

# Engaging K–12 Language Learners in Media Literacy

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Calls to integrate media literacy into K–12 language classrooms appear to have gone largely unheeded. However, media literacy skills are seen as crucial for 21st-century learners. This article answers the calls for a focus on media literacy in the language classroom by addressing both why and how systematic attention might be brought to this issue and by highlighting the connections between language and media literacy.

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**More** and younger students, including K–12 language learners (LLs) in the United States and abroad, are using the Internet to explore and discover; however, not all that they discover is factual or real. From commercial tracking to fake prize-winning scams to Photoshopped images and film, the Internet is rampant with bias and misinformation. Without the knowledge and skills to recognize and evaluate Internet-based information, young students could misunderstand or, worse, be taken in by unscrupulous Web users. As Quinlisk (2003) notes, young LLs “have not always experienced the commercial underpinning or consumer driven culture that we have. They don’t understand the tradeoffs involved with commercial media” or the “subtle messages about social interaction, rules of participation, and what is valued or devalued in certain communities” that are transmitted through media (p. 35). Egbert and Huff (2011) note that student exposure to value-laden content on the Internet is unavoidable, but that making those underlying values salient to students should be focal. For language teachers it is a priority that students learn to read, write, listen, and speak in their chosen language(s), but LLs

need additional language and literacy skills to live and thrive in the world. One of the most crucial 21st-century skills is media literacy.

## UNDERSTANDING MEDIA LITERACY

For students, media literacy can generally be defined as having the ability and skills to critically interpret, analyze, and produce media. Media literacy calls for students to challenge “what they see, not as right or wrong, but as being open to interpretation” (Quinlisk, 2003, p. 35). This includes such skills as understanding political sound bites and propaganda, parsing advertisements, using social media effectively, and being able to “create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in every day” (Cooper, 2002, n.p.). This article answers the calls for a focus on media literacy in the language classroom (see, e.g., Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2012a; Curry, 1999; Egbert, 2009; Egbert & Huff, 2011; Quinlisk, 2003), by addressing both why and how systematic attention might be brought to this issue (Wan, 2006), and by highlighting the connections between language and media literacy.

There are a number of reasons for language students to become media literate. One reason is the need for LLs to be safe in order to learn (Lacina, 2013; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004), to make sure that their persons and information are safe from harassment, theft, and other types of victimization (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). Further, media literacy as the focus of study in language classrooms fulfills a range of goals by incorporating both language and technology while also addressing organizational and national standards that call for critical thinking. For example, media literacy addresses the standards from the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE.org), which include that students “apply existing knowledge to generate new ideas, products, or processes,” and the Common Core standards, in which “just as media and technology are integrated in school and life in the twenty-first century, skills related to media use (both critical analysis and production of media) are integrated” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012, n.p.). In addition, because during media literacy study

learners focus on media that they use both within and outside of class, the chances are high that students will be engaged in media literacy tasks (Egbert, 2007; Lacina, 2013; Lin, 2012; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004). The Center for Media Literacy's *Why Literacy is Important* web page (<http://www.medialit.org/why-media-literacy-important>) provides articles with many additional reasons to address student media literacy; for example, "because the media help define how we communicate with each other . . . the media interpret our world, its values and ideas to us . . . the media are carefully planned, designed and constructed products" (Worsnop, 2011). Wan (2006) adds that teachers can integrate media literacy as part of every discipline and in ESL instruction, as shown in the next section.

## TEACHING MEDIA LITERACY

According to the Center for Media Literacy ([www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)), students should learn the following five key concepts about media to be media literate:

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

In other words, students need to learn to ask *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* about the media they come in contact with, whether the media are digital or print. Addressing these concepts can help learners to meet the standards for media literacy. There are a variety of tasks that can help students understand these research-based concepts. Important to media literacy instruction for LLs, as noted previously, is that language is central and that students are engaged in the tasks. The sample introductory tasks outlined below meet the standards' requirements for media literacy mentioned previously. They help learners both to understand and create media products, and they also demonstrate the overlap between language learning and media literacy instruction by providing specific language

objectives and starting with and containing engaging connections to students' lives. Each task is tied to the five key concepts noted above, and teachers can adapt these tasks for a variety of different LL student populations by refocusing the task objectives, providing more structure and support, or requiring a simpler product. For example, in adapting Task 2 for younger audiences, instead of asking the students to suggest whether the photos are real based on their background knowledge, the teacher could explain the photos and provide ideas for how to tell. In addition, all the tasks could focus on more or fewer objectives, depending on learner age and/or level. The Center for Media Literacy also offers simpler statements of the five key concepts for younger learners.

**Task 1: What's the Appeal? Exploring Audience Shaping**  
*Content objective.* Learners will be able to point out ways in which media sponsors attempt to appeal to specific populations.

*Language objectives.* Learners will be able to use descriptive words to describe media; express an opinion; use "because" appropriately.

*Opening questions/connections.* Why do you like some things and not others? Why do you use some web sites/magazines and not others? What is your favorite web site or magazine? Why? Does this web site/ magazine appeal to you? Why or why not? To whom is it addressed?

*Task instructions.* After teacher models the task and previews the language objectives, students choose a web site or age-level magazine to review. News sites such as CNN and Fox (or their children's sites), game sites like GirlsGoGames, and education sites such as the Discovery Channel and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) are useful for different learners' reviews, as are any media that learners use regularly. Learners list words, graphics, design, and other aspects of the media that appear to address a specific audience. Students discuss their findings, employing the language objectives. A site or magazine that students do not know can then be provided, and students create a list to determine who might be attracted to this medium and why.

### **Follow-up discussion on Concepts 2 and 3.**

*Assessment.* Learners choose a site or a magazine and use the language in the objectives to explain its appeal in either written (posted to a wiki or other class site) or oral (recorded) form. Peers provide formative feedback by replying to the author about the ideas and the teacher uses a checklist to note mastery of language objectives.

*Concepts addressed:* 2, 3.

### **Task 2: What Is Real and What Is Not? How to Figure Out the Truth of Web Photos**

*Content objectives.* Learners will be able to explain that media messages are constructed; use primary sources to make an argument; summarize.

*Language objective.* Learners will be able to use complete sentences to create and present an oral summary.

*Opening questions/connections.* What is the first thing you notice about each image? How do you know what is real? Have you ever seen the subject of the image in real life? How could you find out if it were real? Is it okay to publish fake photos? Why or why not?

*Task instructions.* Ask students to evaluate the likelihood that a picture (like that of an alligator coming out of a sewer at <http://canofmystery.blogspot.com/2012/10/alligators-in-sewers.html> or the photos in the *Can You Spot the Fakes* quiz at [urbanlegends.about.com](http://urbanlegends.about.com)) portrays a real or unreal event or artifact. Model how to find primary sources, and ask students to find information that will support their decision about the photo. Together, write a summary of the information and have students reconsider their positions. Provide students with additional photos and have them create a summary that they will present to their peers to convince them that the photo is real or unreal. Discuss the effects of media construction.

*Assessment.* Peer comments and teacher rubric that contains the objectives.

*Concept addressed:* 1.

### **Task 3: Image Close-Up: Creating Powerful Advertisements**

*Content objectives.* Learners will be able to describe how media have embedded values and points of view; explain how messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

*Language objectives.* Learners will be able to use the language of appeal; describe an object; exaggerate; make an oral presentation.

*Opening questions/connection.* Have you ever seen a picture of something that you wanted and then been disappointed when you saw the actual product? How many of you eat at McDonald's (or any fast food chain)? Describe what you see on the menu board, and compare it to what you really get.

*Task instructions.* Using an image like those at <http://www.alphaila.com/articles/failure/fast-food-false-advertising-vs-reality/> helps students explain why there might be differences in what you see and what you get. For example, ask students to consider a wrapper for Skittles candy. On the wrapper it says *five fruit flavors*; however, there is no fruit in Skittles. In addition, the wrapper prominently displays an ad to *play and win*, suggesting that consumers may have an opportunity to not only enjoy a wholesome fruit snack but also to win big just by opening the package. Ask students to whom the wrapper is addressed and what kind of power the image carries. Figure out with students why the wrapper is designed this way and the type of language used. Then, after modeling the task while addressing the language objectives, have students design their own wrappers for a product and "sell" the product to the class. They should include a reflection on their advertising choices to hand in.

*Assessment.* Formative assessment includes discussion of the language used, how persuasive each ad is, and what makes it so. Note students who do not seem to understand the concepts well or need additional language to help their product.

*Concepts addressed:* 2, 4, 5.

### **Task 4: Which Sources Are Reliable?**

*Content objective.* Learners will be able to identify embedded values and points of view in media; use a search engine to refine results.

**Language objectives.** Learners will be able to write complete sentences; create citations in American Psychological Association (APA) format.

**Opening questions/connections.** What's a question about the culture of this country that you are interested in? Where would you search for information? How can you tell if information is reliable? If you looked at this citation list, would you believe the information in the article? Why or why not? Why do we use citations like this?

**Task instructions.** Model the task, using a question about a topic in which students are interested and know something about. Then, help students make a question about a topic that they are interested in and will briefly research. Students use the advanced search function of a search engine to find the top 10 web sites addressing their question. Students create a citation for each site in APA format following the model provided, and then they use complete sentences to explain why each source is reliable or not. Finally, they use the reliable sources to write an answer to their question and share with the class.

**Assessment.** A formative rubric that includes correct citation format, complete sentences, and correct answer to the question can help to understand where students need more work and where they have mastered the objectives.

**Concepts addressed:** 2, 4.

## **Task 5: The Language of Media: Producing Slogans**

**Content objective.** Learners will be able to discuss the power of words; identify and use slogans.

**Language objectives.** Learners will be able to use “powerful words” appropriately to create a slogan; provide written feedback.

**Opening questions/connections.** What is a slogan? What slogans do you know, either in your first or additional language? Why are some words powerful? What other words could be used? Does this slogan inspire you?

**Task instructions.** After initial discussion, use some of the slogans at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_lists\\_of\\_slogans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lists_of_slogans) to further students' understanding of “powerful” words. Create a slogan, modeling the process, for something that all students

know and understand. Students then choose a product, event, or person for whom/which to write their own slogan. They post their slogans electronically for peers to read, and peers make comments in text. Follow-up discussion may focus on which words were powerful and why some slogans were more powerful than others.

*Assessment.* Students receive credit for posting useful feedback to their peers; students receive points for all of the “powerful” words they can find and explain in others’ posts.

*Concept/concepts addressed:* 1, 2.

### **Project: Honesty in Advertising**

*Content objective.* Learners will be able to synthesize and apply content learned during their media study.

*Language objective.* Learners will be able to use language and structures learned during their media study in context.

*Opening questions/connections.* How can we teach others about media?

*Task instructions.* Learners in groups choose either to create an “honest” advertisement for a product or develop a teaching aid for helping others learn about media literacy. Learners choose video, audio, print, and/or other formats and modes, but they must include a text-based explanation of their product. Learners write a reflection explaining their products and how they have incorporated principles of media literacy.

*Assessment.* One criterion could be how many of the principles are included in the project; learners could also be evaluated on language use, integration of concepts, logic, and meeting the project goal.

*Concept/concepts addressed:* All.

Clearly these tasks only begin to deal with issues of media literacy for K–12 English language learners (ELLs), but they do address the crucial need for learners to interpret, analyze, and produce media. As teachers attend to the need to become more familiar with critical media literacy (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2012a, 2012b), perhaps the five key concepts mentioned throughout this paper will become a more integral part of ELL instruction.



## CONCLUSION

Media literacy instruction for LLs is crucial, not only for helping students to effectively and safely navigate the Internet, but also to engage students in language learning around a topic with which they are familiar. For language teachers who are concerned that teaching media literacy will diverge too far from the curriculum or take time away from the focus on language, the sample tasks provided above demonstrate that language and media are intricately connected; by understanding each, students understand both better. The tasks above can help language learners gain skills to critically interpret, analyze, and produce media while addressing language that is inseparable from their daily lives on the Internet. That language students often use the Internet on a daily basis speaks not only to the urgent need for media literacy but also to the ability of media literacy study to engage these learners in the target language. Addressing the needs of language learners to become media literate, therefore, can help teachers to create engaging, language-focused classrooms in which culture and technology play a central role and learners achieve in multiple ways.

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