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LOOKING FOR A PATH TO INVOLVE MEDIA LITERACY IN AN EFL SETTING *

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Abstract

In this article, I present some theoretical background about literacy and the different dimensions it involves; particularly, I explore the concept of media literacy. At the same time, I propose two workshops that could help teachers interested in traveling around this new topic, at least for me and for my context. This is not a research report, but the workshops presented in this paper are part of the instructional design of an in-process case study research, whose findings will be share in a future publication.

Key words

Literacy, media literacy, critical media literacy, television literacy and workshop.

Resumen

En este artículo, presento algunos referentes teóricos acerca del alfabetismo y de las dimensiones que este abarca, particularmente exploro el concepto de alfabetismo en medios. De la misma manera, propongo dos talleres que pueden ayudar a los profesores interesados en explorar este, al menos para mí y para mi contexto, nuevo tema. Este artículo no es un reporte de investigación, pero los talleres presentados hacen parte del diseño metodológico de una investigación de estudio de caso, que está en proceso, y cuyos hallazgos serán compartidos en una nueva publicación.

Palabras clave

Alfabetismo, alfabetismo en medios, alfabetismo crítico en medios, alfabetismo en televisión y taller.

This article discusses major issues on Media Literacy and Its likely connections to FL classrooms. The paper supports the 'FL Teaching and Learning' research field of the UPTC Master Program in 'FL Teaching'.

Introduction

The time we are living has been characterized by a type of invasion that has been called the age of the information revolution. Media appliances and gadgets have invaded our world; even they are present in our private spaces. Nowadays, it is common to find a TV set in front of our beds as another furniture piece. This phenomenon has called the attention of different researchers who have found that children and adults devote much time in front of a screen. Lawrence et al (1993) point out that students spend hours in front of a screen, even when they have their meals. Kuan (2007) expresses that elementary-age children spend an average of four and a half hours a day in front of a television screen, computer monitor, or video game and concludes that schools may not be helping young viewers handle what they are seeing and hearing.

Lawrence et al (1993) further claim that what students absorb from television shapes their concepts of fashion, music, entertainments and even values. When students come to schools after spending hours in front of a screen, they come to classes with information that can not be real, but that is perceived by them as an example to follow. Television has the main characteristic of showing stereotypes that could be followed by youths and even adults. In Kuan's words (2007), it has a remarkable power on young people's identity configuration, way of life choices, and knowledge construction which are evidenced in the teenagers' habits and behaviors, their dressing styles, their daily expressions, and their rules of interaction with each other. For that reason, educators

cannot be outside this reality. It is necessary for them, to join students' realities and the work done in the schools for exploring new spaces of learning beyond the four walls of the classroom.

This article presents a practical application taken from an in-process research that I am developing in a public school with tenth graders. I consider that the examples provided in this report could be used by those teachers interested in exploring and knowing about another type of literacy: media literacy.

My proposal searches to involve the world in which teenagers spend most of their time and simultaneously provides teachers with some examples to follow while they are walking towards media literacy practice. The two workshops introduced in this paper could help teachers to understand how students critically react to the messages that they receive everyday from their favorite TV programs.

English teachers, as trainers or guides in the development of the communicative skills, are also responsible of designing and applying activities that go beyond the structural aspect of the language. They can support or empower critical students to be aware of the world in which they are immersed which is one of the educative goals stated in the Colombian National Constitution (1991) article 67, that claims for the development of critical and reflective people to favor the scientific and technological advances.

Based on some aspects of the critical pedagogy that recognize the importance of

empowering students to assume critical positions about their world and about themselves. A critical educator is always questioning the accepted power relations and the discourses that are transmitted outside the four walls of the schools. Therefore, as a teacher of English recognize the power implicit in a language in terms of culture, gender, race and other issues and I decided to explore a different field to understand my students' development of their critical literacy, particularly critical television literacy.

The first thing was to know about my students' likes and their contact with media. Then, I applied a survey (see annex 1) at the beginning of the research and I decided to work with some of the students' favorite TV programs or sit-coms: "The Simpsons" and "The Fairly Odd Parents". Therefore, the activities and the information presented in this article are based on some of the episodes of these two TV programs. Nevertheless, and because of my students' knowledge of the English language and because I wanted to go deeper in their critical television literacy, the workshops are planned in Spanish and the students can answer them either in Spanish or in English.

Bearing in mind the existence of diverse types of literacy and because I was interested in media literacy, I began a theoretical and literature search about the topic. Some of my findings are presented in the next part of this paper.

Towards an understanding of Literacy and Media Literacy

Literacy is a concept that has suffered a

process of transformation. Many years ago, literacy referred to the skills of reading and writing in a proper way. In that sense, Ferreiro (2003) observes that literacy was considered as a technique. The technique of drawing and reading what is printed.

Nowadays, the concept has been expanded and it provides a richer field where literacy is not a simple technique but it involves the world in which the human beings develop their daily life. Hudelson (1994) argues that literacy is a medium which individuals use to learn about the world, share their understandings about it, change the world, enjoy the language and its richness, and struggle with the condition of being human. Therefore, it can be observed that literacy refers to the ability of learning and critiquing the world, but at the same time, it refers to be able of proposing alternatives and changes to improve the quality of the world that we want for the future generations.

Kucer (2001) suggests that there are different dimensions of literacy depending on the discipline we study or we are interested in exploring. In that way, literacy can not be perceived as a simple field of research about reading and writing. This author explains different perspectives about the way how literacy has been understood for different practitioners and researchers.

These perspectives point out linguistic, cognitive, socioculturalist and developmentalist studies. The linguistic studies emphasize the language or textual dimensions of reading and writing. The cognitive psychologist refers to the mental processes used to identify how meanings through and from print are generated. The

socioculturalist approach takes into account acts of literacy where identity and power relationships are defined; this approach also provides an understanding of the rules and norms that social groups and institutions use to transact with written language, to produce, consume, maintain, critique and control knowledge within the same social groups. Finally, this author presents the developmentalist view about the strategies used and the patterns found in the learning of reading and writing. This last approach accounts for the active role of the learner in literacy development.

As we can see, literacy is in itself a dynamic and multidimensional word. Literacy involves all the fields in which a human being grows and develops as a social individual. Therefore, any type of literacy education needs to involve all the dimensions in which the student is immersed in, inside or outside the school. Becoming literate is to be able to read and write the world in different ways. In my particular case, it involves move forward the printed paper to the screen in the computer or in the TV set. Be literate is to be able of recognizing the implicit messages hidden in the messages that flow up in the media. Be literate is more than reading and writing in order to answer a test or to develop a comprehension reading activity in a class. Be literate is having the capacity to give opinions and to reflect about the others'. In short, be literate is being able to go beyond the superficial aspects of a consumerist society. Therefore, if students' literacy also deals with television then teachers are asked to create critical TV watchers.

Growing bodies of research suggest that if students are taught to become critical

viewers, teachers will give them more than the ability to analyze the construction of isolated images; teachers also give them the ability to think critically about the composition of the picture, "enhancing their ability to read words and worlds" (Considine, 2002).

Another important issue that teachers ought to take into account to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes is students' prior experiences. Students come to schools with lots of knowledge that, in most cases, is not taken into account by the teachers, as the students' lives, likes and even their problems do not have a relevant place into the academic practices.

In addition, it is well known that most of schools, particularly public schools, do not have the updated technology and the enough resources to offer to the students; however, it is also clear that students access to those appliances outside the school.

In this way, Ballentine (2000) suggests that children must be offered different methods and alternatives where they have different possibilities to explore their capacities beyond the pictures and the text itself. To involve a TV program for exploring media literacy is a way to begin to transform the traditional board and markers and to start to consider those spaces and learning environments in which students spent most of their time. Also, teachers will be providing a learning environment with different possibilities to empower students to identify and evaluate the messages they are receiving while watching TV. This is one of the concerns in media literacy. This concept will be explored in the next section of this paper.

Media Literacy

Modern societies are the result of media impact. Much of who we are and what we think depends on the various media messages we receive. Students are not far from these techniques of media manipulation but, it is one of our responsibilities, as educators, to guide them to develop media literacy abilities.

It is mandatory, to provide spaces to “pull back the curtains” that cover the implicit messages in the different media appliances. Computers, internet, televisions, iPods, cell phones and other media artifacts have invaded our lives and most of the times they are used to disguise the reality and to show us a consumerist world where the human values are not relevant.

Explaining the concept of media literacy is not simple. Hobbs (1998) observes that according to the intentions of educators or media instructors, media literacy has been assumed from different points of view.

She proposes seven questions that compile the diverse ideas about media literacy and light the way that guide the classroom practices for the teachers interested in teaching and working with media:

Should media literacy education aim to protect children and young people from negative media influences?

Should media production be an essential feature of media literacy education?

Should media literacy focus on popular culture texts?

Should media literacy have a more explicit political and/or ideological agenda?

Should media literacy be focused on school-based K-12 educational environments?

Should media literacy be taught as a specialist subject or integrated within the context of existing subjects?

Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations?

The practical experience I present in this article, relates to the third question proposed by Hobbs. Taking into account popular culture texts; in this case, “The Simpsons” and “The Fairly Odd Parents” may help teachers involve students’ personal media consumption experience into the classroom as a way to empower students to assume critical positions about the messages they receive everyday from television and other types of media.

Regarding the concept of media literacy and the idea of working with my students’ likes I considered the media appliance that is everywhere: Television. This issue will be explored in the next paragraphs.

Television as Authentic Material

Television has played an important part in the evolution of science and technology. Its early stage was conceived as a means to generate education. At the beginning Television was filled with educative programs; later entertainment became its principal goal. In this moment, in Colombia, this is the most important aspect in any

channel of television. Nevertheless, those entertainment programs could be used for generating knowledge. Williams (1956:187) suggests, "As a supplement to the work of the teachers, thoughtful television programs directed to the needs of the school community could make a valuable contribution to classroom instruction".

In this sense, Television is also perceived as a learning environment. By means of the amount of information it provides, it is feasible to foster a space for communication that stimulates curiosity, creating dialogue capacity and where possible the free expression of ideas, interests, needs and mood states. Moreno et al (2000) claim that the use of commercial television with pedagogical goals enriches the methodology and the teaching practices in order to help students to develop communicative skills and competences which are mandatory matters in this new age of globalization and cultural exchanges. Pineda et al (2003) also highlight the importance of moving beyond grammar based approaches and the need of that foreign languages programs be focused on the individual rather than only on the language.

During the study, students are provided with questions and activities where they reflect about not only the literal content, but also the information "behind the curtain" that is provided in commercial TV programs or sit-

coms such as The Simpsons and The Fairly Odd Parents. In that sense, being exposed to this kind of activities help students to assume critical positions about the information they receive everyday from this type of TV programs.

In the next part, I will present two of the workshops that were developed during the case study research that I am developing.

Towards a Practical Application

The following charts present two workshops that could be used as examples to be adapted or adopted for teachers interested in going beyond the structural aspect of the language. The topic is one episode of "The Simpsons" and one episode of "The Fairly Odd Parents". Different questions are proposed in order to look for how students develop critical television literacy. The workshops are based on the PPP ESL lesson plan: Presentation, Practice and Production (Hammer, 2007). However, these lessons were adapted to focus on critical and specific aspects of the episodes watched during the classes, rather than in language items.

Teachers interested in this topic can choose other type of programs or consider other activities regarding the characteristics of the population they are working with.

WORKSHOP No 1

TOPIC	ACTIVITY	OBJECTIVES	PROCEDURE	TIME	ASSESSMENT
LISA'S SAX	EXPRESSING MY IDEAS ABOUT TELEVISION AND ITS CONTENTS.	<p>To discuss about television habits.</p> <p>To involve students in critical TV literacy activities.</p> <p>To provide students with questions where they could reflect about hidden contents in TV programs.</p>	<p>Warming up: The teacher starts encouraging students by asking questions about television and their habits to watch it.</p> <p>Presentation: The teacher asks the students about the episodes they have watched of this TV sitcom. The teacher tells the students about the episode they are going to watch and asks them to go beyond superficial observation.</p> <p>Practice: Students watch the episode. The teacher asks them to compare what they see in the episode with life in a typical family and for implicit messages in terms of culture, policy, gender, sex, religion or others. Also, the teacher can ask them to pay special attention to the relation between siblings and parents.</p> <p>Production: The teacher provides students with questionnaires or other activities to foster the critical television literacy. Some questions that could be used are: Have you lived a similar situation to Lisa's one? What do you think about Homer's attitude? How was the first day of Bart at school? What's your opinion about that? What do you think about Marge's position respect to Lisa's talent? Do you consider that Lisa was in that situation because she was a girl? Why? What happened at school that changed Bart's attitude??Do you think that it should be the behavior of a child because he is not popular? Why? Which could be another way of calling attention and being popular at school? What other aspects do you identify in the episode that you consider are implicit in terms of gender?</p>	<p>Section 1</p> <p>2 hours</p>	<p>The teacher collects student's artifacts in order to check their answers.</p> <p>The teacher collects student's artifacts in order to check their answers.</p>

WORKSHOP No 2

TOPIC	ACTIVITY	OBJECTIVES	PROCEDURE	TIME	ASSESSMENT
Mighty Mom and Dyno Dad"	EXPRESSING MY IDEAS ABOUT TELEVISION AND ITS CONTENTS.	<p>To involve students in critical TV literacy activities.</p> <p>To provide students with questions where they could reflect about hidden contents in TV programs.</p>	<p>Warming up: The teacher starts this section by asking the students questions about the last episode they watched during the last section or at home.</p> <p>Presentation: This part can be based on questions about the program or in other activities to encourage students to participate actively in the development of the workshop.</p> <p>Practice: in this part the students watch the episode about "The Fairly Odd Parents" Mighty Mom and Dyno Dad". The teacher asks them to compare what they see in the episode with life in a typical family. Ask them to pay special attention to the relation between Timmy and his parents.</p> <p>The teacher asks them to go beyond superficial observation and to look for issues they consider are implicit in the episode in terms of culture, policy, gender, sex, religion or others.</p>		<p>The teacher tape records this part of the section in order to check their answers.</p>
			<p>Production: The teacher can give the students a questionnaire with the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ¿Qué opina de la manera como Timmy era tratado por sus padres al comienzo del episodio? ¿Por qué? ¿Está de acuerdo con el punto de vista presentado en este capítulo, de que para compartir tiempo con los hijos, es necesario ser superhéroes? ¿De qué otra manera se puede mejorar la relación entre Timmy y sus padres? ¿Que opinión le merece el hecho de que por exceso de trabajo los padres no le dediquen suficiente tiempo a los hijos? Por qué? ¿Mientras veía el episodio percibió alguna situación que se asemeje a su realidad o que le sea familiar? Cual? Explíquela. ¿Cuál cree usted que podría ser el mensaje que deja este episodio de los padrinos mágicos? ¿Qué le hace pensar o sentir este episodio de los padrinos mágicos? ¿Por qué? ¿Qué otros aspectos llamaron su atención mientras veía el episodio? ¿Por qué? <p>The teacher can also ask the students to draw a family or a situation different to the one presented in the episode and to describe them.</p>		<p>The teacher collects Student's artifacts in order to check their answers.</p>

Conclusions and Implications

Through this article I intend to give colleagues an example of how media literacy can be practiced in the classrooms. My suggestion is simple: language educators should be aware of that beyond teaching how to read and write properly, it is necessary to provide students with spaces to share their understandings about media and its influence in their lives.

In addition, it is important to recognize that when we watch a film or a TV program with our students, the purpose should not be the content of the movie per se, but what lies beneath.

Considering, that the experience I am living with the development of the research study, I conclude that I have learnt many teaching and learning aspects that go further the structural aspect of the language. I have realized about the importance of taking into account my students' likes as a way to know them and to learn about their real lives. In this moment, I must conclude that teaching is more than looking for answers; it is a constant process to be asking questions.

I hope that the ideas discussed in this paper will generate some new ideas for those teachers interested in working with media activities.

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ANNEX 1

UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA Y TECNOLÓGICA DE COLOMBIA
FACULTAD DE EDUCACIÓN
MAESTRÍA EN DOCENCIA DE IDIOMAS
ENCUESTA No 1

OBJETIVO: conocer sus percepciones y opiniones acerca de la televisión y otros aspectos relacionados con ésta. Recuerde que todas sus respuestas son válidas y muy importantes para el encuestador.

1. ¿Qué piensa acerca de la televisión?

2. ¿Tiene televisor en su casa? ¿Cuántos? ¿En qué lugar(es)?

3. ¿Cuánto tiempo dedica a mirar televisión diariamente?

4. ¿Durante el día, en qué horario mira televisión?

5. ¿Cuál es su programa de televisión favorito? ¿Por qué?

6. ¿Hay algún programa de formato animado que le guste?, ¿Cuál?, ¿Por qué?

7. ¿Considera que en los programas de televisión hay ciertos aspectos o grupos de personas que son representadas con más frecuencia? ¿Cuáles?

8. ¿Cree que la televisión forma ideas sobre las personas, su género y/o su raza? ¿Cómo lo hace?

Muchas gracias

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