Exploring media literacy research in Australian ESL contexts: A review paper

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ABSTRACT

Potentially, media literacy theory can provide a productive framework in which to examine the role of media in second language contexts. The aim of this article is to introduce TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) researchers to media literacy research, using television as a focal medium. After the key concepts of media literacy are explained, three areas are set out for further exploration: media studies, cognitive processes and pedagogy. Investigations grounded in the context of media studies examine production techniques, analyze texts and study audience reception. Cognitive approaches to media research focus on individual interactions with media texts, comprehension tasks and strategy use. Pedagogical media research looks at effective classroom usage, or highlights how the use of media affects professional development, curriculum planning and assessment.

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INTRODUCTION

As language researchers, there are many ways to look at the media. We can, for example, examine it for its textual features (e.g., Burns, 2003; Graddol & Boyd-Barrett, 1994; Wodak & Busch, 2004), approach it through discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1995; Macdonald, 2003; Matheson, 2005; O'Keeffe, 2006;) or see it as a site of language contact (e.g., Cormack & Hourigan, 2007; Piller, 2003). Digitized media are also a central component of computer-assisted language learning (Corbel, 2007; Jones, 2006; Levy & Stockwell, 2006). One coherent way to investigate the area is to use a media literacy perspective and focus particularly on television. But why frame our research within media literacy studies, and why examine television? Such a framing offers a firm theoretical basis for examining the media in ESL contexts. And television? The depth of work on television (e.g., Allen & Hill, 2004; Bignell & Orlebar, 2005; Casey, French, Lewis, Calvert & Casey, 2007) can ground our analyses in a coherent body of literature and be a solid basis for research that touches on media studies, TESOL and applied linguistics.

My purpose here is to encourage media literacy research in the context of Australian TESOL. To do this, I first explain media literacy concepts, and then emphasize three areas: media studies (production, content and effects), cognition (message decoding and meaning construction), and pedagogy (message access, skill development and education). In each of these areas, I sketch some of the main issues, provide an illustration and raise questions for further research. A brief discussion concludes the article.

MEDIA LITERACY CONCEPTS

Literacy itself is a wide-ranging and dynamic concept, and difficult to define. Recent thinking and debates about the term that are relevant to areas including language learning, academic proficiencies and teaching can be found in numerous sources (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Kern, 2000). Although media literacy research is also

an expansive area (see, for example, further references in the Appendix), here we focus solely on its essential concepts.

Though scholars contest definitions of media literacy (Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2003; Potter, 2004), one oft-cited view is that "media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Aufderheide, 1993, p. xx). Scholars agree, too, that "a media literate person ... can decode, evaluate, analyze, and produce both print and electronic media" (Aufderheide, 1997, p. 79) and that (a) media both are constructed and construct reality; (b) texts carry commercial, ideological, and political implications; (c) formats each have unique aesthetics, codes, and conventions; and (d) receivers negotiate meaning (Aufderheide, 1997, p. 80). Nowadays, as Hobbs (2005, p. 866) writes, "most conceptualizations of media literacy now involve a type of 'critical' literacy based on reflection, analysis, and evaluation, not only of the content and structural elements of specific media texts but of the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which messages are created, disseminated, and used by audiences." Defining 'critical media literacy', Kellner Share (2005, p. 372) write that it "involves cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts."

A search on the Internet for the term 'media literacy' and 'media education' results in a listing of thousands of sources. Initially created by the government of Ontario, Canada in their *Media Literacy Resource Guide* in 1989 (Pugente, n.d), a look at prominent sites (e.g., Aufderheide (n.d.) and Considine (n.d.) is a convenient way to see key 'principles of media literacy':

- Media are constructions
- Media representations construct reality
- Audiences negotiate their own meaning
- Media constructions have commercial purposes
- Media messages contain values and ideologies

- Media messages have social and political consequences
- Each medium has a unique aesthetic form.

Notably, in the Great Britain, the term 'media education' is commonly used to refer to what is often termed 'media literacy education' in North America (Stafford, 2001). Australia, Canada and Great Britain are prominent leaders in 'media literacy' and/or 'media education', and historically the United States has lagged somewhat behind (Kellner & Share, 2005; Kubey, 1998). Many countries outside of the US encourage media literacy education as a way to counter the possible effects of 'cultural imperialism' (Elsamer & Bennett, 2003). For American educators, media literacy training is seen as a way to teach K-12 students to view the mass media critically and guard against rampant consumerism (Hobbs, 2005). Indeed, much of the work in all countries is directed to primary and secondary students. At the US-based Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) website for kids [pbskids.org/dontbuyit/], for example, children are urged to examine 'advertising tricks', consider how real life differs from television and learn to create their own advertisements.

Tertiary students have also drawn the attention of media literacy educators (Christ & Potter, 1998). As Hobbs (2005) suggests, the strong growth and interest in media literacy education at the secondary level is increasingly filtering into higher education. Problems to do with the acceptance of the concept in the academy however, particularly on whether to emphasize 'theory' or 'practice', as well professional training and assessment concerns continue to challenge the efforts of advocates (Christ, 2004).

MEDIA STUDIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXTS

To start, a better understanding of television productions may help inform media literacy concepts. Most television productions are produced under time pressure, are targeted for specific audiences and are primarily made for commercial purposes under industry guidelines. Productions are created by teams of specialists, ranging

from directors to actors to camera operators, and must be edited to meet strictly timed slots (Bignell & Orlebar, 2005).

Television productions use variations in shot composition, pacing, variations in lighting and special effects to produce a unique *tradecraft* (Armes, 1988). A shot, or a segment that contains a "single, uninterrupted sequence of film taken by a single camera" (Wetzel, Radtke & Stern, 1994, p. 113) is the primary basis for tradecraft. A shot can be analyzed for its content, composition or movement or perhaps the way references other elements within the production. Variations in shots can be used to signify differing meanings (Berger, 1998). A series of related shots creates a scene; a coherent set of scenes make an entire production.

Zettl (1990; pp. 341-349) lists five major functions that aural elements serve within television productions: 1) information, 2) outer orientation, 3) inner orientation, 4) energy, and 5) structure. Information dissemination is the prime function of sound in television, according to Zettl, through forms of speech, which consist of 1) dialogue, 2) direct address, and 3) narration. Dialogue helps to develop characterisation, a plot, or the context of an event in television. Direct address allows someone on-screen to speak directly to the viewer-listener, creating an optimal method for information exchange. Narration is either on or off-camera and is used to bridge gaps in the continuity of a screen event.

Television productions, of course, are not "ordinary, familiar" versions of reality but rather particular views of the world constructed through sophisticated textual devices (Bignell & Orlebar, 2005, p. 5). Graddol (1994) uses sketches of the 'visual narrative structure' of television clips to display elements of their construction. Figure 1 provides an example.

Much like a tree diagram used in linguistics, Figure 1 is read from top to bottom. At the start, the genre of the text is identified. Here, it is 'advertising'. Following genre, 'location' is the parent concept of each scene that lies below it. Within individual scenes, each shot is identified with a number. The utility of mapping visual

narrative structures is to indicate the degree of complexity a video-text may have, particularly when they include information concerning the duration of a single shot. Intra-textual references, for example when a shot is used many times throughout a clip, can also be tracked with diagrams of a visual narrative structure.

Figure 1: Example visual narrative structure
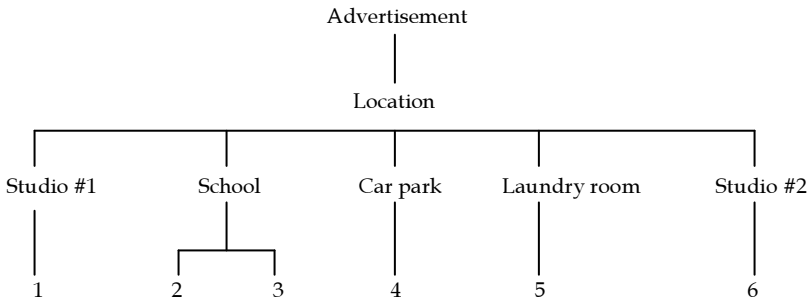
Analysis of the content of a production provides another way to approach media literacy. Work by Nugent, Loncar and Aisbett (1993) and, more recently, Jacka (2002) provide examples of investigating cultural diversity. Content analysis is a multi-faceted approach that includes quantifying the appearance of certain types of people (e.g., ethnic minorities, non-English speakers) for specific productions, time slots or television channels, for example, or identifying particular themes across productions or broadcasters (Neuendorf, 2002).

With an upsurge in globalization, media texts have become an increasingly prominent 'site of language contact' for our learners (Piller, 2003). Clever advertising encodes both primary and secondary discourses (Piller, 2001). 'Primary discourse' motivates the acquisition of good and services: buying this or that makes us healthier, or saves us money, or makes us more comfortable. 'Secondary discourse' establishes the context for the consumption: by using this or that, we can emulate the people and values of a society who appear to be healthier, richer and more at ease with their lives.

Although there are numerous studies of audience reception (e.g., Brooker & Jermyn, 2003; Gillespie, 2005), further consideration of second language viewers and contexts is needed. Perhaps, as Miike (2007) asserts, communication theorists tend to be Eurocentric. Karanfil (2007) recently examined the place of media amongst Turkish migrants to Australia, and considered how satellite television is often used to crucial fill gaps that free-to-air stations may neglect:

Diasporic groups, who feel a need to preserve and reproduce their identity in a place away from the one they might consider home, seem to be tempted to turn to the mass media where they search for their reflections, even for small signs and messages that make them feel at home. And again the case is that usually these minority ethnic groups feel that the mainstream media do not meet their needs (Karanfil, 2007, p. 61).

If Karanfil's observations are widespread phenomena, what is the role of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) amongst Australian migrants? TESOL researchers would do well to investigate the role of ethnic television in regards to language maintenance, cultural identity and community building. Using an ethnomethodological approach, Salmon (1997), for example, questioned the efficacy of imported television productions on cultural identity and language maintenance, suggesting that such programs did little for ethnic communities.

A recent edited volume regarding the impact of international television (Elasmar, 2003a) may stimulate interest in the role of media for cultural identity. In this work, audience effects for a range of nationalities (e.g., Argentinean, Brazilian, Ecuadorian and Greek) in regards to American television shows are examined. Moving beyond cultural imperialism, Elasmar (2003b) proposes we see media influence through a range of factors that may indicate susceptibility of imported media (SIM). In this framework, individual behaviours are brought to the fore ahead of larger socio-political influences; that is, unlike models cultural imperialism

(Elasmar & Bennet, 2003), SIM takes into account a person's educational levels, direct interactions with foreign nationals and a willingness to watch foreign programs amongst other factors. An example audience research based on the work of a colleague can help illustrate how TESOL researchers can work in this area.

Case illustration

Catherine has long worked in the adult migrant sector, and now counts several of her former students as friends. Often, when she visits their homes, the television is on but the family rarely seems to gather around it. Sometimes, SBS Radio is playing and her friends listen to a broadcast in their own language. Catherine rarely sees mainstream newspapers about the house, however, and now that she thinks about it no one ever make references to magazines such as *Women's Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan* or *The Bulletin*. She suspects the younger students watch *The Simpsons* as they occasionally imitate the language of Homer and Bart. But what do they make of *Kath & Kim*, for example, or even *Neighbours*? Catherine decides to ask her migrant friends if she can watch television with them a couple of times a month. Prior to her fieldwork, she conducts a content analysis of a few Australian productions. Later, as she sits with friends in front of the home television, she observes their reactions, takes notes and asks questions. Catherine maintains a reflective journal throughout the project. Eventually, she begins to build up a view concerning how they acquire media literacy skills in a second language.

Research questions

When considering audience responses to the media, a number of questions can be considered.

- Which Australian television programs are most watched by various demographic sectors (e.g., children, teens, unemployed men, working mothers, cultural groups, religious affiliation) of the non-English speaking migrant community? Why are some

preferred over others (e.g., plot clarity, narrative e simplicity, 'Aussie' identity)?

- Is SBS television and radio effective in areas of language maintenance and cultural identity? If so, why? Can factors within Elsamer's (2003b) framework for the SIM be used to explain certain behaviours?

- Why do migrants watch particular programs and not others? How does language proficiency affect choices and the ability to evaluate content?

- What role does the media play in shaping attitudes towards Australia, particularly in the areas of national politics, for recently arrived migrants? How is the ABC perceived? At what point do ethnic viewers opt for satellite broadcasts?

RESEARCH ON COGNITIVE PROCESSES IN SECOND LANGUAGE MEDIA COMPREHENSION

Media literacy development can also be investigated by studying how individuals go about making sense of television. In a synthesis of 20 definitions, Potter (2004, p. 63) presents media literacy as a "perspective from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of messages we encounter." To build such a perspective, Potter argues, knowledge structures are required that are built upon media and real world information as well as the seven primary skills of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduct-ion, synthesis and abstracting. Potter writes that the strength of literacy skills depends on the breath and depth of knowledge struct-ures. Five foundational knowledge structures were identified: media effects, media content, media industries, real world and self (Potter, 2004, p. 69). At the lower levels of proficiency, Potter writes, know-ledge structures are small, superficial and poorly organized. As such, these deficiencies in knowledge impose limits on the development of media literacy.

Potter (2004) argues strongly that individuals must accept the responsibility for developing media literacy. As such, Potter empha-sizes that personal locus—the ability to govern information process-

ing tasks—is at the heart of a cognitive model of media literacy. Personal locus operations can either be conscious or unconscious. The essential task of the individual is to be aware of what information is allowed in, and what is ignored. This 'filtering', in turn, affects the ways individuals can match or construct meaning.

TESOL researchers are familiar with studies concerned with the cognitive processing of text, either in printed form (for an overview, see Koda, 2005) or as audio files (for an overview, see Flowerdew & Miller, 2005) or digitized audio-visual media (e.g., Chun & Plass, 1997; Gruba, 2004). In studies of comprehension, one approach that is often used is to ask second language learners to 'think aloud' as they attend to the texts. As they talk, their comments are recorded and later transcribed (for a general introduction to this approach, see Ericsson and Simon (1983/1994)). Transcriptions are then analyzed to yield insights into comprehension processes and strategies. Although verbal report protocols are difficult to utilize effectively, results of such research can inform classroom practice (Cohen, 1994) as well as language testing development (Green, 1997).

Kirby (1993) provides a useful conceptualization of ways second language viewers may encounter television broadcasts. At times, we all must consciously process words, phrases or images and this, of course, causes interference in the process of comprehension. Confusion the verbal and visual channels may strain our attention and working memory resources. Whereas native speakers may not notice occasional errors in a production, however, second language viewers may be 'led up the garden path' to poor understanding caused when they misinterpret the function of an element within a production (Gruba, 2004). Perhaps an illustration of a recent post-graduate student's journey into this area may help unpack some concepts.

Case illustration

Thomas has held a long interest in genre theory, critical discourse analysis and complex interactions between readers and texts. Now considering a doctorate, he's excited about the possibility of using

aspects of second language reading theory to examine how new forms of digital media are understood. He explores media discourse, too, and touches on cinema studies. Thomas considers foreign newscasts as a focal genre: that is, how they might share generic elements, or how they differ in reporting a single global event or even how different ethnic groups may interpret the same clip in a number of different ways. He digitizes several brief clips from a number of sources, deconstructs them both visually and verbally, and has second language learners attend to short segments while they think aloud.

Research questions

If a cognitive view of media literacy is adopted, several questions can be posed and answered empirically.

- How do English as a second language migrants go about making sense of Australian television programs? How do they utilize the 'discourse' of programming in their daily lives?
- What aspects of language in the media are the focal barriers to comprehension?
- What role do images play in comprehension? What is the 'image' of mainstream Australia amongst migrants?
- How do specific elements of audio-visual text (e.g., particular cultural signifiers, unfamiliar tradecraft techniques, special effects) influence comprehension?
- Can we establish a set of criteria, similar to readability indices, to indicate the relative difficulty of news casts for non-native speakers of English?

INVESTIGATING MEDIA LITERACY PEDAGOGY FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Nearly 15 years ago, Vanderplank (1993) bemoaned the lack of our pedagogical use of television:

> *"Although the focus of language teaching goals and practices has shifted from the printed word and knowledge of the language*

> *system to the use and communicative value of the spoken language in everyday settings, the most popular conveyor of popular culture, language, values, beliefs, and attitudes — television — barely gets a mention in the vast literature of language teaching" (p. 10).*

Although a number of pedagogical books in the early 1990s suggested ways to teach foreign languages with video (e.g., Altman, 1989; Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990), Vanderplank (1993) argued that they mistakenly emphasized the visual, not verbal, channel. Television, Vanderplank suggested, was really an outgrowth of radio and should be used primarily for teaching audio elements. Focus on video pedagogies diminished with the rise of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), spawning a host of work on multimedia (e.g., Cameron, 1998).

Ironically, as Bax (2003) argues, the key criterion for CALL to be successful is that it "ceases to exist as a separate concept and field for discussion" (p. 23). Indeed, Bax continues, CALL practitioners "should be aiming at their own extinction" (p. 23) and seek to 'normalise' their work such that technology becomes seemingly invisible, and its usage is routine and unproblematic (Arnold & Ducate, 2006). If indeed the vision for CALL is to "achieve a seamless linkage between the computer and our teaching that the computer becomes as unremarkable in our daily practice as the pen and book" (Chambers & Bax, 2006, p. 466), a greater emphasis on media literacy may help us re-position the role of digital technologies in our classrooms. Indeed, as Murray (2000) reminds us, literacy development needs to be at the forefront as we go about working with new technologies, new practices and new theories.

As ESL learners go about understanding the media, it is important to note that they are not only confronted by language and textual complexities. Further, learners must place the texts in a 'cultural or textual framework' to make sense of various forms (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Certainly, Kress (2003) points out ways in which the 'new media' challenge our explanations of text, from grammatical structure to the role of image and the fluidity of concepts.

Brown (1998) and Christ and Potter (1998) map media literacy education in the context of higher education. Overall, media literacy proponents see the role of education as a way to promote a conscious processing of information through critical eyes (Kellner & Share, 2005; Potter, 2005). In a typical example, the Center for Media Literacy [www.medialit.org] advocates a four-step process of education: Awareness, Analysis, Reflection and Action. Ultimately, the Center believes that the "power of media literacy is its ability to inspire independent thinking and foster critical analysis" through the acquisition of a "set of 'navigational' skills which include the students' ability to:

- *Access* information from a variety of sources.
- *Analyze and explore* how messages are 'constructed' whether print, verbal, visual or multi-media.
- *Evaluate* media's explicit and implicit messages against one's own ethical, moral and/or democratic principles.
- *Express or create* their own messages using a variety of media tools."

As concerns rise about 'media saturation' in society (Potter, 2004), media literacy education is gaining prominence (Schwarz, Brown & NSSE, 2005). A trend in pedagogical handbooks is to define key concepts, present a case for their significance and discuss issues in teaching. Much of the work to date is directed at the secondary sector. Buckingham (2003) and Goldfarb (2002), for example, discuss ways secondary students can create 'critical videos' and De Abreau (2007) provides 'ready to teach' lessons for high school students. For busy TESOL professionals, work by Berger (1998) and Stokes (2003) can be accessible introductions to media studies. In our own field, there is a growing interest in media literacy instruction that is designed specifically for our own classrooms (Cope, 2002; Gruba, 2005; Quinlisk, 2003). Looking at the way a Japanese teacher took on media literacy research may help illustrate some of the possibilities in this area.

Case illustration

Misako first learned English in her native Japan, and then honed her skills during a five-year stay in Western Canada. Now working as a high school Japanese teacher in Victoria, she's undertaking a master's degree in TESOL and is interested in computer-based approaches. She knows that 'YouTube' is very popular and wonders if she can help stimulate interest in Japan, and Japanese language learning, through extended use of the site. She examines the literature and sees there is little to guide her; much of it, she decides, is out of date and based on analogue video recordings, not digital media. Misako begins to wonder, too, what she will tell the students they are doing with the 'YouTube' site: Video-based listening? Multimedia listening? Media literacy? Though excited about her innovation in teaching, she wonders how gaining proficiencies in this area will help her students pass the VCE Japanese exam.

Research questions

Media education is a rich area of exploration for ESL contexts, and several questions are ripe for further examination.

- To what extent does media consumption promote, or retard, acculturation and second language acquisition?
- Can the explicit teaching of media literacy skills help non-English speaking migrants better acculturate to life in Australia?
- How can media literacy competencies and skills be assessed in ESL settings? What role does the level of language proficiency play in media literacy development?
- What is the responsibility of ESL teachers, for example, in media education? What, if any, professional development concerns would instructors have? What would a professional development course highlight?
- What factors would shape a curriculum regarding media literacy development in an adult migrant context? How important is media literacy in attaining acculturation goals?

CONCLUSION

My aim here is to stimulate Australian TESOL research to consider investigating the roles media may play in a variety of contexts. The media, particularly television, is a well-spring of language and culture. Often, the media are topical, relevant and central to our students; one of our responsibilities as leaders of research-based TESOL is to better understand how they go about making sense of complex and fleeting media texts. It can be argued that the media saturate not only our own lives but those of our students: variously, media affect how we talk, what we talk about, the ways we dress, what we spend and how we see ourselves and others. If TESOL can be seen as the study of language in context, then looking closely at how the media shapes context can be a productive area for investigation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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