

Seeing Is (Not) Believing – Teaching Media Literacy through ELT

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Abstract — Media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, signs, packaging, marketing materials, video games, recorded music, the Internet etc). Media literate individuals can understand how these messages are constructed, and recognize how they create meaning. Education for media literacy means encouraging students to question what they watch, hear and read. In other words, it develops critical thinking. An ELT classroom is a good place to include elements of media literacy education, because media messages represent authentic material for learning a foreign language. Students can be taught to "read between the lines", recognize the language of persuasion and learn the difference between the text and the subtext. This paper will provide an analysis of media literacy elements and give some suggestions for including them in ELT. The workshop will provide some useful practical examples of classroom-ready exercises.

Index Terms — education, ELT, foreign languages, media literacy.

INTRODUCTION

If literacy in the traditional sense is defined as the ability to read and write, then media literacy can be defined as the ability to "read" television and other mass media and to "write" media messages. According to the Media Literacy Project, media literacy is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages of all kinds" so that media literate individuals "can understand how these media messages are constructed, and how they can create meaning – usually in ways hidden beneath the surface." This ability has become very important in societies dominated by mass media in which individuals are constantly exposed to all kinds of messages. In the past people used to get their information from a limited number of usually quite familiar sources, from their community. Nowadays the situation is quite different; because of globalization and the omnipresence of the media, people are bombarded with information from a wide variety of sources, such as TV, radio, the Internet, video games, recorded music, films, books, newspapers, magazines, as well as all kinds of promotional materials - newsletters, billboards, TV commercials, advertisements, packaging, etc. Even children get a lot of information and are exposed to numerous messages from a very early age.

For this reason it has become necessary to develop media literacy and include media education (the process of teaching and learning about media) in the education system. This not only develops students' critical thinking - it also helps them to "construct alternative media" [3] and prepares them for taking the role of reflective, active citizens in their communities. Elements of media literacy education can be incorporated into a number of elementary and secondary school subjects as well as into tertiary level courses. An ELT classroom is a good place to start, because authentic media messages can easily be turned into foreign language teaching materials which can be used to teach students to "read between the lines", recognize the language of persuasion and learn to tell the difference between the text and the subtext.

ELEMENTS OF MEDIA LITERACY

Different sources name various media literacy elements; some call them key concepts or basic principles; some mention as little as three, others enumerate up to eight of them. The Centre for Media Literacy (CML), an organization dedicated to promoting and supporting media literacy education, has summarized these elements and made the following list of 5 core concepts that define media literacy [3]:

Principle of Non-Transparency: All media messages are “constructed”

Media messages are created by authors and no author can create a truly accurate representation of the real world. The audience see only the end result – the product of the author’s decision of what to include in the message and what to omit, of how to approach the topic and how to present it. So, all authors, no matter how objective they try to be, always *construct* their message and this *construction* reflects their background, education, opinions, attitudes and values. According to Masterman, “the media do not present reality, they represent it.” [3]

Codes and Conventions: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Each medium has its own unique aesthetic form and the content of media depends partly on the nature of the medium [8]. Different media use different techniques to present their messages and attract our attention to them. The language of music (rhythm, beat, lyrics ...) is different from the language of film (camera angle, lighting, costumes ...). We also need to be aware that media messages try to influence our opinions and preferences using overt and covert methods. Worsnop [10] states that “Media texts are the product of careful manipulation of constructive elements, both on an obvious and a subtle level. On an obvious level, constructions such as drawings, colors, and headlines may be used. But on a subtle level, constructions such as appeals (generalization appeal or appeal to emotion) may be used.”

Audience Decoding: Different people experience the same media message differently

It is not very likely that two people, no matter how similar they are, will interpret the same media message in exactly the same way. In other words, “audiences negotiate meaning” depending on their background, experience, age, sex, gender, race, social status, etc. [8]. These differences are also reflected in the fact that while some people rarely question the truthfulness of some messages, others are always very critical.

Content and Message: Media have embedded values and points of view

Media messages are rarely impartial and bias-free – they “reflect the values and viewpoints of media makers” [7]. Their content has social and political implications which “convey ideological messages about values, power and authority ... and they have a significant influence on what we think and believe.” [8]. They deal with different issues (race, gender, class ...) and shape our opinions, not only by what they state about them, but also by what they fail to mention.

Motivation: Media are organized to gain profit and/or power

Media industry is an industry like any other – it needs to generate profit in order to survive and it is therefore not surprising that numerous media messages promote consumerism. The commercial implications of media production may not be immediately noticeable to the audience, but one should be aware that there are always someone’s economic interests to be pursued and, as Worsnop [10] puts it “some media texts are created to deliver audiences to advertisers rather than to deliver texts to audiences.” Another important fact is that today there are only about half a dozen global corporations that dominate the world’s media market and according to McChesney, this “concentration of ownership threatens the independence and diversity of information”[3].

It is very important for today’s students to understand the aforementioned core concepts of media literacy because this knowledge can help them acquire the media literacy skills needed to become informed active citizens who (according to [7]) can:

- understand how media messages create meaning
- identify who created a particular media message
- recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do

- name the "tools of persuasion" used
- recognize bias, spin, misinformation and lies
- discover the part of the story that's not being told
- evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, beliefs and values
- create and distribute our own media messages
- become advocates for change in our media system

MEDIA LITERACY IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

Although, according to Kubey [4], [5] "for several historical, political and sociological reasons, U.S. media literacy education traditionally lags behind the rest of the English-speaking world", according to Martens [6] "Most of the states have media education elements in the subject areas of consumer and health skills, in English and language and communication arts frameworks, and (to a lesser extent) in social studies, history, and civics. Also, media literacy education is implemented in after-school programs..." In Croatia, on the other hand, there is no systematic education in media literacy, neither in the form of an independent subject or course, nor in the form of cross-curricular elements included in several subject areas, like in the case of the USA.

Since it has been noticed that first-year students of business and management have a very low level of media literacy, ELT teachers at UAS Baltazar Zaprešić decided to experimentally introduce media literacy elements in ELT and BE classes, for two basic reasons.

The most important reason was the teachers' desire to make the students aware that "Media do not present reality like transparent windows because media messages are created, shaped, and positioned through a construction process. This construction involves many decisions about what to include or exclude and how to represent reality" [3]. The students seem to be surprisingly unaware of this. Thus, the intention was to increase the students' media literacy level and to develop their critical thinking skills, as "they should be able to apply this knowledge when accessing, analyzing and evaluating all kinds of media messages." [6]

However, as Martens [6] puts it, "media literacy is seldom taught as a goal in itself." Teaching English is the primary goal of ELT classes and media messages represent a valuable source of authentic material for learning English. Such materials cover two of the four traditional language skills - reading and listening, and can be used to prepare teaching material which develops the remaining two skills – speaking and writing. Such materials and related activities contribute to acquiring new vocabulary and language, which constitutes the second reason.

According to Schilder [9], meaning does not simply exist, but refers to how individuals create meaning from their experience. In the light of the third media literacy core concept, Jones and Flannigan [2] state that "the idea that the world we shape, in turn, shapes us is a constant and veritable fact. Newspapers, television, and computers, all human inventions, help formulate our beliefs, perspectives, and even competencies. And from each media we create new realities."

Constructivism is an epistemology that affects the way learning has been conceived in the past decade [9] and according to it teachers should guide students to construct their own meaning. This was the approach adopted when developing ELT media literacy activities.

The basic presumption was that the ability to analyze and evaluate media messages is an essential first step in becoming media literate. Therefore, the first stage of the experiment was research – finding authentic media messages (and in the context of the ELT classroom, authentic teaching materials) which included bias, misinformation, omissions and language of persuasion. This was an easy task. Then, it was decided to use textual materials only, as they are easily tailored to fit ELT purposes. Several articles dealing with suitable topics (which could be related to the syllabus) were chosen, abridged and adapted for the B1 (intermediate) level. The next stage included preparing pre-reading and post-reading activities focused not only on the new vocabulary and the story (the level of the text) but also on the underlying meaning (the subtext).

For example, a discussion about persuasion techniques can be used as a warm-up activity, which prepares students for the reading activities, but also raises their awareness of the existence of the language of persuasion and enables them to recognize it in media messages. A possible continuation of this activity is to have teams of students

examine media messages to find examples of persuasion techniques and report on their findings to the rest of the class.

An interesting reading activity may include examining newspaper articles to detect the use of misleading headings, adjectives which create a bias or misleading conclusions which cannot be derived from the content of the article. Such activities can also be used with video materials.

According to [7], one of the most important media literacy skills is deconstruction – closely examining and “taking apart” media messages to understand how they work. As a post-reading activity, a number of deconstructing questions regarding the context of the articles can be discussed [7]:

- Whose message is this? Who created or paid for it? Why?
- Who is the “target audience”? What is their age, ethnicity, class, profession, interests, etc.? What words, images or sounds suggest this?
- What is the “text” of the message? (What we actually see: written words, photos, drawings, logos, design, music, sounds, etc.)
- What is the “subtext” of the message? (What do you think is the hidden or unstated meaning?)
- What “tools of persuasion” are used?
- What positive messages are presented? What negative messages are presented?
- What part of the story is not being told?

Another post-reading activity which activates students and can be done as a group activity is creating a counter-ad. After discussing, analyzing and deconstructing an advertising message (which during the experiment with business students was connected with the topic “Advertising”), the students can be asked to create an advertisement themselves and use the persuasion techniques discussed in order to deliver a different message (the truth?).

CONCLUSION

According to [1] the information age and technological capabilities have caused us to conceptualize the learning process again and to design new instructional approaches. Incorporating media literacy elements into ELT classes based on constructivism is such an approach. Deconstructing ads, identifying the persuasion techniques used, and applying the media literacy concepts activates students, increases the level of their media literacy and develops critical thinking. This, in turn, can help them in their everyday lives, which are characterized by information explosion, and in which the saying *Seeing is believing* no longer applies.

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