominance of those depersonalising ideologies against which literature has always reacted.

Spaces ruled by a temporal pace suitable for promoting emotional responses to the texts—such that time working with them can be seen as a time of enjoyment and freedom—must proliferate in our 'slow-functioning' microcosms. Students must learn to value the ability to create personal positionings and interpretations. Even when these individual productions remain in the realm of the personal imagination and do not reach a stage of materialisation in concrete actions, they become inserted in a free constellation of responses to literature and, by extension, to life that enriches us as human beings and therefore contributes to validating a notion of 'usefulness' different from that represented by the practicalities rendered fashionable by the media. The supreme achievement of our emotional task would be to activate an ethics of desire, articulated around what Jeffery Frank (2019) describes as the students' "willingness to commit to conserving what is good and create conditions for flourishing" (2), in order that they can also "take the risk of demonstrating the good of that same position to a fellow student or a family member who may not, at least initially, see its good" (16). Our activist duty as lecturers and scholars is to design routes for encouraging the dissemination of these commitments beyond academia and for invading the same communicative channels that reductive ideologies use to diffuse their postulates with these new horizons of possibility. The confluence of emotions and activism generates an intellectual dynamism that is the best antidote against the contemporary pandemics that generate passivity and conformism. We cannot ignore the unhappiness we experience in these academic contexts where we frequently get lost amidst so many bureaucratic tasks and impermeable projects focused on pursuing 'excellence' to the neglect of our first duty: empowering and giving voice to the citizens who, though silenced in the media, are truly committed to ameliorating society.

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