The Use of Media Literacy Knowledge in Teaching Specific Language Skills

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Abstract
The paper analyzes the benefits of using media literacy knowledge in teaching foreign languages at the tertiary level of education. Lending themselves well to the reading, writing, and discussion skills, media literacy competencies can help language instructors uncover the often hidden layers of meaning both on the textual and audiovisual level. The applicability of this approach will be demonstrated on specific examples.
Key words: media literacy, media education, manifest/latent/cumulative messages, media text

Introduction

Literacy in today's media-rich world does not only signify the ability to read and write in the traditional sense of the meaning, but also the skill of understanding, interpreting, and critically evaluating media texts[1] (Hart 2008; Mičienka, Jirák et al. 2007; Sloboda et al. 2011). In other words, the definition of literacy has changed as new channels of communication together with technological innovations have emerged. In addition, the media, with the Internet in particular, have become the primary sources of information, which can often result in an uncritical acceptance of facts, ideas, or opinions expressed in them. This is especially the case with undergraduate students, who might tend to interpret texts as only right or wrong, instead of being open to interpretation.

In general, foreign language instructors frequently make use of media sources of written, audio, and visual texts such as the Internet, TV, radio, film, newspapers, or magazines, offering instances of authentic language. However, as Quinlisk (2003: 35) claims, media literacy should not only be viewed "as a way to incorporate mass media as a source of linguistic input but also as a tool for learning to interpret multiple layers of messages and to separate mediated images of people, places, things, ideas, and values from those of the real world."

In this paper, our aim is to describe what media literacy is and how it can be applied to foreign language instruction, especially when teaching the skills of reading, writing, and discussing. We demonstrate this application on English as a foreign language (EFL) and English for specific purposes (ESP) taught at the university level.

Defining Media Literacy

According to Silverblatt (2008: 4-5, original emphasis), media literacy can be defined as consisting of the following characteristics:
"1. (P)romot(ing) the critical thinking skills that enable people to make independent choices with regard to: 1) which media programming to select;

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[1] The concept of *text* is to be understood as any media product, whether textual, audiovisual, or multimedia.

and 2) how to interpret the information that they receive through the channels of mass communication.

2. Understanding the process of mass communication.

3. An awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society.

4. The development of strategies with which to analyze and discuss media messages.

5. An awareness of media content as a "text" that provides insight into our contemporary culture and ourselves.

6. The cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content.

7. In the case of media communicators: the ability to produce effective and responsible media messages."

Similarly, Quinlisk (2003: 36) posits that there are certain basic premises which can help in understanding media literacy:

"-… media messages are constructed representations of reality

-… individual experiences filter media messages

-… media messages carry social, political, economic, and aesthetic power

-… each form of media has its own communicative characteristics."

Finally, Hobbs (2011: 55-56) describes the core concepts of media literacy, taking into account the differing emphases and orientations articulated by media literacy scholars over the last decades:

"1. Media messages are constructed.

2. Messages are produced within economic, social, political, historical, and aesthetic contexts.

3. The process of message interpretation consists of an interaction between the reader, the text, and the culture.

4. Media use language and other symbol systems with codes and conventions associated with different genres and forms of communication.

5. Media representations play a role in people's understanding of and participation in social reality.

6. Media messages reflect and shape individual and social behavior, attitudes, and values."

As can be seen from the above conceptualizations of media literacy, several of its characteristics seem to be repeated and shared by the authors. First of all, media messages are social constructions and representations of reality, i.e. reality is mediated via symbolic representations, which then have to undergo the process of interpretation. Secondly, media messages arise within specific contexts and carry specific power connected to economy, society, politics, or aesthetics. Thirdly, media messages provide, via the process of interpretation, insights into contemporary culture, ourselves, and communication. Fourthly, media messages are conveyed through genres, which are highly conventionalized forms of communication. Lastly, media messages exert a considerable impact on both the individual and the society.

Many of the above mentioned characteristics can be considered when incorporating a media literacy approach into classroom practice, especially in the case of reading, writing, and discussion skills. However, the most important objective is to provide students with tools necessary for the critical evaluation of media texts so that informed decisions could be made regarding their interpretation. As Silverblatt (2007: 3-4) states, media literacy equips students with important critical thinking skills and analytical frameworks that can scaffold their understanding of various types of media discourse, be it printed or audiovisual.

Types of Media Messages

The messages that the various types of discourse carry can generally be divided into three types – manifest, latent, and cumulative.

Being clear and easy to comprehend, manifest messages are overtly expressed pieces of information that are immediately recognizable to the target audience. A typical example of a genre in which the messages are manifest is the advertisement. One of its functions is to offer a product or service, which the target audience, fully aware of this function, might potentially purchase.

Latent messages, on the other hand, are hidden in the media text, being therefore difficult to notice. As a result, they might exert influence upon the audience's subliminal perception. If advertising is again taken into consideration as in the previous paragraph, latent messages can play a major role in this genre. For instance, product placement is a common advertising strategy in popular programs in the USA such as *American Idol,* in which the judges have a glass of specific soft drink in front of them on the table. This may contribute to the company's image enhancement due to the way it indirectly creates a positive link between the soft drink and youth, talent, fame, entertainment, and singing.

Finally, cumulative messages are frequently occurring types of information that might add new shades of meaning to old ones or help form completely novel meanings over a certain period of time. Cumulative messages can instigate the audience to begin to think stereotypically about such issues as gender, age, race, sexual orientation, and culture. As an illustration, many advertisements make use of predominantly female sexual symbols to sell specific products (such as perfumes, clothing, and cars), thus creating a cumulative message reproducing, naturalizing and even contributing to gender stereotypes.

Media Literacy and English as a Foreign Language

Since EFL students are not expected to become experts in the field of media studies, it is important to select only the most pertinent issues related to critical analysis of media texts. The following set of points was selected, taken from Semali (cited in Quinlisk 2003: 35-36), which can bring specific issues relating to the critical interpretation of media text into focus:
"- the portrayal of people, society, and culture
- the promotion of attitudes and values by specific images
- the generation of meaning through technical, symbolic, and semiotic features
- the media influence on one's opinions of others, world views, social relations, and behaviors
- the meaning of a text as it is interpreted through different cultural positions."
Quinlisk (ibid.: 37) also offers a set of questions for discussions, reading and writing assignments, which can be useful when analyzing various forms of media genres such as TV/radio programs, films, advertisements, posters, spots, magazines, and newspapers:
"1. How are X^2 portrayed physically? (e.g., clothing styles, attractiveness, age, gender)

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[2] X should be understood as a person or a group of people that share one or more characteristics such as age, religion, ethnicity, language/social status, sexual orientation, gender, profession, or economic/educational level (Quinlisk, ibid.)

2. How do X talk? (e.g., dialect, accent)

3. What do they talk about and with whom? (e.g., topics of conversations: serious, trivial)

4. What do they do and what are they shown doing? (e.g., professionally, for leisure)

5. To what extent are their actions meaningful to the plot?

6. What is their power or status level in their communities?

7. How is their lifestyle represented, and what do they possess?

8. Are their intercultural interactions positive, negative, or neutral?

9. What will their future be?

10. What emotions do they display?

11. What kinds of emotional responses do they evoke from the audience or other characters?

12. What are their values and how are they displayed?

13. How would you describe the moral code by which they live?

14. Overall, what stories about X as a culture are being cultivated through these images?

15. How do these cultivated stories of X compare to what you know from your own experience?"

Table 1 Methodological framework for analyzing media texts, taken from Hobbs (2011: 57)

Five Critical Questions	
Core Concepts	*Critical Questions*
Authors and Audiences	1. Who is the author and what is the purpose?
Messages and Meanings	2. What creative techniques are used to attract and hold attention? 3. How might different people understand this message?
Representation and Reality	4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented? 5. What is omitted?

Similarly, in figure 1 above, Hobbs provides a methodological framework for analyzing media texts which can be applied to EFL context and which can result in deepening students' critical thinking skills. She makes use of three broad categories,

namely authors and audiences, messages and meanings, and representation and reality.

Approaches to Analyzing Media Texts

Silverblatt (2007, 2008, 2009) suggests various approaches that can be applied to the analysis of different media texts. The following is a summary of the most important approaches, lending themselves well to the context of EFL instruction.

The *process* approach can be used to examine how and why a specific media text is constructed and received. In addition, it analyzes the way media influences a specific genre. The approach is concerned predominantly with the question of function, i.e. what the underlying purposes of media texts appear to be – whether it is profit, persuasion, education, entertainment, or escape. Interestingly, different media texts can have a combination of purposes, with some being manifest and some latent.

The *formulaic* analysis looks into the characteristic features of a given genre in terms of structure, characters, and plot, providing insight into the way a specific culture is depicted via attitudes, values, stereotypes, and myths in a media text. This analysis is suitable for making comparisons between the same genres in different countries (e.g. Czech talk shows vs. American talk shows).

The *historical* approach analyzes how important events are depicted in specific genres, uncovering any distortions or biases in the presentations of such events. The approach can also be used in tracing the development of a specific genre – for example, it can demonstrate the ever-increasing gore in contemporary horror films as opposed to relatively violence-free scenes in horrors 50 years ago.

The *ideological* approach can be applied to the analysis of ideological values (whether political, religious, or cultural) of messages contained in a given media genre. These messages may convey what life is and what life should be. As Silverblatt (2009: 3) points out, this approach to the study of media texts "is designed to help people become more sensitive to the ways in which the media reflect, reinforce, and shape ideological systems."

An interesting and highly usable approach to analyzing media texts is the so-called *autobiographical* analysis. Being audience driven and idiosyncratic, it looks at the influence of media on individuals, their value systems, styles of living, views, attitudes, and opinions. The approach can shed light on differing perceptions of media content depending on who the receiver of the message is. Thus, the analyses will differ according to the gender, ethnicity, race, class, psychological traits, etc., having the potential to result in interesting debates.

Non-verbal analysis is used to analyze non-verbal features of media texts such as gestures, posture, hand movements in people; tone of voice, dialects, accents in audio materials; layout, font type and size, illustrations in text; and camera movement, focus, background in video materials. For example, in political elections these features may account for up to 75 percent with regard to whether a particular candidate has a potential to be successful candidate.

The above-mentioned approaches or types of analyses were selected for their usability in EFL instruction. Silverblatt (2007, 2008, 2009) offers many more of these, however, they deal with aspects of media texts that would require specialist media knowledge for an effective and in-depth analysis. Chief among these approaches are

the following: mythic analysis, analysis of production elements, and industry perspective.

Example Activity 1

When discussing the topic of advertisements and commercials, media literacy approach can effectively provide useful tools for critical evaluation of the media text, unearthing any hidden assumptions or taken-for-granted stereotypes.
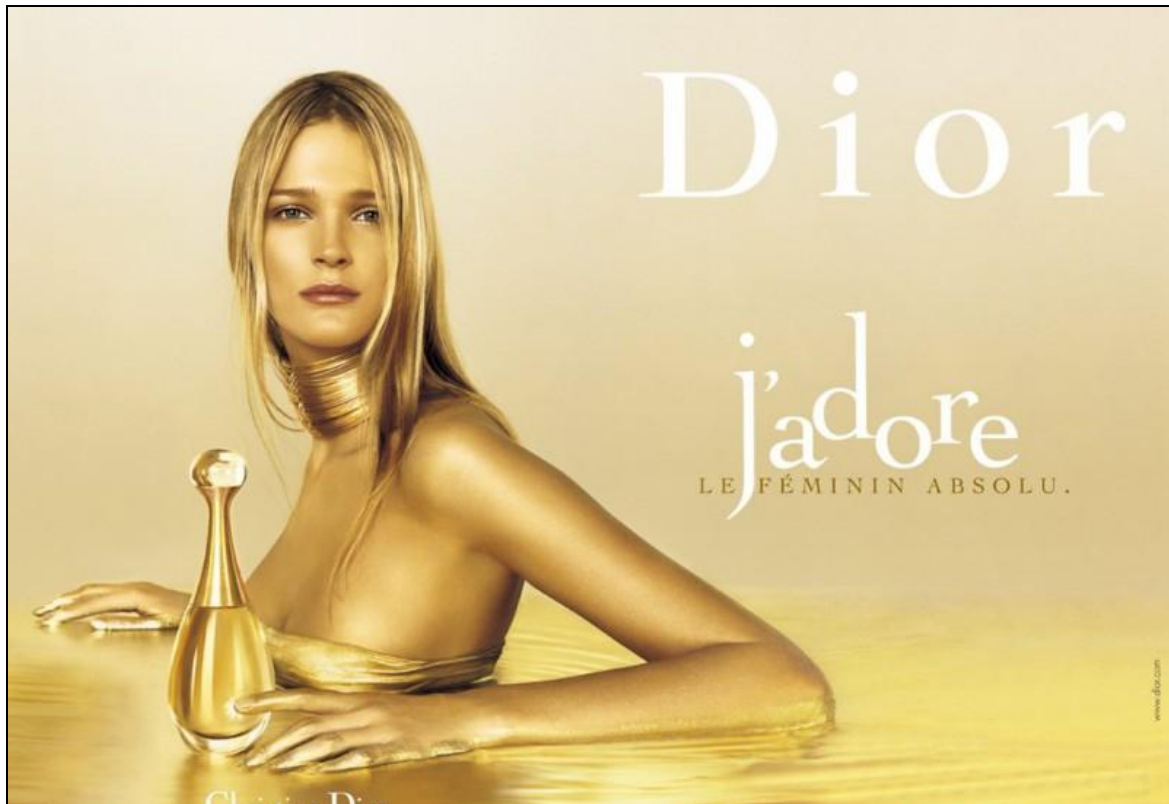

Figure 1. Example of an advertisement for a Dior perfume usable in the English lesson[3]

The above advertisement can be used in discussing how specific colors, objects, font sizes or types can connote or suggest various meanings to promote a specific product. Firstly, however, the students should be made familiar with the basic distinction in semiotics between denotative and connotative meanings. The former is used for the primary or the main meaning of a word while the latter can imply or suggest additional meanings to what is explicitly expressed in the denotation. For example, a dictionary meaning of the word *snake* can be a scaly, legless reptile which is sometimes poisonous. The connotative meaning of the word can include danger or evil.

In this particular advertisement, the students may find several examples of symbols with different denotative and connotative meanings. For example, the woman's blond hair can connote an idealized female, innocence, gold; the jewelry can signify extravagance, attraction, lavishness; the gold color can imply luxury, expense, success, wealth; the perfume bottle connotes treasure, beauty, jewel-like

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[3] Taken from http://pursuitist.com/dior-jadore-fragrance/

shape; the French word *adore* (love) signifies desire, excitement, lust; and the font type and size suggest posh brand name, exclusive designer label.

As far as the three types of messages (i.e. manifest, latent, and cumulative) are concerned, all three can be analyzed by the students themselves. The manifest message of this media text is the promotion of the perfume targeted at young women. The latent messages can be described in similar ways as the connotative meanings discussed above – e.g. if you buy this product, you will be extravagant and glamorous, you might attract the attention of men, you might fall in love, etc. Regarding the cumulative message, the advertisement reproduces and contributes to viewing female beauty as linked with expensive perfumes, youth, Caucasian race, blond hair, and thinness.

Example Activity 2

This activity focuses on the link between media literacy and teaching English for specific purposes, in particular English for nutritional therapists. There are many reasons why nutritional therapists should be media literate, especially in connection with fad diets, alternative therapies, magic cure-alls and peculiar medical procedures (such as colon cleansing).

The activity, which can be referred to as *The Red Flags of Health Fraud,* begins by discussing phony medical or nutritional articles or advertisements in popular magazines, claiming immediate results after a specific treatment, dose of pills or period of dieting. Students can highlight typical language used in such a type of text. The answer can obviously vary; however, there are distinctive features available for analysis (Anding 2009):
- the text recommends taking supplements and promises fast results without any restrictions regarding diet, exercise, or lifestyle
- easy fixes to conditions such as obesity or impotence are promised
- it promises to cure untreatable diseases
- it uses expressions connoting conspiracy and mystery, such as *miraculous breakthrough*, *secret formula, hidden ingredients,* and *magic cure-all*
- the text describes the product as *all natural* therefore *safe* (however, not all natural products or substances are at the same time safe)
- it contains testimonies from unknown physicians alias actors
- product endorsement by sportsmen is included in the text (who frequently do not take the product)
- there is often the *before/after* comparison (which is often adjusted with Photoshop)
- the text contains expressions signifying a sense of urgency such as *limited availability, act now, call immediately,* etc.
- the text offers no-risk guarantee with money back if the client is not satisfied (however, medical treatments or procedures are never risk-free)
At the end of the activity, students can discuss their own experiences with fraudulent medical articles or advertisements.

Conclusion

Media literacy approach to EFL teaching offers a valuable contribution to classroom practice, in particular when it comes to the reading, writing, and discussion

skills. In today's world, where media play an important role in our societies, in order to be a successful language learner, the sole mastery of lexico-grammatical structures seems to be insufficient. Students need to be media literate, critically considering how different people, communities, nations, and races are typically represented in different media genres.

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