

## **Creating Discerning Students: Media Literacy in EFL**

**Louise Haynes**

**ACADEMIA, Journal of the Nanzan Academic Society, Literature and Language, Nanzan University; Vol. 76, p. 53-63, June 2004.**

### **Abstract**

Students of English are increasingly using Internet and other authentic sources of the language for research and for pleasure. Many are choosing to go abroad to experience the language in other countries and cultures. A large part of their contact with English will include messages in the news or in entertainment media. In the English language classroom in Japan, as the skills of our students evolve, teachers can begin to show learners the subtleties of how vocabulary and images are used not only to convey meaning but to influence our purchasing decision, for example, or to further the values of a given community. In addition to developing critical thinking skills, the goal of media literacy education is to encourage students to become more prudent consumers and more discerning world citizens by maintaining a healthy inquisitiveness about the information produced by the media. This paper will outline the basic elements of media literacy education and will discuss the place that media literacy training has in English language education.

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we find ourselves living in the information age. Facts and figures, up-to-the-minute news broadcasts, cell phone text messaging, downloadable music, instantly available with the click of a mouse or the button on a touch pad. How do students of English deal with all of this information? How do they interpret the messages they take in every day through television, the print media and the Internet? This paper aims to show why media literacy skills are essential in any EFL curriculum and to provide a general outline of the basic aspects that should be included for students of English.

#### **“Critical” media literacy**

In 1992, at the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program’s National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, “media literacy” was defined as “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes” (Aspen Institute 1992). Since then, the definition has been amplified to include skills that foster critical thinking:

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy (Center for Media Literacy).

There are widely varying definitions of “critical thinking.” Halonen suggests as a starting point the synthesis of a variety of definitions as “the propensity and skills to engage in activity with reflective skepticism focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Halonen 1995).

In English language education in Japan, there has been increasing attention paid to students’ use of critical thinking skills in language learning, and in content areas as well. More and more course books are asking learners to discuss controversial social issues. This use of reflective reasoning in the Japanese context has not been unquestioned:

In Japan, methods of teaching global issues and critical thinking have been criticized as foreign, as challenging the *status quo* or as conflicting with elements of Japanese culture, particularly Japanese classroom culture. To a certain extent, teaching critical thinking does this in any culture. Also, to a certain extent, since the Meiji era, adapting foreign ideas, challenging the status quo, and introducing values that conflict with previous cultural values has become a part of modern Japanese history and culture (Gettings 1999).

Within the Ministry of Education here in Japan, there seems to be an uncertainty about the terminology involved with regard to media literacy. Shibata compares the position of the Canadian Ministry of Education on the teaching of media literacy skills with views presented by a committee of the Ministry of Education in Japan. She found that part of the problem in the Japanese system revolves around the interpretation of the word “critical,” as in “the critical use of the media.” As the government regulates the educational system here in Japan, it should not be seen as promoting media literacy in order to criticize the media (Shibata 2002, 105).

She points out that media literacy is currently “classified into two categories: ‘critical use of the media’ and ‘subjective use of the media’” (ibid, 103). Then in 1991, “Subjective use” was subsequently defined at the Information Cooperation Conference as the “ability to utilize information in social and vocational activities” (Ministry of Education in Japan, quoted in Shibata 2002, 103). In much of the recent literature on “information education” the emphasis is on the use of computers to store and retrieve data, the use of programs such as Power Point to produce presentations, and the use of technology to produce promotional materials such as videos. Certainly in the information age these skills are necessary, but in order to foster greater understanding of the power of computers, technology, and forms of digital and other media, higher order thinking skills—critical thinking—are needed, as is a critical approach to the use of the various media. The “critical approach” is one of discerning the methods and effects of the media, not simply criticizing the messages it sends to us. Perhaps a less highly charged term would be discernment.

The Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary defines “discern” as “to know, recognize or understand something, especially something that is not obvious,” and “discerning” as “able to show good judgement about the quality of something” (Oxford 2000). Students of English often have trouble seeing beyond the words and pictures on the page to interpret the meaning behind the symbols. They have not yet learned to recognize what is not obvious. Media literacy education is one way to show them how to formulate questions about the symbols they see.

“In the context of semiotics, 'decoding' involves not simply basic recognition and *comprehension* of what a text 'says' but also the *interpretation* and *evaluation* of its meaning with reference to relevant codes” (Chandler 2001, italics in original). Many of our students do not yet understand that the message that was intended by the sender is not always the message that the students interpret. There are several levels to interpreting any message that is sent, and for language learners they may stop at a very superficial level of meaning, with the assumption that it is the only possible one. However, interpretation of signs or messages does not occur in a vacuum.

The meaning of signs or representations is dependent on social, cultural, and historical contexts. We construct meaning based on the physical appearance of the sign; our previous personal and cultural experience; time or era we live in; and context or place it occurs. There is not one meaning or interpretation of an [sic] each sign. There are multiple sides and points of view to each sign (Yildiz 2002, 4).

In the next section we will look at further reasons why a basic study of media literacy skills is in the best interest of students of the English language, beginning with this connection between signs in context and the media that these students consume.

### **Why teach media literacy in EFL?**

A major motivation on the part of the teacher for introducing media literacy studies in Japan is that there is great interest on the part of English language majors to learn about other cultures and countries. Many students use the media to learn about the latest news, gossip, history, festivals, and so on, of a particular culture. American sitcoms are quite popular. The authentic English that they encounter on the Internet, on television, and in films, is representative of that country's social/historical context and without knowledge of that context, the student will miss many cues given in the messages.

With regard to language learning, the use of authentic materials can provide learners with “target language items... in the kinds of contexts where they naturally occur... [which] will assist learners because they will experience the language item in interaction with other closely related grammatical and discourse elements” (Nunan 1999, 27). Learners will need to understand the cultural context of the language they encounter as well as the cultural items in these natural media settings. Media Literacy study can assist students in learning to ask questions about the particular culture they experience through the media they are using.

For example, reading the headlines in the New York Times we might count the number of male and female writers and question whether the 2:1 ratio is in any way indicative of the percentage of women in the U.S. workforce. Obviously this is not a scientifically accurate way of investigating this, but it starts the students thinking about more than the 2-dimensional messages they receive when viewing a newspaper.

As learners interact with and begin to ask questions about what is produced in the media of a given culture, they simultaneously develop schema to understand that culture. With a wider background knowledge of the culture, they can learn to evaluate stereotypes in reports about the people of that country or culture. When researching problems occurring in certain countries, they can learn not to rely on the solutions given in the report, but to consider what alternative solutions might be effective.

### **Student interest in shopping**

Students in general, and university students in particular who may have their first after-school jobs, have a natural interest in money and in shopping. They are active consumers. Learning about the effects of advertising gives them a wider choice of tools to use in making wise decisions about their purchases. If they start to ask the right questions, they may not only save themselves money by buying quality products, but might also make prudent judgments about their place and power as consumers, and the effects of their purchases on the environment, for example. Recognizing how we interpret the messages and signs we receive helps students in understanding how we all are affected by advertising.

### **Development of language skills**

Training in basic media literacy helps develop linguistic, academic, and critical thinking skills, which include knowing what questions to ask, taking context into consideration and imagining what is missing in a picture or report, and questioning the validity of an item by cross referencing with an alternative source. It also engages students' metacognitive skills through questioning, identifying "what you know" and "what you don't know," and considering diverse points of view.

Media Literacy studies can assist learners in critically analyzing the information and the language they encounter, and help them learn to recognize "loaded" words and forms of expression. A high level of language ability is not as necessary as is a curiosity about how people obtain their information, how that information is presented to them, and how what is presented shapes their values. Intermediate through advanced level learners will be able to augment their vocabulary by understanding the subtleties of words depending on the context in which they are used. This awareness can also lead to greater use of the student's creativity in oral and written expression.

Many EFL students in Japan currently use media sources such as CNN, BBC, USA Today, Yahoo News, and English versions of Asahi and Yomiuri newspapers to do research for presentations, reports and essays. Recognizing reliable Internet sources, for example, is part of the skills one develops through a study of media literacy. Learning to decipher fact from opinion is essential when supplying sources to support a thesis.

Recent course books such as *Impact Issues* (Day 1998) deal with a wide variety of controversial social issues. Students can be drawn to the role the media plays in shaping public opinion and attitudes around these topics: how the story is presented, what information is given and what omitted, etc.

### **Outline of Points to Cover in Teaching Media Literacy**

We will now turn to what can be covered in the classroom. More than anything, teaching media literacy is encouraging students to ask questions. What is the media?

#### **How media is manufactured**

It may be easy to assume that everyone has the same definition of the term "media," yet this is a good point on which to start the discussion. Learners will no doubt come up with rather obvious answers such as television, radio, magazines and the like. The teacher can stretch their thinking by asking whether a billboard, a logo on a bag or shirt, an ad at the top of an Internet browser, a political candidate speaking from the top of a

van parked in the street, or even the university course they are taking at this moment qualify as form of “media.” Why or why not? The discussion can turn to how we would define what media is and is not.

The next topic to consider is who owns the media?<sup>1</sup> What else does that corporation own? How might that affect the choice of stories covered? The major media, at least in the United States, are large corporations that are generally owned by even larger corporations. The main business is sales, and what they are selling is audiences. They sell the audiences to other businesses who have products to sell (Chomsky 1997).

We could engage the students in considering who chooses the stories and images, why some of these are chosen over others, which viewpoints on particular stories are broadcast and why. What outside influences are there on the journalists that write news stories? Is one aspect of the story presented as trivial or more important than another? How is this done and what is the effect on the reader/viewer? A more difficult question is whether there is bias in the reporting and how it is possible to discern this. It is also important to consider various kinds of bias, especially those we might not consider:

“Another important bias operative in many news organizations is neither liberal nor conservative but a bias for sales, which in a television era means a preference for pictures, sensationalism and the elevation of emotional coverage over logic and reason” (Considine 2003, 4).

This may be one reason why news reporting rarely covers stories that are ordinary. Are there other possible reasons?

### **Whose voice?**

Next, we might ask about those who are allowed to speak in the media we consume. Students can observe first-hand whose voices they hear/read: news commentator, politician, person on the street, “experts” such as university professors and other researchers, victims of war, refugees? Students should be aware of the location of the speakers, and whether they are in the executive boardroom, on the street, in quiet surroundings or in the midst of a political demonstration. What do the speakers look like? Are they dressed in business suits or in costumes and carrying posters or signs? How does their attire affect the credibility of what they say?

In addition, the students’ attention should be drawn to the fact that cultural values are being implied overtly or covertly. The learners can discuss steps they could take to pinpoint those values, and consider how those values may align or differ from those in their own cultures or communities.

An essential question to be raised in any media literacy study is what is being omitted. It is easier to take on what we are given as fact than to question what we have not been told simply because it takes a great deal of background knowledge about a particular topic to realize that only a portion of the total facts have been presented. One form in which omission widely occurs is through the use of “sound bites.” Students come to understand that there are time limits on any news broadcast, and space limits to any newspaper or magazine news item. Therefore, editors must make decisions not only

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, I will limit most of my examples to the media of newspapers and television.

about the selection of stories to include, but also the length of interview comments or statements to the press.

This leads to a discussion of the consequences of partial coverage of issues in the media. How are the debates limited in breadth or discussion? Why are some aspects considered and others not allowed in the debate? Whose interests does this serve? How does a limited analysis of an issue shape public policy?

### **Images**

Images are perhaps the most powerful methods of transmitting a message. Students should be aware of images broadcast or published over and over again in relation to stories about various minority groups, domestic or international conflicts, and question why these images are used and not others, and what message these images send to the media consumer. Looking at individual images, they might consider what the relationship is among the members in the image, power or lack of it, violence or the result of violence, among other questions. They might also discuss what they could do if they thought there was bias in the images being used.

### **Word usage**

One of the most important aspects of media study is analyzing the choice of words used in a story and understanding how they affect the reader/listener. What impressions do the words infidel, freedom fighter, terrorist, evil, democracy, alliance, or axis generate, for example? Other questions to ask may include why some words are used and not others, what words are used in advertising, how they are associated with images, and what emotional charge they carry, if any.

### **Internet**

Until recently, the people who have produced the majority of the media we consume have been media corporations, or those with the ability to finance media broadcasts or publications. It is quite difficult for the average citizen to produce and widely distribute opinions or facts about products, social trends, or government policies, for example. That is, until the use of the Internet became widespread. It is now possible for anyone with Internet access to build a web site and contact millions of others around the globe. The recent explosion in the number of blogs (originally Web Logs) designed to broadcast one's opinions attests to the popularity of this form of expression. Yet our students may not have developed techniques to filter fact from opinion, or whether a "scientific" study used on a pro-smoking web site is truly based on credible scientific methods. As teachers we need to point out that a healthy skepticism is an admirable quality to have when using the Internet as a research database.

### **Conclusion**

As language teachers we can assist our students in making sense of the innumerable messages in English that overwhelm them daily in their academic and personal lives. Through media literacy they can become more aware of how they interpret the messages they take in on television and Internet, and in the print and entertainment media. Media literacy study helps prepare students for their later roles as citizens of a

democracy by developing their critical observation and inquiry skills. Media literacy education is a path along which they learn formulate questions about the symbols they see, whether pictorial or verbal. As many learners have not yet been presented with concepts of message transmission and reception, their awareness of the possible multiple levels of communication and multiple levels of meaning can be enhanced.

By learning to distinguish words and expressions that carry double meanings learners are more able to critically analyze the information and the language they encounter. Media studies can be introduced to lower level students, and at high levels can help learners expand their vocabulary by understanding the nuances of words within the context in which they are used. Being alert to integrity of Internet web sites as possible sources for research information also depends on an awareness of how to interpret and use the media.

Any study of the media can use learner interests as its point of departure. Student interests in sports, shopping, fashion, or other countries and cultures can become the springboard for discussion on how the media shapes our view of our society and the world. In fact, if learners understand how and in whose interests the media operates, when they experience media from an authentic source, they will realize that the source itself is part of that cultural context.

The main questions to raise have to do with the voices, images, words we hear and see, and how we interpret messages and how they are interpreted for us. Equally important is the information we do not receive, and the reasons this occurs, as these omissions also have an effect on the shaping of public policy. Teachers should provide resources that students can consult for alternative interpretations of current events. Through this study, students come away with a more mature ability to question how they form their own attitudes and opinions on a wide variety of social issues, their purchasing habits, and their future goals, while maintaining a healthy skepticism of the media around them.

## RESOURCES

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