Learning English and Media Literacy

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Abstract: Learning a second language has great benefits in the academia and the business world. Especially learning English is a crucial factor in upward mobility around the world. The media have become a major component in learning English. The media, with television, mobile phones, computers, and the internet can provide more exposure to English language and culture as well as providing more chances to interact and communicate with native speakers of English. The benefits of the media in language learning are undeniable. Yet stereotyping and misrepresentation prevalent in and sophisticated construction of media materials raise the arguable view that the media programs are promoting only certain lifestyle and culture. Do media programs harbor cultural alienation in children? Do media materials endorse obliteration of African, Asian, and Eastern European cultures? This paper examines the careful usage of the media in English learning from a cultural studies and critical pedagogy perspectives.

1. Introduction

A great interest has risen after the Cold War around the world to learn English. Schools started to provide ESL classes in primary schools. Children have started to become bilingual having English as their second language in non-English speaking countries. Britain and the US took advantage of this widespread interest in English by producing English media materials. With the introduction of digital and mobile media, defined as mobile phones, laptops with internet connection, iPods, and other devices that deliver entertainment such as television programming, films, games, and music, non-English speaking people found more venues and chances to learn English (Clark, L.S, 2011). Children, especially, have been exposed to audio-visual media to become acquainted with English. Societies have become immersed in media and misperceive it as a source of cultural pedagogy to educate masses how to behave, what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire, how to dress, look, and consume (Kellner, 1995). Experts offer differing views regarding how to deal with this newly emerging technology. Some experts recognized these technologies’ benefits, yet warned against their harms especially for the new generations and proposed protectionist views. Some others recognized their benefits and proposed the need to become media literate if to be in control of media, and not be controlled by it (Meskill, 2002).

2. Children, Learning Languages, and Media Usage

The way children comprehend and make sense of the world is tightly connected with language. Language plays a major role in the development of children’s thinking and behavior. Language acquisition –without formal teaching- is part of children’s physical, social, and cognitive development. Vygotsky considered language as a dynamic process. It would prosper if a rich environment is provided (Clark, B.A, 2000). In first and second language acquisition, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment will support language development.

In case of not living in the culture of the target language the media substitutes the environment. Children in non-English speaking societies use the audio-visual media in various ways to learn English. Parents encourage their children in the usage of the audio-visual and mobile media to familiarize their children with the target language and culture. Younger children prefer playing online games, watching cartoons, movies, documentaries, soaps. Adolescents prefer movies, music, documentaries, soaps, series, surfing on the internet, and chatting.

3. Media Literacy

Media literacy is the ability to critically consume and create media. Media literacy has three major aspects:

- Training individuals to decode the intricate nature of media materials. This is also called “critical media literacy.” Critical media literacy involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, ideologies,
those of their parents, or their local culture, and the child’s views and tastes may be different from children. Article 13 of this convention asserted that emphasize the state and adult responsibilities towards of the Child was an international attempt to The 1989 United Nation Convention on the Right around them (Meskill, 2002). 

• Training individuals to produce their own media materials and convey their own messages so that they become subject of their histories instead of objects of histories (Freire, 1970). Producing one’s own media materials is closely linked with pluralism and participatory democracy. Instilling both this and the previous aspects of media literacy is an imperative for vibrant multicultural societies as well as democratic, self-governing, and empowered individuals (Kellner, 1998; Naiditch, 2013).

• Incorporating media tools into education. This requires curriculum development. The gap between education inside the classroom heavily based on print media and outside of school continues to grow (Semali, 2003). Children, in general, are busy with non-school related endeavors and feel disconnected from the world when entering classrooms (Bauerlein, 2008). New technologies need to be incorporated into the curriculum so as to remove the developing idea among new generations that schools and their outsides worlds are far apart and unrelated of one another.

Media literacy is in its infancy, still open, developing, and experimental. A media literate person is one who is able to analyze media codes and conventions, able to criticize media stereotypes, values, and ideologies. This is the area in which parents, teachers, college students, or adults in general can be skillful. Only a self-constituting person is able to evaluate ideas, values, forms of behavior, and cultural forms in a critical and discriminatory mode (Kellner, 1998). However, children do not have the capacity and equipment for these skills, at least not without a proper education and adult intervention. Some scholars posit that children create their own cultures and at times resist the intentions of mass consumer culture in their unexpected creativity (Clark, L.S, 2011). Children can do all these, based on the belief that they can recognize the techniques the media employs to manipulate their emotions and desires, and understand that this manipulation is not just part of advertisement, but is woven into the programming around them (Meskill, 2002).

The 1989 United Nation Convention on the Right of the Child was an international attempt to emphasize the state and adult responsibilities towards children. Article 13 of this convention asserted that the child’s views and tastes may be different from those of their parents, or their local culture, and permits these views and tastes to be catered by the state or global media providers (Davies et al., 2002).

4. Parental Mediation

Experts warn parents that the unbridled use of the audio-visual and digital media by children who are not aware of the underlying messages and ideologies of news, games, movies, cartoons, ads, and websites harms them physically, mentally, and socially. (Semali, 2003; Strasburger, 2011) Children are not equipped with any faculties to resist the influence of audio-visual media, its alien messages, or to know how to be selective in choosing the right material.

Scholars have proposed various ideas regarding how to deal with negative effects of the audio-visual media on children. Scholars first employed the term parental mediation, giving the responsibility to parents to regulate their experience with the media. Further research and children’s further immersion in the media with the introduction of the widespread use of internet and mobile phones made the children more vulnerable to the negative effect of the digital media. Physical harm of the media include: loss of concentration, increase in violent action, inability to differentiate between cyber and real world, loss of sensitivity, exposure to profane language and promiscuity, obesity, sense of insecurity, mistrust of others, poor postural development, and weakening the eyesight. (Davies, 2002; Adam & Goldbard, 2009; Tayie, 2008, Brown, 2011; Strasburger, 2009)

5. The Media and Cultural Alienation

The media has been shaping not only what we think, but also how we think. In addition, it shapes public opinion, political and cultural priorities (Adam & Goldbard, 2009). It has become a critical force in shaping society value systems and collective behaviors. The media influences audiences through portrayal of stereotyped, biased, or otherwise unfounded images of other people, misrepresenting the authentic character and socio-cultural values of these people (UNESCO, 1995). Powers of media have been putting pressure on local cultures. Cultural plurality is being replaced by the uniformity (Adam & Goldbard, 2009).

As a non-native, the wholesale, unbridled, non-reflective consumption of media risks devaluing one’s sense of self even more than it does for those in the native culture depicted. For those from cultures other than what is represented in the media, they are witnessing material that may starkly underscore that they are different from the idealized models of a target society they see and hear about (Meskill, 2002).
6. Conclusion

Social justice can be installed by providing an adequate and appropriate universal education. This universal education is based on universal ethical values as well as emphasizing adherence to local traditions and openness to tolerance and dialogue with others. Globalization and universality are positive concepts as long as local identities are preserved and willingness to engage in dialogue to establish acquaintance with other cultures, nations and traditions for collaboration is accomplished.

The media shall contribute to the education of children by promoting programs in which social norms and traditions are emphasized (Gülen, 2011). The media is a powerful tool and it employs a variety of methods enriched by the technology that can address different faculties of individuals. The media has become a critical force in shaping social value systems.

There is a common fear that audio-visual and digital media materials spread foreign culture and eventually obliterate local cultures and traditional values (HDR, 2004). There are many problems associated with the globalization of media. The main concern is about the possible cultural swamping of indigenous traditions by global ideologies, or the alien cultural ideas on human minds and hearts. In the case of children the impact reaches its height, because of their innocence (Davies, 2002).

Since global media producers are too powerful to be forced to change their production policies the solution to protect children from alienating programs of the media lie with the state, school, and parents.

States: The negative effects of the audio-visual media on children can be minimized by educating the adults. Parents especially need to become aware of media’s harmful ideologies. This requires a strong curriculum development to teach media literacy in secondary and higher education. States in order to safeguard the new generations need to intervene with the local television stations

• to limit foreign programs screened
• to stipulate certain percentage of educational children’s programs to be aired
• to screen programs to raise cultural awareness
• to produce programs that appreciate multiculturalism and diversity
• to air educational programs for children regarding critical viewing of the media

Teachers need to be trained in colleges on media literacy,
• to employ new technologies in classrooms
• to understand stereotyped media products and the underlying ideologies with which they are constructed.
• to use media technologies efficiently to produce one’s own messages in order to become subjects, not mere objects within the media culture.

Parents: Age 0-6 is the most crucial period for child development. Parents need to acknowledge that everything seen, heard, experienced during this period will be permanently engraved in children’s memories and shape their personalities. Introducing the media technologies to the children early does not have any benefits, on the contrary may be harmful for the children’s development (Semali, 2003; Strasburger, 2009).

Experts have not been suggesting children to have a computer with an internet connection in their rooms (Strasburger, 2009). Controlling children’s media usage become virtually impossible with the introduction of smart phone technologies. Only practical solution to decrease mobile media harms lie in late introduction and moral equipment of children in early ages within the family environments. Parents also need to stop using audio-visual media as an electronic nanny.

7. References


