

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To You, who believed and created impossible worlds. You provided the seed and the path, and gave me the water and thirst.

The Influence of Media Literacy on Second Language Learning of 21st Century Students

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a literature review regarding media literacy (ML) as a pedagogical instrument. It also exposes a reflection upon its potential as a critical tool on 21st century students' second language learning. As media literacy is a multi-layered subject, this research is based on the notion of its being a mechanism to increase a thorough reflection on the nature, techniques and impact of mass media. ML can be used inside the classroom as an empowering mechanism for students as it allows them to be involved in their own learning process. Thus might lead to the production of meaningful multimodal works on second language acquisition processes, as well as point the way to a deeper comprehension on the pragmatics of the target language. Engaging students on its learning processes is a challenge provided by the new education system dynamics. This is the reason why it is indispensable for in-service teachers to be aware of current literacy practices applicable to this purpose.

Key Words: Media Literacy, Second Language Learning, 21st Century Education.

Resumen

El presente artículo reporta los hallazgos de la investigación bibliográfica en relación a la literacidad mediática como instrumento pedagógico. Ésta también da a conocer una reflexión sobre su potencialidad como herramienta crítica en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua en los estudiantes del siglo XXI. Debido a que la literacidad mediática es un asunto con

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múltiples perspectivas, ésta investigación se encuentra basada en la noción de ésta como un mecanismo para incrementar una concienzuda reflexión en la naturaleza, técnicas e impacto de los medios masivos. La LM (ML, media literacy, por su sigla en inglés) puede ser usada dentro del aula de clase como un mecanismo empoderador para los estudiantes pues ésta les permite estar involucrados en sus propios procesos de aprendizaje. Por consiguiente, puede conducir a la producción de trabajos multimodales significativos en procesos de adquisición de una segunda lengua, al igual que indicar el camino para una comprensión más profunda de la pragmática del lenguaje objetivo. Involucrar a los estudiantes en sus propios procesos de aprendizaje es un reto proporcionado por las nuevas dinámicas del sistema educativo. Ésta es la razón por la cual es indispensable para los profesores en ejercicio concientizarse de las prácticas de literacidad actuales aplicables a éste propósito.

Palabras claves: Literacidad Mediática, Aprendizaje de Segunda Lengua, Educación del siglo XXI.

Introduction

The fast development of new technologies in the past few decades has accelerated social, economic, and cultural processes globally in an attempt to evolve along them. In that sense, the pace of technology today (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) has become an issue that transcends the boundaries of cultural expression and into more specific fields such as academia and labor (Tulodziecki & Grafe, 2012).

In the case of academia, one can no longer conceive texts as a plain written organized set of ideas. The way contents and information are transmitted, distributed and received has changed. At present, traditional print texts have been replaced by multimodal messages made with a variety of new technologies and media, now recognized as texts. Accordingly, literacy practices continue evolving. Nevertheless, there is little clarity about the new progression and

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we have thus reached a point where our conception of being literate has been compromised (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009).

The so-called *New Times* (Luke and Elkins, 1998) have raised a generation of students who have grown up after the popularization of the World Wide Web and the permanently emerging digital devices related to it (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Those children perceive the instant communication and fluency of information as a normal state of life. Others, from former generations, view it as an inherent advantage of the new generations. In fact, the reality is that those technologies had created an intricate (confusing even) environment for them, as well as a false expectation of outstanding capacities in interpreting information (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009).

Even though this new generation is able to use worldwide information platforms and technology intuitively by life-time exposure, they still lack the necessary sophistication to handle those artifacts and achieve the abilities to understand, manipulate and produce meaningful contents in media (López & Aguaded, 2015). Although these children and youth are regular media, they still lack the abilities that make them competent on “critically engaging with media messages and increasing the ability to access, understand, analyze, use and create media products” (Lee & So, 2014, p. 2). In fact, if they do not develop these new digital competences, they are prone to misinterpret the messages, to have future academic and labor failures, and even more disquieting, to be manipulated by the media (as recent events such as Brexit, the Colombian peace referendum, and even the US election have shown).

Despite the lack of effectiveness on using media as a pedagogical tool, it is impossible to ignore the importance and influence they have on 21st century students. Media are used as instruments to set up the features of a particular target culture, both in social and school settings. That is why teachers must be aware of those new scenarios and tools to integrate them to their classroom practices; competences cannot be developed without real life

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closeness. This makes it necessary to establish a method of exposure that benefits a full understanding of the information received through media and its usefulness; specifically, on second language learning.

Though media have very specific goal settings, one can find ways to use them more mindfully, thus empowering an entire generation of users. The full understanding of the influence of media literacy in students' second language performance could become a very powerful educational strategy in the second language learning context. We may achieve this so long as we do not remove the appealing factor that makes media socially successful is not taken away, as it currently happens with the misuse of technology inside classrooms.

Materials and Methods

The critical literature review (Mora, 2004) that frames this article is guided by the question "How can media literacy become a critical tool on Second Language Learning of 21st Century Students?" I searched for articles within specialized educational and literacy publications that illustrated from several points of view how scholars define media literacy in the academic field. I also searched for published articles showing real-life examples of media literacy use inside today's classrooms to have a better understanding on those practices. Those inquiries are done with the goal of delimiting the comprehension of the term *Media Literacy*, as well as making a critical reflection on how it is being utilized and its potential application into Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

What Is Media Literacy?

There is no unified consensus about the concept of media literacy or its practices. The most referred perspective is Hobbs' (2010) idea of media literacy as "life skills that are necessary for full participation in our media-saturated, information-rich society" (p. VII), i.e.,

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the ability to interact, scrutinize, and use media to communicate in different forms.

Nevertheless, this definition merely outlines the concept, as nowadays it has expanded to include the new developments brought by technology on social media and other digital channels.

Alverman and Hagood (2000b) provided an interesting background journey on Critical Media Literacy (CML), exposing it as a term that had evolved in accordance with certain characterizations more than a date, and surely keeps evolving on technologies pace. They claimed that there are multiple perspectives that CML draws from and that it is not a new concept on research. What these authors are calling Critical Medial Literacy is, then, as an expansion or even a synonym of Media Literacy itself, as they are both related to critical discourse analysis.

Some of the main perspectives they introduced include Luke's (1999, in Alvermann & Hagood, 2000b) claim that, theoretically, CML can be portrayed as an ability with three fluctuations: (a) considering the pleasures brought by media and its cultural practices; (b) making a thoughtful selection among the culturally established icons; and (c) alluding to be authors of their own multimodal –and multimedia- texts.

There were also two perspectives that were of great interest on their characterization, cultural and postmodern. The cultural perspective, which integrated the features proposed by Kellner (1995) and McRobbie (1997), conceived CML as a matter of understanding how society and politics work with or against one's interests, and, at the same time, as a term concerning ideology, and power issues and how they produce cultural indicators. The postmodern perspective, as introduced by Sholle and Denski (1995), made reference to the different manners in which individuals take up cultural texts in accordance with their interests and position in diverse social and historical contexts.

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Correspondingly, in *Literacy in a Digital World*, Tyner (year, in Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009) reminded us that "the overlap between the competencies and purposes of various multiliteracies is so close, that their differences have more to do with constituencies than anything else" (p. 104). Thus, the perspective of media literacy should be one in which learning, technology (both as a tool and as a concept), understanding and perception are not isolated, otherwise, connected to every aspect of new century's way of life; and the interpretation of its products should be analyzed from multiple perspectives as a whole.

For the purpose of this article, I will rely on Pungente & O'Malley's (1999) definition of ML. Their definition is concerned about increasing the critical comprehension on the nature, techniques and impact of mass media, relies on education for the production of meaning and organization of media, and has as ultimate goal raising a generation with informed enjoyment, ability to create media by themselves, and awareness of how those media construct reality. As an extension, ML seeks individuals who actively use multiple perspectives drawn from personal knowledge structures to interpret the messages provided by mass media (Potter, 2014).

In recent years, more studies have broadened the perspective of ML, updating the term to include a wider range of digital ways of expression, and most importantly, understanding the shift on the conception of the 21st century audience. A more current understanding of ML describes it as the "ability to access analyze and respond -critically- to and benefit from a range of media" (Sargant, 2004, p. 28) for both empowering and protecting people from the media to which they are exposed on a daily basis.

Authors such as Kellner and Share (2005) also defined it broadly as one that "involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one's culture and society" (p. 369). Kellner and Share established a direct connection between culture-

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society-media literacy- and education. They proposed that classroom practices should not favor any one kind of literacy, instead arguing for a multi-literacy approach to education.

How Can We Use ML Inside Our Classrooms?

Luke (1997, in Alvermann & Hagood, 2000a) argued that it is an important principle on CML teaching that educators “focus on respecting the pleasures adolescents experience as fans while simultaneously engaging them in a deeper understanding (through various reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities) of what it means to be a fan of certain person, group, or object” (p.437)

From this perspective, as a starting point, teachers can and should include media literacy in every class session as it motivates students to be involved and, at the same time, to be authors of their own knowledge path.

Every student inside a classroom makes part of an audience, and as such, they not only receive a message, but they actively create different meanings -each of them as varied as the people who made them- that in prospective will constitute cultural texts. (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000a). In that sense, media literacy is also a tool for awareness on such perspective differences, which, along with a constructivist approach, could lead to more meaningful learning.

More specifically, inside a classroom, there are countless activities that could use media literacy as a tool to create significant and critical learning experiences. However, all of them should have as common ground the understanding of texts as a set of available modes that include not only writings but illustrations, sounds, and multimodal material. From the review of the literature, I found two main trends, described below.

Trend 1: Using ML for teachers with no skill or need of a break. This trend focused on the critical analysis of media through question production. Those inquiries could

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help students understand the settings and intentions for which the text was created and marketed (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). They can also provide a wider students' perspective on the consequences of media messages in society and how they can react for or against them more consciously.

Trend 2: Using ML inside the classroom for student production. This trend referred to the student-created multimodal works as a channel, as a materialization of their comprehension and critical reflection on a specific media -or message- used as reference.

For instance, the experience from Alvermann & Hagood (2000b) with musical fandom created an occurrence where "teachers can become instrumental in assisting students' engagement in the complex multiliteracies that they are encountering as we enter the 21st century." (p. 438). And namely, from my own experience, the usage of multimodal papers (Mora, 2016; Mora & Giraldo, 2015) and slam poems (Mora & Uribe, 2015) that produced a great learning experience and a very critical reflection on different subjects close to the students' likes, perspectives and realities.

How Can ML Provide Opportunities for SLA?

Media literacy is a set of features that can become an educative tool in terms of providing a critical device. As knowledge uses complex and interrelated systems to create new connections, learning through ML as intermediary could be integrated to any course and experience both inside and outside the scholar setting. Even more, it could not only be a learning approach but a cultural artifact creator.

In the case of SLA, it is safe to depart from a ML core premise that states that meaning is not given through a text itself, but by its significance built by each individual, and usually shaped for its gender, class, and ethnicity (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). And so, as SLA deals in a greater way with understanding the pragmatics of a language, media literacy

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can provide an opportunity to comprehend in a deeper manner the popular culture of the target language, not only by what it shows -or intends to- in media, but by considering the real implications those media displays intent to imbed on their spectators.

In addition, ML can also be quite useful to provide a framework of reference in terms of applying lessons to individuals' core culture. The new set of critical skills (also understood as *filters*) can be productive on confronting and finding out that some of the accepted ideologies and ways of acting are, in fact, a social construction from its community. In the context of today's globalized world, it becomes necessary to understand that some of those paradigms are constructed by an alloy of culture heritage and mainstream media producers which are being accepted blindly by all the members of that particular society.

Comprehending those established paradigms and patterns can lead to strengthening individual consciousness. Doing a parallel between its culture as referent and the target culture and its language could make significant learning attainable (Ausubel and Fitzgerald, 1961). It may also help preventing injustice and discrimination of any kind by giving the students the critical tools, the media availability, and the language resource they need to fight against and be understood.

When it comes to communicative skills, ML can also provide a scenario for students' producing their own texts from media models. They could use and imitate the language style and intonation that could make them closer to real communicative competence practices. Also, if using the same text for all students, their different approaches can help to find several interpretations, create discussions on a second language, or get to a better understanding of what the text really meant. Reading and re-reading of texts allows for a social context to be formed where multiple interpretations and understanding of a text are discussed, which enhances meaning and furthers understanding. (Jenkins, 1992).

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Lastly, using students' preferences and allowing them to choose their own sources and resources can point the way to a more throughout work where they are engaged with the matter that is been talked about. Unknowingly, students will be directed to use a different language as a tool to express their opinions about something they take pleasure in. And to do so, they must look for ways to expand their expressing limitations, which implies finding new ways inside this other language to speak their minds. In other words, while they are excited about what they are doing, they are unconsciously acquiring a second language and improving their communicative competences.

ML can provide many learning opportunities for SLA not only inside school settings but also as a critical and autodidactic tool to explore a different language. The main advantage on this matter is the availability of the media nowadays. Providing students with a critical apparatus to support or reject media content deliberately, improve their pragmatics understanding and, as being exposed to many possibilities, improving not only their language skills in general, but expanding their minds to a more convergent thinking.

My Own Teaching Experience Using Media Literacy Practices Inside a 1st Grade Classroom.

There have been some general understandings on critical thinking and there is a tendency in research to refer to how it is developed in grades from middle school to above. Thus, there are comparatively fewer examples on how it can be developed in the upper grades of elementary school, and even less on how it can be implemented in lower elementary or preschool stages.

As a teacher with little experience but with lots of theoretical basis from university, and especially in my experience as a researcher in the Literacies in Second Language Project (LSLP – Mora, 2015), I am convinced that it is necessary to start motivating my students to

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be media literate regardless of age. They are part of a generation who has a strong growing dependency on media.

Because they are between the ages of 5 and 7, I found it necessary first to make them aware of the devices themselves. I started by letting them know how some *strange artifacts* became the gadgets they know and use at present thanks to the efforts and work of scientists. I also made a special emphasis on how those scientists devoted their lives to love knowledge and to apply scientific facts to their realities in the search of a better world. The aim was to make them excited and take ownership of knowledge, to make it look like something of greater importance in which they could get involved at some point.

On next sessions, as it was established on the school curricula, we gradually look over the different media that is currently used. We talked about their history and the last developments. To my surprise, they knew about a lot more than I did regarding the uses of the gadgets I brought to class.

Simultaneously, we started to talk about the different messages brought by the media and about the real value and use of those messages. At the beginning the response from the students was confusion, I could see how much they would believe on everything they saw online. Then gradually they understood how they had to use their logic and judgment to form an opinion on the messages.

As a result, they not only have a stronger opinion (according to their development level, of course) but they use their critical thinking in Spanish classes and, by extension, on every subject. At present, they ask for the reasons why we do certain activities, what is the importance of their daily life actions, and they bring to class news or conversations they overheard outside the school. They also raise their hands on any subject with examples from media, especially from TV, and keep asking questions about the messages they see in them.

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I as a teacher keep encouraging them to use their judgments by letting them know the goals of our activities, the reason why each of their actions are important for their present and future lives, and the necessity of society agreements well thought to beneficiate every member of it.

Contrary to my initial expectations, they understood perfectly how to use critical thinking and ML as an important resource for their regular life experiences. Encouraging them to apply both in every classroom should be an everyday activity. A recurrence on this actions can develop on students a more realistic view of what media offers and become well informed critical citizens.

If we start developing media literate students, we will get to a point where *mainstream* won't be a possibility. From early stages, there are ways we can encourage those behaviors. The challenge is for us as teachers to fully understand the meaning of ML and the approaches necessary to use these new literacies practices inside our classrooms.

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