

“Reading” the Media: Introducing Media Literacy in EFL

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After about two years of reading about the media and its relation to how public opinion is formed, I have just recently begun to teach introductory media literacy skills. In order to be an active participant in the local, national and global community, a person living in the 21st century must be able to choose wisely from the barrage of information we experience on a daily basis. Developing basic media literacy skills help students to increase awareness of certain types of bias in reporting, advertising and entertainment media.

My presentation, outlined below, reported on the main points covered in a mini-course on media literacy that was conducted over two weeks in a class of freshman English majors at Nanzan University. The class met for 45 minutes, three times a week for a total of 4.5 hours, with one more class two weeks later for student presentations.

The Basic Concepts

We begin our study by raising some very simple questions such as what we mean by the term “media” and by listing examples of media we find around us. Next, the students are asked to describe their media “diet”, that is, how much and what kind of media they experience through any given week (Thoman). Part of becoming media literate is learning how to create a balanced diet of a variety of sources.

Asking students what they use the media for will raise awareness of their purpose in using the various forms of media: whether they watch a program or read printed matter in order to be informed about a product or a situation in the community, for example, or to be entertained, as in the case of a talk show, comedy or drama, or comic book.

Next, we can ask who pays for the media; we consider where the money to produce magazines or TV shows comes from. We become aware that, in some way, the viewers of almost all forms of the media are buyers or potential buyers. For example, we buy magazines and newspapers, go to the movies, use the Internet, listen to the radio or watch TV. Remember that most TV and radio stations have commercial sponsors that pay large amounts of money to place their advertising where many people will see or hear it. That means that the TV or radio station is selling an audience to such sponsors. Thus, we can ask such questions as:

- Who benefits from our “consumption” of this product?
- Is there anything the consumer might lose?
- Do you see any potential conflict between the purpose of the sponsors and the expectations of the viewers?

We then move on to discuss how media is constructed. Who decides what is produced? Who chooses the stories we see / read about? Why do they choose those stories and not others? What is the impact of not providing the other stories? From whose perspective do we see the issues? Why? Are we given other perspectives? If we are not, why not?

At this point we can stop and recap what we've learned so far. There are some basic concepts that students should keep in mind throughout their study about media, called the "Five Core Concepts". They are:

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

(Center for Media Literacy)

Reading the images

Encourage learners to pay attention to the video images or photographic images they are shown. Draw their attention to the following questions:

- If it is a video clip, does the commentary match the images or is it different?
- Are the same images shown time and again?
- What is the effect of showing the same images repeatedly?
- Are a variety of images shown or only a select few?
- Do the images show the scene from different points of view or only a select few?
- Why do you think such images were chosen?

An obvious example of the importance of perspective in photographic media is the image of the felling of the statue of Saddam Hussein during the Iraq War. The images that were published in news magazines such as Time and Newsweek gave the impression that there were large crowds of people around the statue. Another perspective of the event – a photograph taken at a higher elevation looking down on the square – revealed a much smaller gathering, relative to the size of the square. Have students compare the assumptions that the viewing audience might have if they were given one or the other picture.

Reading the voices

In this section, we look at who is chosen to deliver the message. When we watch a news program or read a newspaper article, it is important to think about why certain people are chosen over others. For example, do we see more women than men delivering the main news stories each evening or vice versa or do men and women speak in a balanced amount of time? Are the stories they present of equal importance to the viewers? For interviews, who is interviewed? Was it a government official, an "expert", and average worker in the community, a college student? Why are some people chosen to give their opinions on television and not other people?

News programs on television and radio do not normally have unlimited time to deliver their news stories. They are restricted to a certain amount of time, usually 10 –30 seconds, to deliver the message. We can observe how these “sound bites” are used in the media by asking the following questions:

- How long are people from each of these groups allowed to speak?
- What is the location where they are filmed?
- How does the background affect the viewer’s perception of the “credibility” of the speaker (for example, protestors yelling slogans outside a company office building as opposed to an interview with a company executive in a corporate meeting room)?
- Is one viewpoint given more time or column space than another? If so, why?

Reading stereotypes

One way that students can experience the effect of the media in a very personal way is to ask them how much they know about certain groups of people such as gays and lesbians, people with HIV, people from other Asian countries, Hindus or Jews or Christians, and so on. Have them talk about what they know about these people. Then ask where they got their information. Do they know members of these groups personally? What influences most strongly their perception of people from these groups. Do the students think their perceptions are accurate? If so, to what extent are they accurate? (See also the lesson and worksheet “Looking at Ourselves and Others”, published by the Peace Corps).

If students follow the images and messages in the various media, they may be able to track how the media sometimes presents only certain aspects of these groups. News about crimes committed by foreigners, images of gay men cross-dressing, reports of problems in hotels that refuse service to certain marginalized groups of people: are these true of all people in these groups? Students can keep count to determine whether the reports that viewers “consume” are similar to these or the media shows positive images of members of the groups.

Reading silence

One of the most important points to consider when learning to read the media is what is omitted from what we see or hear. The students may have found through their discussion about stereotypes that many times we simply have no information whatsoever on diverse groups of people. This applies to a wide variety of issues in the world around us as well. As teachers, we can stretch the students’ critical thinking skills by having them consider what questions are not being asked and answered during an interview, a talk show, a newspaper or magazine article.

Advertising

Although we did not spend much time on the different methods advertisers use to convince us to buy their product or services, I gave my students a homework assignment

to count, in one day, the number of brand names or logos they could see easily on clothing, bags, shoes, jewelry, cell phone straps, glasses, etc. This included easily recognizable characters such as Winnie the Pooh, Pokemon, and so on. One student came back the next class to say she was surprised that she'd counted close to one hundred. This provided an opportunity to raise the issue of free advertising. Companies pay billions of dollars every year for media to place their advertising, yet consumers very freely wear logos on clothes or bags, yet are not paid for this advertising. This became the topic of a lively discussion.

Project

The students got into groups of four or five and each student in the group chose one Japanese media source to follow over a three-week period. As the purpose of this assignment was to use their new awareness of aspects of media bias, and so as not to overburden them with sources in English, they were encouraged to observe their own culture's media. One student chose an Internet news source, another chose a radio news source, and still another used a morning TV news commentary. As a group they decided on one issue in the news, for example, the war in Iraq, the Expo, the Japanese abduction issue, the situation in Palestine. The students then chose specific questions to answer each time they watched their particular news source. A sampling of the questions includes:

1. Count the number of interviews given to the various representatives on an issue
2. Record the number of appearances made by "establishment" figures, such as government spokespersons on corporate chief executive officers, and compare those to the number made by demonstrators or people with opposite views
3. Count the number of times a story appears in the particular media outlet you're monitoring
4. Who are the sources used in the story? List their names and positions (politician, store owner, government official, school principal, homemaker, carpenter, etc.)
5. Is the coverage factual or based on speculation or opinion?
6. List the vocabulary used most frequently to describe events or people. Are negative terms used to describe sources that might be considered alternative to the "official" sources? For example, are environmental groups labeled "radical" while governmental officials are labeled "official"?

(Brookfield)

Three weeks later, the students regrouped and gave short presentations in English to other students who had focused on other topics. Their presentations reported on the data their group had gathered for the project.

Student Reaction

I was quite impressed that after we finished the two-week study of the media, the topic kept recurring throughout the remainder of the semester as we dealt with other topics such as gender, fashion, HIV/AIDS, and discrimination. Students were able to link many

issues to either the impact that the media has on how we form our beliefs and opinions or how the lack of information leads to our misperceptions about the import of issues facing us on many levels. It is my hope that these students will continue to use elsewhere the skills they further developed through this study of the media.

Conclusion

Developing awareness of certain types of bias in reporting, advertising and entertainment media is fundamental to basic media literacy skills. Teachers can assist learners in this process. We should encourage students to monitor the kinds of media they experience, how the information they receive through this media is produced and for whose benefit, and who decides what, how and through whose voices we, the consumers, are to experience media messages.

Finally, we can support them in considering what values we are being imparted through the selective messages we are given in the various media. Students can work together to identify stereotypical images and reports of groups of people, or the exclusion of certain piece of information, and the effects that these images or omissions may have on the general public.

This particular course material was difficult to encapsulate in a 25-minute presentation in that there were many sub-topics to describe, and although a handout provided more details, many sample exercises and further suggestions had to be deleted due to the time constraints.

Suggested Reading and Resources

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Bio

Louise Haynes currently teaches English oral communication and writing courses at Nanzan University in Nagoya. She has published and presented on teaching HIV/AIDS in EFL for over eight years and is the director of a non-profit AIDS education organization, JAPANetwork. Her current research interests include media literacy, gender issues, and peace studies.