

Chapter Nine

Critical Media Literacy and ESL/EFL Classrooms

Arda Arikian

The use of media in foreign language classrooms has been recognized as a powerful tool for teaching. Media open up spaces to practice language within a pool of cultural artifacts that are already known to students through TV, radio, movies, songs, and literature. Even though to date there are many volumes of research and books on media literacy, few have integrated English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). The aim of this chapter is to explore how media literacy can become a critical project in ESL/EFL classes that are in countries other than the United Kingdom, Canada, or the United States. Media literacy refers to an act of “knowing” within a specific critical stance that rejects the idea of an isolated neutral/objective reality while collaboratively constructing realities under sociohistorical influences (Gallagher 1993). This chapter addresses critical literacy in ESL/EFL classrooms by applying a critical theoretical framework taken from teaching about media and English language teaching research.

Theoretical Framework

An evolving body of literature strengthens a new classification of literacy in the academia. Some scholars think that traditional definitions of literacy are narrow and limiting because literacy is confined to reading and writing skills. Critics support a new and broader definition of literacy that includes other literacies, such as being able to read, understand, and discuss other forms of texts, including visual and audio-lingual texts and cultural artifacts, experiences, and written pieces (see, for example, Lankshear 1994). In his preface to *Rethinking Media Literacy*, Kellner

argues that critical literacy is more than acquiring the rudimentary skills of reading and writing:

Functional literacy refers to the acquisition of the rudimentary skills of reading and writing, while cultural literacy refers to acquisition of basic knowledge concerning one's culture, society, and polity. These are the concerns of standard pedagogy. Critical literacy, by contrast, refers to the gaining of skills necessary to analyze and critically dissect all the forms of culture with which individuals interact, ranging from books to the artifacts of film, television, radio, and the other products of the cultural industries. . . enabling people to create their own meanings, identities, and to shape and transform the material and social conditions of their culture and society. (xiv)

The introduction of media literacy into the study of critical literacy urges educators to take a closer look at the simplistic definitions that have been used for decades without being questioned. Kellner's argument is supported by critical theorists who have emerged in the fields of education, cultural studies, anthropology, and in media and communication studies (see, for example, Giroux, Simon, and Contributors 1989; Freire 1985; McLaren, Hammer, Sholle, and Reilly 1995). Many studies have emerged on the use of media artifacts in the teaching of English as the second language (ESL) and in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). However, most of these quantitatively limited ESL/EFL studies lack an analysis of power relations. Traditional approaches are silent about how knowledge and power work together to silence or marginalize students in various contexts. While applying critical media literacy in classrooms, therefore, all texts must be regarded as sources that carry shifting meanings in time and contexts and reflect cultural ideologies that need to be uncovered (Semali and Pailliotet 1999).

Why Media Literacy in ESL/EFL Classes?

We have witnessed a shift from teacher-centered language teaching and learning to student-centered practices (Kumaravadivelu 1994). As teachers of English, we have tried new methods and activities to create student-centered classrooms in which students were the measure as well as the active agents of the language-learning process. Hands-on, or the so-called learning by doing, philosophies have replaced our syllabi, yet not much has changed in the role of the teacher despite nationwide changes in language teaching curricula. For instance, from Tunisia to Taiwan, and from Argentina to Eastern European countries, many governments have tried

to standardize language teaching and learning practices in light of new theories and methods. These changes are taking place within the influence of the communicative language teaching paradigm that have found inspiration and direction in the interaction of initiatives, both theoretical and applied, in many different cultural and national contexts (Savignon 1997).

When the influence of communicative language teaching paradigm on our own teaching is considered, we see a dramatic shift from traditional teaching techniques to newer models of and attitudes toward language learning. This shift, which seeks more social ways of teaching and learning, embraces the world outside and prepares the language learner in the classroom in such a way that the student experiences the target culture and language in the classroom as a rehearsal for the real life (Savignon 1997). This attitude can best be contrasted with the traditional methods that have been criticized for being decontextualized. Bateson exemplifies the notion of this traditional language teaching methodology as teaching of isolated entities rather than parts of the whole that are multiple and fluid in their nature.

Children in school are still taught nonsense. They are told that a "noun" is the "name of a person, place or thing," and a "verb" is "an action word" and so on. That is, they are taught at a tender age that the way to define something is in itself, not in its relation to other things. (McLaren et al. 1995, 35)

These changes in how we understand education and language teaching are also articulated by social reconstructionists who ask for a positive social change that can be achieved through educating students to assume a critical stance that they can apply in their real lives. Social reconstructionists often make use of print materials such as newspapers, music pieces, and television programs that are relevant to students' lives in order to show social injustice and the status of various groups in the society (Kliebard 1995). It is believed that it is not only the societies of the English speaking world that we, the ESL/EFL teachers and instructors, should analyze and teach within a critical stance, but we have to do it for our own societies which cannot be separated from the rest of the world. However, we have to be aware of the fact that referring to social things and cultures that are multiple and diverse in nature often creates a greater problem for us in the context of the issue of media bias. Certain questions spring from the value-rich problem of media bias, some of which are: How realistic are these representations? Who creates and ben-

efits from the representation/knowledge produced? What are the effects of these representations on the individuals who are exposed to these materials? What are the effects on the society?

Contemporary research on English-speaking communities refers to the fact that there is no single standard language or usage of English in the English-speaking world (Ayers 1993; Crystal 1998; Wardaugh 1999). Using classroom materials that transmit a single “standard language” to differentiate among other cultures and individuals within the English-speaking community apparently not only distorts the realities of these groups but also puts our language learners in a difficult position for their future contact with the English-speaking world. This misleading practice which occurs in many ESL/EFL classes has been a major concern in literature and is often named as stereotyping. Stereotyping is a common fallacy that disrupts the process of learning a language and cultures (Ayers 1993; Cohee, Daumer, Kemp, Krebs, Lafky, and Runzo 1998; Hall 1997; Tiedt and Tiedt 1990). Because of concerns about stereotyping, teachers often feel uneasy about adding cultural aspects of the language in their classrooms, particularly when social unrest is a factor in the countries that the language is being taught. For instance, many ESL/EFL teachers who work in countries that prohibit free expression of personal and social identity feel uneasy about talking about media representations of religious, political, or cultural diversity. While, as Slocum (1997) argues:

Media bias affects all aspects of our lives. Women are seen as sex objects that need to be controlled by men. African Americans are usually taking drugs, committing crimes, or on welfare. Arabs are terrorists. Jewish people are cheap and try to cheat you in business. Gay men are promiscuous. Disabled people are asexual. These are all common stereotypes that are found in media messages everyday. (19)

Why do we insist on putting media literacy in our ESL/EFL classes in the face of mentioning all these problems and concerns? I think the answer lies in recent attempts to bring real life into the classroom in order to provide a life-like context in which to learn language. A question arises: How are we going to treat the classroom as a rehearsal for real-life contexts? How can we exemplify the lives of individuals and groups living within the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, and within the countries in which English is the dominant language? How can we represent these groups with their social and cultural aspects that are essential in students’ language learning experiences?

Some privileged schools and institutions are trying to solve this problem by bringing native speakers of English to their countries as language teachers. This strategy has limitations; one individual doesn't constitute the whole social system. Perhaps this problem could be addressed by the use of media. Media that present native speakers of English through movies, songs, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and radio could be utilized broadly. That is to say, EFL teachers whose native language is not English could use this practical solution to solve the culture and language gap. Bringing the media products of the English-speaking countries (which are already available through the television, radio, etc.) into our classrooms could introduce students to authentic language use.

But this method of introducing media as audiovisuals for cultural learning does not in and of itself constitute a critical literacy project. To introduce critical media literacy in the ESL/EFL classrooms, teachers must not consider the mere presence of media artifacts (play, songs, films, etc.) to be sufficient. Instead, they must endeavor to teach *about* these media as well as *with* them. Students need to be engaged as they learn the communicative powers of the target language as well as its constructedness; its conventions; its connection with industry, especially with advertising; its value-laden messages; and its aesthetic characteristics. It is through questioning of these media that ESL/EFL students find the opportunity to engage in a critique of the culture while learning how the language works.

Here are some important reasons to teach about media representations in our classes through critical inquiry as outlined by Slocum (1997):

1. LACK OF FAMILY INTERVENTION: If the family hasn't done primary teaching about media representations, and often they have not, the responsibility falls on schools.
2. PROMOTION OF CRITICAL SKILLS: Students should be enabled to think for themselves, and since the media constitutes a large part of a student's life, it needs to be addressed.
3. BRIDGING BETWEEN THE CLASSROOM AND THE REAL LIFE: Media literacy can enhance real-life learning rather than textbook learning, which tends to be more academic and less contextual.

4. IMPACT OF NEGATIVE MEDIA PORTRAYALS ON STUDENTS' SELF IMAGES: If the classroom is a sample of the whole society, then we are likely to have students from diverse communities, sexual orientations, and religious and cultural backgrounds that are misrepresented or negatively portrayed by the media. How do these images affect them?

In short, I advocate the use of media materials in classrooms by language teachers because they can provide a direct means for English learners to envisage real-life situations and authentic language use. In my own teaching, I have often been surprised to find that many ESL/EFL students know a lot about American or British pop singers, Hollywood shows, and programs. In almost every classroom, the students were exposed to print advertisements from tobacco companies or auto manufacturers that are American or British. Even in less privileged countries, our students see or hear about Red Cross volunteers or missionaries or United Nations workers that are American. All of these examples provide opportunities to make contacts with the English language in ways that could be engaged authentically. Such contacts include news broadcasts we hear about these groups, news that we can analyze in our own ESL/EFL classrooms. How would a teacher utilize these materials in a critical media literacy context?

How Can We Teach about Media in the ESL/EFL Classroom?

I believe that the best and the easiest way of starting a language class about a media product is to ask students the meanings they gather from that specific product or message to elicit the effect of the media product on the receiver. It is the easiest way for me instead of starting with a lecture. The students will gain control over the lesson and can further develop the discussion, activity, or the lesson as a whole without much help from the teacher. In addition, there remains a dilemma that the teacher faces as Hart (1998) cites Tyner:

Teacher response to popular culture ranges from trashing it to embracing it. If teachers criticize popular communication forms, they run the risk of alienating and insulting the very culture that students value. If they embrace it, they risk looking like ridiculous fuddy-duddies who are trying too hard to appear up-to-date. . . . In the course of walking this tightrope, it isn't necessary for teachers to suppress personal distaste for popular cultural artifacts, or to express glowing enthusiasm for every new pop culture trend. (187)

The role of the teacher as the mediator is difficult for several reasons. First, the teacher must switch back and forth between his or her ideology and academic knowledge. Second, how will the teacher deal with students' feelings or reflections that they bring to the classroom? This situation can be complicated by the fact that it may well be the first time that students have been pushed to think critically about their favorite programs or media icons. To overcome these difficulties, it may become necessary to have a teacher use a dialogic (two-way) approach and also use his or her knowledge base. In this phase, the critical thinking activities the teacher introduces can help students transfer this way of thinking to a critique of media products. Harpley (1990) starts critical thinking activities about media products with students who are as young as five years old. His questions include the following:

1. What sort of text is it? Is it a drawing or a photograph?
2. Is there a story implied in the picture or is it a straight picture of the product?
3. Does it appeal to the emotions? Does it encourage competitive feelings like "I must have that to be like everyone else"?
4. What clues do we get from the location, clothing, colors, materials, and people?
5. Who has made the decisions while creating this media product? Does it give a real, honest view of the product? How are these claims made by comparisons, scientific studies, people's recommendations, or research?
6. Who are the viewers or readers? Are there any other ways of feeling or categorizing the product? What are they?

In addition to Harpley's questions, there are more detailed lists of questions produced by other media specialists that offer an in-depth inquiry about media representations, such as those developed by Silverblatt (1995). Even though his list is too complex to explain here in detail, there are four main categories that might be relevant to this discussion of how to deconstruct media messages and images:

1. **PROCESS:** The purpose, characteristics, owner/producer, audience, and strategies behind the message.

2. **CONTEXT:** Time, location, setting, values, myths, worldviews, and stereotypes behind the message.

3. **FRAMEWORK:** The title, themes, story or depictions, and logic attached to or behind the message.

4. **PRODUCTION VALUES:** Point of view, colors, movements, connotations, and performance of the message.

The ESL/EFL teacher should make use of the culturally available models and products in their teachings while adapting media products in their lessons. I have found it very useful to start the lessons that must include a summary of grammar previously learned with media performances or media products that were already available for and in the classroom. For example, in my first pre-service teaching at a secondary school in Ankara, Turkey, I had to review the simple past tense with the students. By coincidence, the Oscars had been broadcast the night before I taught my lesson. In this lesson, I started with a short question: "Did you watch the Oscars last night?" The students screamed "Yes!" The teacher who observed my class commented on this method; she found it very creative and professional. Creative and professional it may well have been, but I was motivated largely by a desire to incorporate into my pedagogy events from the students' lives, which in this case happened to have been the recent broadcast of the Oscars. As EFL teachers, we can make use of our social environments to make meaning from the whole experience that we carry into our language classes.

The examples that we can gather from media resources to introduce into our classrooms are numerous. However, EFL teachers may have many concerns with regard to the social and cultural environments in which they have to apply critical media literacy in their classrooms. Many of these concerns may, and do, come from academic or official policies that don't value including media resources into the curriculum. We can make use of the current ESL/EFL research to support our critical media literacy project in our classrooms.

For example, Kumaravadivelu (1994) outlines current strategies for second-language and foreign-language teaching, from which we can easily find justifications for using media materials. Although he doesn't write about media literacy in his article, all of his macro-strategies provide ample evidence of the necessity for using media sources in classrooms.

Kumaravadivelu's list offers fresh ideas about how to create critical media literacy in our language classrooms. Kumaravadivelu's list of macro-strategies (with my pedagogical suggestions in parentheses) are as follows:

1. MAXIMIZE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: Treat your predetermined syllabus as a presyllabus that is to be reconstructed to meet specific learner needs. (Simply add media materials or replace the traditional ones with them in cooperation with your students. It can be a movie, an excerpt from a TV program, or an advertisement.)

2. FACILITATE NEGOTIATED INTERACTION: Ask open-ended questions rather than predetermined display questions. (Instead of asking knowledge-based "yes-no" questions that students can directly catch from the material, ask them "what do you think/how did/do you feel about" types of questions.)

3. MINIMIZE PERCEPTUAL MISMATCHES: Be clear and concise throughout your activities, as the teacher's intention and the learner's interpretation must match for the success of the outcome. (Make clear that you expect students' responses and value them. Tell what the activity will do and what the students are expected to do rather than trivializing the whole activity.)

4. ACTIVATE INTUITIVE HEURISTICS: Provide enough textual data so that the learner can infer certain underlying grammatical rules. (Grammar! In fact, everything you want to use for teaching grammar skills is found in the media. Every sentence or expression is grammatical, yet be sure to discuss the issue of the Standard English with your principals or coordinators.)

5. FOSTER LEARNER AWARENESS: Create sensitivity and awareness of the nature of the language and its role in human life. (What is the nature of language? In short, it is the societal use that we have problems in understanding in EFL classes. Rules change and there are variations. Media resources provide varieties of materials fostering such richness.)

6. CONTEXTUALIZE LINGUISTIC OUTPUT: Create contexts that encourage meaning-making in the classroom through scenarios, tasks, role-plays,

and discourse-based activities. (After the critical media activities, your students can reenact or reproduce these materials with what they learned in the critical thinking session that you have taught.)

7. INTEGRATE LANGUAGE SKILLS: Pull reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills together rather than teaching them in a way that isolates and fragments them. (You can ask your students to take notes while watching or listening to the material, or if it is a print material ask them to discuss it and respond to classmates.)

8. PROMOTE LEARNER AUTONOMY: Since your student is going to be on his or her own in language learning and use in real life, empower him or her to be able to create and trust his or her own language destiny. (Make your students produce their own reflections about the material while reshaping and changing it or while commenting on it.)

9. RAISE CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS: Elicit and reach a synthesis among the learner, her home culture, and the target cultural objectives. (Treat your contextual media materials the same as other “target culture” materials. This will also increase student motivation.)

10. ENSURE SOCIAL RELEVANCE: Be sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational factors that shape the environment where you teach. (Here is the most important consideration for the safety and well-being of the teacher. Realize that applying critical skills and asking many questions that generate thought about political, sexual, traditional, and cultural topics may bring dissatisfaction or concerns from the parents or from the principals. It may help to wait until students are comfortable with critical analysis before you introduce controversial topics, and always make sure that when you address these sensitive topics you use ESL/EFL methodology correctly. Share the ESL/EFL documents in support of what you are doing in the classroom.)

To conclude this chapter, let me return to Layzer and Sharkey’s (1999) EFL experiences in a Japanese EFL classroom. After teaching there for two years, they concluded:

Students come to the classroom with a vast storehouse of cultural information to be mined for insights. Through a course in media literacy, the process of excavation and analysis can be initiated. (169)

They indicated that one of the factors that made their experience successful was that their course was a relatively safe site for ideological contestation but it was very rich in meaning-making. This, as they reflect, could be done better in a similar classroom through a more in-depth exploration of notions of culture and identity formation. This reflection gives the responsibility to the teacher to learn more about these issues, which serve as the toolkit of the instructor who is teaching in such a project.

To sum up, it seems to me that every ESL/EFL teacher will create her/his own critical media literacy curriculum to foster a better language learning and practice. The environment must be appropriate for the students' ages. Other factors might consist of availability of the materials and the political and social situation of the context of teaching. Critical media literacy provides students with the most up-to-date information relevant to the students' own target language and their own sociopolitical, cultural, and linguistic realities. Students will be empowered through critical media literacy to understand how these realities shape their learning and they will also be empowered to understand how these realities are created and what forces stand behind their production.

References

- Ayers, W. 1993. *To teach: The journey of a teacher*. New York: Teachers College.
- Cohee, E. G., Daumer, E., Kemp, T. D., Krebs, P. M., Lafky, S. A., Runzo, S. (Eds.). 1998. *The feminist teacher anthology*. New York: Teachers College.
- Crystal, D. 1998. *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freire, P. 1985. *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gallagher, S. 1993. *Hermeneutics and education*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Giroux, H., Simon, R. I., & Contributors. 1989. *Popular culture, schooling, and everyday life*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.
- Hall, S. 1997. *Representation. Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harpley, A. 1990. *Bright ideas: Media education*. Warwickshire: Scholastic Publications.

- Hart, A. 1998. *Teaching the media: International perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kliebard, M. H. 1995. *The struggle for the American curriculum*. New York: Routledge.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. 1994. The postmethod condition: Emergent strategies for second/foreign language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* 28, no. 1: 27–48.
- Layzer, C. and Sharkey, J. 1999. Critical media literacy as an English language content course in Japan. In *Intermediality: The teacher's handbook of critical media literacy*, ed. L. Semali and A. Pailliotet. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Lankshear, C. 1994. *Critical literacy*. (Occasional paper no. 3, pp. 4–26.) Australian Studies Association.
- McLaren, D., Hammer, R., Sholle, D., Reilly, S. 1995. *Rethinking media literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Savignon, J. S. 1997. *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Semali, L. M. and Pailliotet, A. W. 1999. *Intermediality: The teacher's handbook of critical media literacy*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Silverblatt, A. 1995. *Media literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Slocum, K. J. 1997. *Media literacy in the secondary language arts classroom: The Penn State experience*. University Park: Penn State University.
- Tiedt, L. P., and I. M. Tiedt. 1990. *Multicultural teaching: A handbook of activities, information, and resources*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Wardaugh, R. 1999. *Proper English: Myths and misunderstandings about language*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.