

# Media Literacy and Language Teaching

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## Abstract

Ours is an age of media and information technology, in which the mass media drive our global politics and economy and control our perceptions. Media literacy, or the ability to "read" what is hidden in the media text (both spoken and written) is a very important skill for our learners, especially at the tertiary level, to really understand what is going on around them, and to become independent, critical thinkers in our society. This article gives an example of a newspaper report with bias and shows how a critical reading can be done to reveal the implicit side-taking perspective. It also discusses why media literacy should be incorporated into a language class and how this can be done.

## Introduction

In this age we are living in, information, entertainment and education all come to us in a continual bombardment of our perceptive senses by what is now called The Media. Media has always been with us but never with such a conglomerated volume or distinctive identity. In the years before the printing press was invented, books were hand-written and stories were told from mouth to mouth, but they were not meant for mass circulation. The evolution of technology has made it possible for the public to access the same information at the same time at the flick of a switch. Now the media has encompassed all aspects of our lives. It would not be an exaggeration to say the media are now driving our global politics and economy. English-language media, in particular, have become influential not only in our language classrooms or our academic lives but also and perhaps even more in our daily perceptions, beliefs, values and judgements. Most of us, the receivers, however, do not seem to be aware of the power of the media as much as we should be.

## Media literacy

The dictionary definition of media is "The main means of mass communication (especially newspapers and broadcasting) regarded collectively" (The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary, 1991, p.901) and literacy is defined as the ability to read and write (The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary 1991, p.839). But when put together, "media literacy" means more than just the ability to read (or write) in terms of the mass media. Here it means the ability to "read" those media, with the word "read" in quotation marks. To "read" is to be able to read both the literal surface meaning and the implied, hidden but usually more significant agenda encoded underneath. And in order to be able to read the latter, it is important that we "develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques" (Duncan et al., 1989). In other words, we need to be media literate, especially regarding the agenda hidden in the message.

### **The hidden agenda**

But what is this so called hidden agenda in the media? In order to move further, we need first to understand that, contrary to the popular belief, no media are innocent, neutral and objective, containing merely purely literal, factual information. This point should be self-evident in what is known as a tabloid newspaper. But even the more intellectually sophisticated newspaper, what we usually call a broadsheet newspaper, is not completely objective. Under the literal surface content, all media representations embody perspectives or viewpoints about the world. This is why we say that media represent rather than present reality; they are representational means rather than presentational.

Whether or not this embodying process is carried out with conscious intentions is beside the point. The point is that choices and decisions always need to be made in producing media, and in choosing one word over another or one picture over a hundred others, the chooser's perspective is represented. Viewpoints thus manifest themselves on the media page or screen through a variety of choices and decisions made by the people who produce the media (e.g. photographers, reporters, scriptwriters, editors, newspaper owners, directors, sponsors etc.).

To illustrate this point, let us take a news report in a newspaper as an example. In reporting news in a newspaper, the producers will have to make choices and decisions such as:

- What story to report?
- From whose point of view?
- Whose voice(s) should be heard?
- Whose voice(s) should be ignored?
- What words or sentence structures to use for the headline? For the body paragraphs?
- What images to accompany the news items?
- How to edit the draft?
- Where to place the news item?

All these choices and decisions, once made, constitute the embodied perspective or what is called the hidden agenda in the news. An analysis of a real news report may clarify this point.

### **An example**

The following news report is taken from the international news page of The Bangkok Post, March 30, 2001 (p.10). The break down of paragraphs with paragraph numbers up to paragraph 10 is provided for ease of analysis.

#### *Newspaper Report*

HEADLINE: *Israel kills Palestinian teens*

SUB-HEADLINE: *Arafat slams strikes, 100-day Sharon plan*

BY-LINE: Gaza City, AFP (Agence France-Presse)

BODY: (first ten paragraphs):

1. [the lead] Israeli troops shot dead two Palestinian teenagers yesterday as fierce clashes erupted in the Gaza Strip a day after Israeli helicopter gunships blasted bases of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Force 17.

2. A third Palestinian, a member of the preventive security forces in the Gaza Strip, was also killed overnight by Israeli forces, the army and Palestinian security forces said.
3. Mr. Arafat condemned the Israeli air strikes, which killed a member of Force 17 and a woman and injured more than 60, as part of a deliberate strategy by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon against the Palestinians.
4. "The Israeli aggression is the beginning of the 100-day Sharon plan," Mr. Arafat said, referring to Palestinian charges that the hardline Israeli leader has mapped out a plan to crack down against the six-month-old intifada, or uprising.
5. "Whatever they do, we are still here and we will stay here," he said, vowing that the intifada would continue until the Palestinian flag flies over Jerusalem as the capital of an independent state.
6. Dozens of Palestinian youths confronted Israeli troops at the Erez crossing between the northern Gaza Strip after Israel launched air raids on Wednesday in retaliation for a spate of bomb attacks in Israel, the first military strikes by Mr. Sharon's government.
7. A group of about 50 was hurling stones at Israeli forces just a few meters away, shouting: "Israelis out, Israelis out," and setting fire to Israeli flags.
8. Mohammed Salman Abu Shamla, 18, was hit by bullets in the head and the heart when Israeli troops fired live rounds and tear gas at the youths, while Mahmud Khaled Abu Shahada, 15, was shot dead with a bullet to the heart.
9. Another 13 Palestinians were injured, two of them seriously.
10. The army said it had initially fired rubber bullets and tear gas at the demonstrators throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails but used live bullets when a group of youths stormed the Israeli-controlled checkpoint at Erez.

*(The Bangkok Post, March 30 2001, p.10)*

The news item seems to report the "facts" about the conflict and violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the casualties caused by it. "Facts", "reality" and "objectivity" are what we have been taught to find, and expect to see, in a news report like this. However, a more critical reading of the report reveals at least one implicit point of view, that is sympathy for the Palestinians and condemnation of the Israelis. Such side-taking is hidden in the choices of language, both verbal and non-verbal, as well as in other elements.

### **Choice of words**

The use of emotive words, such as *slams*, *fierce clashes*, *erupted*, *blasted*, *crack down*, *vowing*, *air strikes*, *stormed* serves to arouse the readers' emotions, thus rendering the news report more dramatic and colourful. It should be noted that most of these emotive words describe what Israel did to Palestinians, framing the former as a violent, heartless aggressor and the latter as helpless victims. This coincides with the terms

used distinctively and repeatedly to refer to the Palestinians as *teens*, *teenagers*, and *youths* both in the headline and the body of the report.

### **Choice of sentence structuring**

The sentence structuring chosen to describe the incident here is basically the active voice, starting from the headline, which reads - *Israel kills Palestinian teens*, with *Israel* as the clear agent of the action verb *kills* and the *Palestinian teens* as the victim of the action. 'Israel' is presented as an impersonal force. Literally, the word refers to the country. Instead, it is used here to refer to Israeli soldiers involved in the action. The use of the term 'Israel', rather than 'Israeli troops' or 'Israeli soldiers' makes it seem that the entire country of Israel is somehow guilty of the killings. Further on in the ten body paragraphs, we can see more of how sentences are structured. Grouping of subjects / agents together with the action verbs they perform yields the following results:

#### *Israelis as subject / agent*

Israeli troops shot dead ...

Israeli helicopter gunships blasted ...

Israeli air strikes, which killed ... and injured ...

Israeli leader has mapped out a plan to crack down ...

Israel launched air raids ...

Israeli troops fired live rounds ...

it (the Israeli army) fired ...

#### *Palestinians as subject / agent*

Palestinian youths confronted Israeli troops.

A group of about 50 (Palestinian youths) were hurling stones ..., shouting ..., and setting fire ...

A group of youths stormed the Israeli checkpoint.

In most of these sentences, *Israel* or *Israelis* are depicted as the agent(s) of the violent actions by using the active voice construction. The choice of active / passive structure generally reflects how writers encode their mental image of reality and how they account for their experience of the world in language. The active sentence foregrounds the doer's involvement in the incident whereas the passive empathizes with the receiver of the action (Simpson, 1993). The choice of the active construction therefore implies the agency, the responsibility of the agent as well as the causality. In our case, we can say that by making *Israel* or *Israelis* the agent of these active verbs, the writer implicitly assigns responsibility of the event to Israel and hence condemnation is implied on the country as a whole.

When the passive structure is used, as in paragraph 2:

A third Palestinian ... was also killed overnight by Israeli forces ...

The writer chooses not to delete the agent phrase (introduced with *by*). In this case, the agentless passive (without the *by* phrase) would have rendered the causality and agency unclear and the condemnation considerably weakened (Fairclough, 1989, p.124-125). But the writer chooses to do the opposite, thus making the agency and responsibility even more strengthened on Israel's part.

### **Choice of quotes**

Side-taking is also implied in the use of quotes. Of the ten paragraphs, two contain direct quotes (paragraphs 4 and 5) and one contains an indirect quote (paragraph 3) of the leader of Palestine by name. On the Israeli side, only the army, but not the leader, is indirectly quoted as a collective group. The event, we can conclude, is presented from the Palestinians' perspective rather than from that of the Israelis.

### **Choice of picture**

Last but not least is the choice of photograph to accompany the news body. A popular belief in our culture is that "the camera never lies," therefore photographs present reality. In fact, photographs never present; rather they represent, which means they transform reality through the photographer's choices of what to photograph and how to do it as well as the editor's choice of what photograph to print on the page. They are, therefore, representations of the reporter / editor's opinions or viewpoints on the topic. For this article a picture of a boy was chosen, maybe for the same reason as the choice of the words *teens* and *youths*: children represent innocence, helplessness and vulnerability in most cultures. The picture of the boy is given a comparatively large space on the page not only to attract the readers' attention but mainly to draw their sympathy and again the blame is on the Israeli side.

The analysis of this one news item is probably sufficient to show that news reports are not objective, factual representations of reality. And this is only a small example of the hidden agenda in the media. In the news reports on various international television channels during the recent war in Afghanistan and on the conflict between the US and Iraq, we saw even more hidden agendas, both biased viewpoints and propaganda, in the attempt to gain sympathy, partnership and approval / legitimization from the various countries of the world.

### **Framing**

Our world-views are heavily mediated. In receiving the literal meaning of the news, our views are unconsciously framed by the hidden agenda. This hidden agenda, when received repeatedly at a subliminal level, can exercise great framing power and control over the receiver's perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, opinions and social values. That is, the receivers of the news can easily and unconsciously accept the hidden agenda as their own points of view and use them in making future decisions or value judgements. To understand this point, we only have to ask ourselves how much of what we heard or saw from the media made us side with the US or the Al-Qaeda Group in the Afghanistan War. Or how much do we rely on the media in siding or not siding with minority groups in Thailand when their villages are threatened by dislocation from a dam? We have to admit that the mass media shapes what we see, think, and do. The ability to "read" the hidden agenda or to recognize the framing and the framing devices of the media is therefore a matter of life and death, or of war and peace, because we, as both national and global citizens, will be able to make unbiased, well-informed, balanced and independent decisions or judgements towards all events around us if we are empowered against the control of the media. Being informed, but powerless, is basically useless. And this is precisely what we mean by being media-literate. As Bowen (1996) puts it, "media Literacy seeks to empower citizenship, to transform citizens' passive relationship to media into an active, critical engagement capable of challenging the traditions and structures of the privatized, commercial media culture, and thereby find new avenues of citizen speech and discourse". All this, if included in

a reading class, will bring great benefits to our students as well as our global society. And this is what being "globalized" is all about.

### **In the classroom**

The question to be raised here then is how do we, English language teachers, empower our students? The traditional way of using media material such as a newspaper report in class is for comprehension practice. Activity resource books see newspaper reports as "a medium that lends itself splendidly to strategies fostered in progressive reading programs - skimming, scanning, anticipation, the use of context, vocabulary development, inference and critique" (Fredrickson and Wedel, 1991, p. iii). This aspect of newspaper use has been made popular among English language teachers in Thailand in the past decade. In line with this traditional approach, the *Bangkok Post* report above can have various activities designed to involve learners in scanning for specific information (e.g. Where did the event take place? When? How many casualties?), in making predictions from the headline and the photograph, or in guessing meanings of words from context. General comprehension checking, note-taking and summarizing can also be done on the basis of the literal content of the report. Using newspaper reports to teach or practise these literal reading strategies is not such a bad idea and can be useful for the learners. But is that sufficient? Does teaching reading, especially at the university level, mean only enabling the learners to deal with the literal level of the text, without an awareness of the power of the language and the power of the media, an awareness that eventually will lead the learners to better understand the world around them?

In order to move beyond the literal comprehension level to the hidden agenda, media literacy should be included as one of the objectives of the language program. And that means all languages taught, including Thai, not only English. To the learners, it will be a big step forward because it will help move them "from merely recognizing and comprehending information to higher order critical thinking skills implicit in questioning, analyzing, and evaluating that information" (Considine, 1994). To the teachers, it will be more than just a step forward; it will be rather a paradigm shift because language teaching will no longer be merely the teaching of skills. It will be teaching of, and about, the language itself, i.e. pointing out to students the language's usage, its roles, its functions and its power as well as how language relates to each individual and the society as a whole. Knowledge of language, linguistics, communication, history, geography as well as knowledge of what is happening in the world will be necessary for the teachers and the learners as they analyze and discuss the media.

In a reading class using a newspaper report, teachers may proceed from the literal comprehension level by asking questions surrounding the agenda hidden in a particular news item, indirectly leading the learners through a critical analysis which will reveal what lies beneath. Some examples of such questions are:

- Who is doing the speaking? For what purpose?
- Whose viewpoint is heard? Whose is not heard?
- What and how language (i.e., words, sentence structuring, connectors, quotes, visuals) is chosen to frame the viewpoint?
- How does the camera frame the event?
- Who is benefiting from the report?

- What is our role as readers in identifying with, siding with, or questioning what we see or hear?

Media literacy, in this respect, is very close to some definitions of critical reading. Kurland (2000), for instance, explains that in critical reading, students are asked to accomplish the following goals:

- to recognize an author's purpose
- to understand tone and persuasive elements
- to recognize bias

All of these require analyzing the choices of content and language.

A media literate language classroom then will be different from a simple language skills classroom in the depth of analysis as well as in the depth of questioning and thinking. And once the learners get the grip of it, it will not be so difficult for them to take the role of analyzing and questioning the media themselves. The ability to question and analyze the media will empower the learners and enable them to become independent thinkers and critical members of our society.

## Conclusion

Media literacy, or the ability to "read" what is hidden in a media text (both spoken and written), is a very important tool for our learners to better understand what is going on in our media-driven world. Idealistically, it should be incorporated in the teaching and learning of all languages, not only English. But since English language media are probably the most pervasive and the most powerful in the world now, English language media literacy has even more justification to appear in our English language classes. And now that the Office of University Affairs has recently proposed a reform in the Foundation English Language Program in Thai universities throughout the country, this may be the best time for us teachers of English to shift the paradigm and start viewing English language teaching not only as skills-based, literal comprehension activities but also as ways of equipping learners with world awareness.

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