

# The Media and Language Education

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Using the media for language lessons can be an effective tool for instructors hoping to teach world issues such as peace, human rights, development and the environment. Many researchers have promoted language education as a natural medium for these studies. But considering the inherent biases of the corporate media towards certain views of the world, teachers using media-based texts risk imparting one-sided, pro-business concepts directly to their students. Without a proper awareness of media biases and an attention to the various methods of language manipulation, global language educators will find it difficult to effectively help students gain a real understanding of the world. This paper highlights some of the problems language instructors face in using the media and suggests how they may be overcome.

A casual survey of language texts published during the past several years will reveal a certain increase in the use of authentic, primary source materials as reading or course books dealing very often with the media. Language sections of bookstores abound with titles concerned specifically with various news publications: how to understand and interpret them, the meaning of news jargon and terminology, listening texts based on television and radio broadcasts and explications of specific articles in newspapers and magazines. The introduction to a textbook based on the popular U.S.-based *TIME* magazine provides a typical rationale for using media-based materials:

Just as Time offers a unique view of the United States and its

people, TIME: *We the People* presents a special reading opportunity for students of English. Forty-six recently-published articles from TIME have been selected to represent a wide range of topics and issues... (TIME: *We the People*, 1992.)

It would appear that in such cases textbook writers and instructors using these materials have posed a growing challenge to the once widely-held view that reading and listening materials be carefully limited in content and vocabulary. Materials writers are now very often found to favor the use of original texts taken from commercially-available news sources as opposed to those written especially for language students. In this matter they appear to agree with reviewers such as Hess and Jasper (1995) who maintain that "abridged texts seem to have had all the flavor squeezed out of them". Instructors too, bypassing textbooks altogether, will use photocopied articles direct from newspapers and magazines with the intention of exposing students to the "untouched" word of professional journalists.

In the process, textbook writers and instructors make, I feel, a commendable argument for language students to become more directly engaged with the world and the social/political issues which affect them outside the classroom (Gomes de Matos, 1988; Kates, 1993; Ricento, 1993, etc.) Along with this increase in the use of news-based texts, the introduction of issues of peace and justice (normally considered to cover an entire range of sub-issues including development, war, poverty, hunger, sexual and racial discrimination, environmental issues, etc.) has become a major focus in many language classrooms and many instructors who once based their curricula entirely on "soft" cultural issues now prepare original lessons concerning the environment, human rights and issues of peace-making and development. As language

instructors attempt to redefine their roles to include education beyond the limited purvey of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, they frequently turn to the most readily-available media for source material.

A large percentage of the primary-source texts which these language teachers are likely to use include materials taken either wholly or in part from large-circulation newspapers, news magazines or, in the case of video materials, from major television news programs. Textbooks issued in the past several years attest to the increased interest materials writers have taken in this type of material; they include such titles as *Understanding English Newspapers*, *Exploring Newspapers*, *In the News* and *World News*. With new titles based on the media appearing regularly each year, a number of questions might be raised concerning the actual sources of these materials and what basic values they tend to promote. What is the nature of the publications these texts are drawn from? Who is the intended readership of newspapers and news magazines? How are news organizations funded and what possible influence does this funding have on their reportage? Answers to these and similar questions will necessarily affect the views expressed in language texts and materials based on these sources. More importantly for language educators, these answers will affect the overall approach taken in introducing vital issues of peace and justice to students through the use of media sources. If one shares the late Peter Streven's belief that language educators, because of their principal function of facilitating international communication, occupy an ideal role for the promotion of peace education (Strevens, 1989) and that their job definitions extend beyond their own field to include larger issues of world citizenship, attention to the credibility of ones

sources will be a natural concern.

In the case of English language textbooks concerning the media, material is most often drawn from major U.S. or British news sources: *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, *Time* or *Newsweek*, and television news programs such as the *BBC*, *CNN* or *ABC* news. In Japan, language instructors frequently employ the major local English language dailies, *The Japan Times*, *The Daily Yomiuri*, *The Mainichi Daily News* and *the Asahi Evening News*. An article in one particular news-based text intended for college students advises student to read English language newspapers with the following assurance:

If you read English newspapers, you will get more information about other countries, people and cultures, and more international news than you would in a newspaper published in Japanese. (*Understanding English Newspapers*, Kitao, 1991)

Another, even more culturally-pointed article in a college language reader makes a distinctly unfavorable comparison of Japanese and U.S. news reporters noting that:

The interviewer in the U.S. is often provocative, and may readily say things like: "Sir, you're not answering my question." Or "Madam, you are contradicting yourself now."... In Japan, the TV interviewer, on the other hand, readily agrees with and endorses what has been said by the interviewee..." (*Ads Speak American Culture*, Lactorin, 1994)

Both of these texts make what I feel are unsubstantiated claims that English language newspapers or broadcasts are substantially superior to those in Japan and that they will reliably inform the reader/listener. Boyd-Barrett (1977), Phillipson (1992) Pennycock (1995) and others have

commented on this notion of the English language as the window to the world in the context of what has been called “media imperialism”-generally the undue and non-reciprocal influences of one country’s media on others’. But whether we regard the claims in these textbooks as expressions of media imperialism or not, inherent in them is a common assumption news organizations generally advertise in one form or another on the mastheads of their newspapers- that their representation of the world is thorough and unbiased. “All the News without Fear or Favor” reads the leading banner of The Japan Times, a popular English language newspaper used as source material by many language educators in Japan. *The New York Times* purports to carry “All the News that’s Fit to Print”. The implication here is that one need look no further for a comprehensive, balanced and detailed account of the world.

Difficulties arise therefore if, in drawing on original media texts teachers accept this assumption of non-bias and all-inclusiveness as somehow signifying that news articles necessarily represent hard incontrovertible fact. The idea of text “authenticity” becomes problematic when textbook writers (and readers) impart to it the notion that, since original sources are not “fiddled” with by language instructors, they must be somehow closer to reality. The introduction to a popular textbook entitled *Exploring Newspapers* notes that the texts are “completely authentic and have been reprinted from British newspapers unaltered for this book...” (*Exploring Newspapers*, Walker, 1993). The underlying assumption here, frequently expressed by newspaper editors (and sometimes textbook writers), is that objectivity depends simply on reporting directly what has been said or done

without commentary.

In this paper I hope to challenge the premise that the media (used throughout to refer specifically to the major news media-either print or broadcast) do in fact present the news in a free and unbiased manner and thereby to cast some doubt on the unconditional advisability of drawing directly and without comment on these sources for use as language texts. In doing so I will look at some of the reasons why and ways in which commercial news sources limit the full spectrum of the news and how these limitations are transmitted in turn to language texts and materials based on these "authentic" news sources.

I do not intend thereby to discourage in every case the use of commercial news sources as language teaching material. The linguistic benefits of exposing students to original sources concerning world issues is not here the principal issue; content-based instruction is a well-documented and relatively uncontested approach to language instruction (Brinton, et al, 1989). There are a number of very good textbooks which do attempt to select pertinent and reasonably balanced news accounts. And although there are vocal exceptions to the *linguistic* effects of a decreased emphasis on grammatical structure, syntax, etc. (Jones, 1993), few educators will care to debate the healthy *social* effects of recent trends in a content-based approach to the teaching of issues of peace and justice. If these goals are to be achieved in their fullest sense, however, materials will need to be based on political and economic realities of the type that are increasingly less evident in the corporate media. Needless to say, if news sources are distorted, incomplete or less than factual, language learning texts and materials based directly on them cannot be any less so.

### **What is the media?**

Having now imputed the reliability of these major news sources (and by implication, texts based thereon) and suggested that their coverage of the news is not wholly to be trusted, let me attempt to define what it is about the media that might cause us to have doubts.

What it often referred to as the “mainstream media” (large circulation, commercial media with vertically-integrated operations and highly concentrated ownership) has come under increasing attack in recent years from critics on both the right and the left. As one might expect, conservative media critics in the U.S., (Accuracy in Media’s Reed Irvine, The Christian Coalition’s Ralph Reed, Rush Limbaugh, and others) make the highly unlikely claim that the media has been commandeered by “liberals” who promote an agenda calculated to undermine the free enterprise system, national pride, and other values they hold dear. These critics focus on what is perceived as the media’s adversarial stance towards business and its oftentimes cavalier and opportunistic attitude regarding the cultural/social diversity which conservatives sometimes disdain. Liberals, for their part, will criticize individual reporters and articles as being unfavorable towards government social programs or generally too far to the right. They too focus on the media’s supposed adversarial stance towards authority, but in their case use this to justify the healthy democratizing function the media is said to provide in balancing the views of all sectors of society. Liberal critics often complain that the news fails to take on big business concerns sufficiently and thus falls short in their duty to provide a proper counterweight to these powers.

But the larger, and arguably more important issue that both

conservative and liberal critics consistently fail to examine or, at the very least, to discuss in an open manner are the structural bases of the various media organizations themselves. Who owns these organizations? Do owners profess any particular political or class prejudices and if so are these prejudices an influence on how the news is presented in their publications or broadcasts? How are news organizations funded? What, if any, influence do funders have on the type of news selected for publication? What is the slant or tone of the news reported? When we begin to find answers concerning these structural relations, it becomes clear why some critics tend to avoid asking the questions altogether. Answers commonly point to the fact that virtually all major media organizations suffer from what Ben Bagdikian in the preface to his classic book *The Media Monopoly* (1983) calls "built-in biases that protect corporate power and consequently weaken the public's ability to understand forces that create the American (sic) scene." A review of Karel van Wolferen's recently-published book "Nihon no chishikijin" characterizes the Japanese media in the following terms:

"...far from acting as a public watchdog, [the media] actually serves as a propaganda mechanism for the power elite. As such, it not only fails to provide any meaningful political analysis for opinion but actively disseminates false information in order to deflect criticism away from the existing power establishment." (Vachon, 1996)

An overwhelming majority of the most commonly-available news sources in many different countries are among the largest corporations in the world. As media critic Michael Parenti comments concerning the situation in the United States (1986), "[Media] do not simply reflect the views of corporate America-they *are* corporate America!".



News organizations in themselves represent a clear conflict of interest. With corporate holdings spanning the full spectrum of investment possibilities, communications corporations such as *Time-Warner* and *Capitol Cities* in the United States, *Bertleman* in Germany, and *Yomiuri* in Japan are giant, vertically-integrated corporations whose thousands of agencies, publications and news outlets are involved in reporting on the very social, economic and political environments they are involved in shaping on a daily basis. It should come as no surprise then, that newspapers employ many times the number of reporters on their business sections, for example, than on news about labor conditions. The billions of workers around the world can rarely expect to find even a single page in most major newspapers devoted to their conditions. Business leaders and financial investors, on the other hand, representing a minute fraction of the world's population, enjoy entire sections in most major newspapers and a host of well-financed business magazines. Communications giants with major holdings in forest products, agribusiness, and nuclear power production will naturally downplay unfavorable news about deforestation, pesticide poisoning and radiation damage. To do otherwise would not be in the interests of the companies' investors and, in the context of the corporate world at least, is simply bad business.

We needn't be particularly puzzled either to learn that the owners of most large news organizations are political (although not always cultural) conservatives- a fact in stark contrast with the image presented by right-wing media critics of a "liberal-dominated" media. Although some reporters occasionally represent what might be called liberal viewpoints, the owners or directors of major news organizations

will rarely employ lower managers who do not share in large part their views of the world. These views tend to be unabashedly class-based, pro-business, anti-labor and generally opposed to efforts which might allow citizens and working people increased control over investment decisions and allocation of government funding for their needs. Unsurprisingly, these views are in close accord with those of most other large corporate directors. And as in most corporations, owners and CEO's exercise control in ways that would not generally be considered democratic. When asked if he ever influenced the type of news reported in his newspapers, the Australian-born news mogul Rupert Murdoch, amused at the questioner's naiveté answered very simply "Of course!" (Cohen, 1995). Murdoch is a self-professed "radical conservative" and shares this distinction with a majority of his fellow media tycoons. Citizen Kane notwithstanding, if people cling to the image of an independent, disinterested and adversarial media somehow beyond the reach of the vulgar business world, it likely comes from the public face constructed for them: handsome, smiling television reporters commenting on the latest scandal story and thereby assuring us that the media is "telling it like it is". But the public rarely knows about the true powerbrokers behind the boardroom doors of these communications giants.

Finally, how are these news organizations funded? A quick look at any major newspaper or commercial news broadcast should make it immediately clear that much of what is often presented to readers and viewers is not actually news at all. Between fifty and seventy percent of most large newspapers are advertisements with television news broadcasts funded *entirely* through commercial advertisements. CNN

(now merged with an even larger communications giant), in its international broadcasts not only carries well-crafted advertisements aimed at the wealthy elite (resort hotels, jewelry, investment opportunities, etc.) but has regular pro-advertising commercials lauding the benefits of advertising itself and its role in providing consumers with more "choice". In contrast, serious media watch organizations such as FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) provide well-documented evidence of important news stories that are consistently refused in deference to major advertisers, or broadcasts which are regularly cut or denied airing by advertisers solely for political reasons. Corporations, through their advertisers, along with full-time government news sources regularly supply media organizations with much of the stuff for their stories. Hence, news organizations cannot easily afford to alienate their major beneficiaries with negative reporting. And since stock prices of communications corporations are directly affected by the tenor of business reportage, business news invariably tends towards the positive.

### **Media sources as language lessons**

Where then does this leave language educators? In light of the above discussion, teachers who hope to expand the scope of their language classes by exposing students to serious world issues are faced with an imposing challenge. Where can they find consistently-reliable material about current issues concerning the environment, human rights, and peace efforts around the world if not in the media? Are commercial textbooks based on the media carefully annotated to expose bias in news stories or are they merely a reflection of the bias in the news

publications themselves? And what about instructors who prepare their own lessons based on reprints from newspapers or magazines? Where do they receive their own education about the world if not from these same news sources? Do instructors commonly pose to themselves the aforementioned questions concerning structural biases and reliability when choosing news material for texts?

Of the fifteen or so media-related language textbooks in my own possession, only one contains a separate section purporting to analyze structural bias in the media. With a brief two page section divided into four very short, one or two paragraph sections entitled "Balance, Censorship, Control and Equality," the text is a dubious improvement on books lacking any commentary at all. The section on balance in the news asks the question:

"....do the media report both sides of the problem in a balanced way? In many cases the answer is yes... But when it comes to tabloid papers, the picture is very different. Their reports often contain strong opinions," (*The Media*, Rabley, 1991)

Whether or not one is wholly convinced of the arguments concerning media bias presented thus far in this paper, the above claim to balance in the major newspapers should cause some careful readers to pause, if only for a moment. The textbook from which this passage was taken is published by a major news source itself (the cover features a glossy photo of the Italian media magnate, Silvio Berlusconi, recently indicted in Italy for fraud). The passage's attempt to separate "legitimate" media from tabloids and its implication that major news publications do not contain strong opinions should also be considered in light of the

earlier discussion about media control.

The section on censorship in this same text concentrates solely on either overt government control of media ownership or on countries which directly limit freedom of expression. Business control of the media as it has been discussed in this paper is not mentioned as a factor in limiting the range of issues which appear in news publications. Students (and their teachers) are given no clues regarding any other possible methods of information control such as media ownership, advertising pressures or a host of other structural impediments to the free flow of news. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in their thoroughly-documented book *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), lay out these various restrictions- or filters- in what they call a "Propaganda Model". Besides ownership and advertising, they discuss the roles played by *news sources*, *flak or enforcers* (right-wing media watch organizations), *anti communism*, and finally *dichotomization* (the reduction of any issue to only two points of view) and *propaganda campaigns*. Other critics have written extensively on the micro-techniques used by newspapers and television to limit discussion to acceptable topics (Gitlin, 1983; Rank, 1984 Solomon, 1989, Croteau and Hoynes, 1994). These methods include the ways that issues (and even photos) are framed, the emotive use of language to subtly influence readers, the placement of stories within a publication, the length and frequency of articles, the mismatch of headlines and story content and in general the tone and tenor given to various stories. Joan Dye Gussow comments on a common practice found in virtually all news publications; that of disguising the agent (the grammatical subject) involved in certain events and thus distracting readers from making causal links. In

commenting on Brewster Kneen's publication, *The Ram's Horn* concerning the language used by agribusiness leaders, she states that;

The report, [Brewster] notes, is full of the passive voice, full of references to agriculture *evolving*, or of the need for everyone to adapt to the changing "agrifood system"... The inference is that the agrifood industry is as much a victim of the inevitable march of progress as anyone else. (Gussow, *Chicken Little, Tomato Sauce and Agriculture*, 1991)

All of above factors add up to a type of "censorship" not hinted at in the simplistic black or white view presented in this language textbook; if governments distort news through direct control, we are (rightly so) supposed to take offense. If, on the other hand, corporations and their media outlets do the same, this is, in the presumed opinion of this textbook writer, simply another clever technique employed in the pursuit of more efficient commercial enterprise.

After the above discussion, the short paragraph in this book devoted to media control merits little comment- and I will offer none. The author's rather limited definition of media objectivity is illustrated in the passage below:

Some people believe that 'media moguls' ...have too much power and are only interested in profit, not good quality papers or programmes. Others claim the opposite- that rich owners are good for the information industry. Why? Because they invest in new technology and create more choice for the consumer. (*The Media*, Rabley, 1991).

### **Countering media bias in the classroom**

Solutions to this host of pitfalls in teaching the media should be suggested by the very problems themselves. First and most crucially,

teachers need to be aware of the structural biases of the media and be prepared both to inform their students about these and to offer critical comments on the texts they choose to teach. In teaching news-based texts without such commentary, instructors run the risk of simply serving as mouthpieces or loudspeakers, amplifying the distortions and limited views found in the news. Educators, perhaps because they are not directly involved in the business world, can often be surprisingly unaware of corporate motives, as witnessed by this remark from two assistant professors of education during a survey of what corporations expect from schools in the United States:

"[Corporations] are unconcerned with political correctness, hidden agendas, or grudges against societal institutions..." (Nidds and McGerald, 1995)

In a similar vein, a Japanese high school language teacher exhorts his fellow teachers to improve their teaching skills by:

"...sending them out to companies to learn from real-world experience... Such exposure would bring them into touch with real-world English, and not just the textbook variety. They could take these insights back to the classroom and to their students." (Tajima, 1996)

Seeing this, a number of well-funded organizations including conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute in the U.S. and Keidanren, Mitsubishi, and others in Japan, aware that educators are in constant need of teaching materials, target publishers, schools and individual teachers with free information and materials carefully designed to promote a positive, pro-corporate view of the world. Instructors who are aware of

the problem have begun to refuse the offers and demand that their names be removed from mailing lists (Staff, 1995). If these business-supplied materials are in fact used, they can still serve as springboards for conversations or writing topics dealing with corporate-propaganda, the undemocratic nature of the media and the inequalities and contradictions of the larger society itself.

As language lessons, these texts can further serve as means of teaching about how language is manipulated to serve the purposes of those who own and control the media. As a means of illustrating nuances in language, teachers can devise materials which illustrate how the micro-techniques mentioned above can inflate, accentuate or downplay and obscure the meanings and impact of language. Writing classes, in discussions of text cohesion, might focus on why certain elements of news stories have been placed towards the end of articles rather than at the beginning and whether headlines actually describe the content of stories. Students might even attempt to write their own news stories from different points of view to illustrate how one event can be described in dramatically different terms. As an example, two students, one writing from the perspective of a top executive, the other from that of a factory maintenance worker might report on the effects of the company moving its manufacturing plant to Malaysia. Comparing the different viewpoints expressed in their articles could potentially help students to understand the inherent class biases in the media they are exposed to on a daily basis. Issues otherwise seen as natural or simply "the way things are", can thusly be "problematized" to use a term popularized by the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1985).



Finally, students might be encouraged to examine newspapers themselves and to do experiments based on what they actually find or, conversely, on what they do *not* find. Student-conducted experiments have been done in at least one college class in which column inches devoted to actual incidents have been calculated and compared in an effort to point out the consistent under coverage of specific news events deemed “unworthy” by media owners or editors (LaBranche, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

Depending largely on how it is presented, using the news in the language classroom can work either for or against the best interests of students and teachers. As a source for a content-based curriculum, it can serve as well or in some cases better than many other subjects. Considering its potential to inform students about major world trends which will almost certainly affect their lives in the future, some teachers have argued that media-based courses should be required in all schools.

The principal danger is with instructors who, despite their good intentions, relay the ideology of a corporate-dominated media directly into the classroom without helping students to become critical media consumers. In doing so teachers generally undermine their own efforts to alleviate, in some small way, the worsening environmental, human rights and peace conditions we all face.

Presenting the concepts, terminology and usage of the media directly and uncritically encourages students to understand and apply this knowledge in ways determined for them by corporations and other

cultural power brokers. This process of "naturalizing" language (Fairclough, 1989) inhibits the ability of teachers and students to recognize it as ideological and thereby conceals the intentions of the writer and those who would use language to exercise power and control. Educators, and language instructors in particular, can combat these ills by becoming aware of the class-based nature of language purveyors and how they in turn affect other aspects of our lives. Since the media and materials based on it reflect these biases, teachers using news-based curricula would do well to understand this point if they hope to be more effective in helping their students to become active agents of change.

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