

RUNNING HEAD: FROM THE COUCH TO THE CLASSROOM

**From The Couch To The Classroom: A Fresh Curricular Approach For Television
In EFL Instruction¹**

**Raúl Alberto Mora
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

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1. **‘A Long Time Ago, in a City Far, Far Away...’ or From Medellin to Champaign and Where this Idea Came from.**

I would like to introduce the rationale to why I became interested in media with a vignette from a conversation I had with some of my seventh grade students in Colombia, a few months before I came to the United States:

Student 1: Where is it that you're going?
Raúl: To the University of Illinois.
Student 2: Illinois? Where's that?
Raúl: Ok, do you guys know Chicago? (Students nod heads affirmatively) Well, Chicago *is* in Illinois. Where I'm going is a city four hours south of Chicago (at that point, I didn't even want to bother talking about Champaign-Urbana).
Student 3: And Chicago is the capital of Illinois?
Raúl: No. That would be Springfield.
Student 3: *Ah, where the Simpsons live, right?*

The fact that my students associated Springfield with *The Simpsons* is not a random accident. In fact, it shows to some extent how adolescents abroad construct realities using what they watch on television. Globalization has allowed people everywhere to access information at much faster speeds than they used to, regardless of socio-economical backgrounds. In the mid-eighties, satellite dishes rapidly spread through residential units and neighborhoods in my hometown, Medellín. I was, in fact, one of the first people who would make a public statement about learning English influenced by American television. By then, the only ‘certified ways’ to learn English were going to an American-modeled school in town (only accessible to the wealthiest), taking English courses in recognized language institutes, or living in the United States, or being there as an exchange student in high school. Back in 1992, people did not really

¹ This paper was the final report of the final project for Dr. Mark Dressman's Fall 2002 C&I 407 AC Course "Adolescents and Curriculum" at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, on which I was enrolled. Every time I make reference to "the course", I will make reference to class discussions and readings. That will imply that some of my thinking in this paper includes my own contributions in class, as well as some of my classmates' ideas, which I found extremely useful in the construction of my concepts.

consider the satellite dish as a reliable source. Later on in my teaching practice, I came across several students who were extremely fluent because they spent several hours per day in front of their TV sets. I have wondered whether these youngsters or I were simply geniuses or there was a little more than meets the eye, and how we can turn these “random acts of geniality” into more organized class situations.

In fact, the widespread immersion to English media was a Latin American phenomenon at almost the same time. In his study of Mexican youth, Levinson (2001) points out how the influence of media affected the vision of the world these youngsters were building in the late eighties. “What has characterized the growth of San Pablo youth culture above all in the past twenty years has been its increased reliance on the cultural media.” (p.160).

English instruction², and education in general for what matters, cannot stay aside in the discussion of these cultural issues, and it has to find ways to reinvent itself, providing further challenges to learners other than learning grammar, while reinforcing the possibilities they have to construct knowledge. In her analysis of adolescence, Lesko (2001) suggested:

We must move between and against the confident characterizations of youth, which involves including teenagers as *active participants* (not tokens) in educational and other public policy deliberations. I am not just trumpeting one “student voice,” but calling for the imagining of concrete practices in which youth demand and exercise adultlike responsibilities, acknowledging that teenagers are also affected by the commonsense reasoning about their age group (p.199).

This view of adolescence and how it has to be redefined is also addressed by Grace and Tobin (2002) in terms of how we see children and adolescents as media viewers:

Children are believed to be hopelessly and helplessly vulnerable to them. Such concerns and fears have resulted in a growing body of articles and studies on the relationship between children and the media. Although studies by such media education scholars as Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1990) have shown that children are sophisticated media viewers, a narrow, often distorted, and limiting view of children’s interest in and knowledge about the media persists (p. 199).

This idea is complemented by another reality that many teachers face, according to Grace and Tobin: “Students often know more than their teachers do about popular television shows, movies, and video games. In this domain, the children are the experts.” (p.199) I found

² I will use the terms “English instruction/curriculum” and “EFL instruction/curriculum.” Since the setting I use as a frame of reference is Colombia, where English is a Foreign Language, these two terms are to be assumed as synonyms.

that my students had a lot of information about TV shows in English and they in fact incorporated the expressions they heard (as I did when I was a teenager) into their daily language. Homer Simpson's "D'Oh!" or Cartman's "Oh no, they killed Kenny!" in *South Park*, as well as many other expressions they hear in movies and shows, are included in their language, sometimes ignorant of the context these expressions carry or the cultural implications of their misuse. EFL instruction is not addressing these cultural issues first hand, and that is a reality I felt as part of my daily practice. Talking about television or video is usually reduced to linguistic awareness activities, such as vocabulary practice or pronunciation skills via listening comprehension. In a review of literature for this project, the farthest video was taken was in a proposal by Harmer (2001), in which he considered video useful for "Cross-cultural awareness." Though I found the idea interesting, I will explain later what I think can be added to make it go even further.

Being an English teacher, who will be back to become an English teacher educator upon his return to Colombia, interested in curricular change, I found another good reason to consider this curricular proposal in Kenway and Bullen's question in 'Consuming Children' (2001), "What notions of schools, teachers, pedagogy and curriculum do these changes necessitate?"... we think these times require educators to look at schools and kids very differently, to ask new questions, to work in new ways and with different ideas but also to keep the notion of educating to the fore." (p. 189). There is a consensus that English instruction cannot limit itself to the regular means we are accustomed to. After all, our learners' needs have radically changed, whether we really want to open our eyes or not. English television cannot be simply set aside as something we use to 'spice up' the class or make them more varied and dynamic. We need to validate the use of the media in English classes, to make it a better instrument. Belonging to what I can call a "first generation" of English learners via TV, I have the responsibility to help other educators improve how we use television. It is difficult for me to think that there are a lot of "couch potatoes" in our classrooms we are not helping while they construct their realities dictated by the mandates of "The Real World," or thinking that Colorado is in fact what "South Park"

shows or California is exactly what they see in “Baywatch.” It is the fact that I can watch almost the same kind of shows in Urbana, Illinois as I did in Medellin, Colombia, that fueled my interest in thinking of a framework and ideas to make my EFL students more critical viewers.

2. ‘To Boldly Go Where No Man Has Gone Before’ or Where Raúl Takes the Step Forward.

As I stated in the paragraphs above, I came to the conclusion that a framework for media literacy skills in the EFL classrooms would be a good, challenging possibility to revise the curriculum. Yet, I have not really explained why I consider thinking of such an idea would place me near the Enterprise crew into exploring one of the ‘final frontiers’ of teaching. To begin with, I mentioned earlier my review of literature for this project. I found very interesting examples of media literacy projects from all over the world. For instance, Brown (1991) mentions some examples of media literacy projects carried out in Latin America, specifically in Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and ... Colombia? To my dismay, it was Uruguay. Not only did I feel terrible that no Colombian institution carried out any research on media literacy, but I also noticed that none of these approaches discussed television as part of English development. These two conclusions were also supported by a review of media education projects by Unesco (1984). In that sense, I believe my approach to critical viewing skills within the classroom has not been addressed by many, if any has addressed them at all.

Also, I realized (after my readings and various class discussions on issues such as *plaisir* vs. *jouissance* or Ritual Theory that made part of the course) that pleasure *is* a part of learning, provided it is engaging. What makes learning boring is the apparent disconnection between reality and school. I had previously addressed that disconnection between reality and writing in the English classes (Mora, 1999) and how we cannot stay still without finding a solution. Sometimes we are afraid of pleasure because we think that it does not contribute to learning at all. Academic pleasure is not about diminishing rigor, but maintaining it in more engaging ways.

That, to my belief, would be another contribution this project would make that could be thought of a kind of novelty in the approach: Not the inclusion of pleasure, but the lack of fear when having it. Some might argue that bringing television and its intake of popular culture is harmful to the classroom setting. Considine (1992) explains that “When concerned teachers and librarians attempt to do this by integrating mass media into instruction, they are often rebuked and rebuffed by a system that resents the intrusion of popular culture into the school.” (p.2). The truth is, we cannot keep believing that schools are ‘bubbles’ isolated from reality. As Levinson (2001) pointed out, schools and the outer world actually affect one another in an interesting symbiosis we cannot deny. He stated that societal values are revalued and rewritten in schools and vice versa. Media, as the object of serious analysis within the classroom, can in fact allow us to confront local and global values, especially if we do not want our learners to think that European and American values are the model to follow and that (in my case) Latin American or Colombian values are outdated. The English classroom has to become the arena where this clash of values takes place. That, in fact, is a very strong shift of roles. English teachers cannot simply limit their work as providers of knowledge and literacy, or as facilitators of classroom projects that are not meaningful enough or do not have a lasting effect in the learners’ lives. That would validate the contribution of this framework. We are dealing with something that will not disappear overtime. Especially if modern households have one television set per bedroom.

Hargreaves (1996) stated that, “a key issue for secondary schools in reforming the curriculum is not just how to generate higher expectations in the diffuse sense that effective schools advocates once called for, but also how to build regular experiences of real and significant challenge into students’ experiences of the secondary school curriculum” (p.85), or as we discussed it once as part of the course, the three key factors for curricular considerations: Relevance, Imagination, and Challenge. Agreeing within the course’s idea that these three are a yardstick for curricular analysis, I found that my proposal has all three. It is *relevant* because it addresses my students’ own realities and how the media might contribute to misshape or reshape

those perceptions. It is *imaginative* since it invited me to reflect on creative ways to do what others have not done and should be done. And it is *challenging* because it demands of teachers and students to go beyond things we have done before. It lies under the assumption that, when students are intellectually challenged, they respond (to some extent, educational ideas such as Critical Race Theory dwell within this assumption.) And, challenging students demand challenging teachers.

3. Let's Get it on! Or How To Implement Critical Viewing Skills in the Classroom.

The first thing to do is to define what Media Literacy is. Worsnop (1994) defines it as “the skills of experiencing, interpreting/analyzing, and making media products” (p.x). Considine and Haley (1992) state that media literacy should enable students “to comprehend the media and to analyze and evaluate media messages. In addition, they should be able to design and produce media products that successfully communicate information and feelings” (p.12). Since I do not want to be unrealistically ambitious, I will eliminate the idea of devising products Worsnop and Considine & Haley talked about. Even though it is pretty interesting, I would rather limit my proposal at this time to the elements of analysis and evaluation. I want English learners to be critical of the TV they will watch in class first before I ask them to produce their own media.

Having defined what Media Literacy is, there is the question of how to bridge the gap between media literacy and the EFL curriculum. Considine (2000) also had a similar concern,

Building a bridge between media literacy concerns and the traditional curriculum is likely to be most successful when we approach the discussion of compatibility by addressing curriculum areas that would represent the line of least resistance (Teens, Substance Abuse and Media Messages, ¶ 1).

In this case, the “line of least resistance” would be the easiest way to bring TV input and making it the basis of further language practice in the EFL classroom. As I realized a few years ago (Mora, 1999), Project Work was a feasible alternative to bring real life into the classroom³. Fried-Booth (1990) also states how Project Work is such an alternative:

³ Back then, I used Project Work as part of a series of units to develop writing skills.

Often, there is a gap between the language the students are taught and the language they in fact require. It is this gap that project work can help to bridge (p.5)

Projects can be easily integrated into the syllabus, as long as you take your time to reflect on the means to do so. In fact, the proposal implies designing sets of culturally-based units, transcending Harmer's idea of "Cross-cultural awareness." That only implies noticing that there are other things out there. I want my students to read critically the "Cross-cultural issues," confront the media portrayals with the reality and then construct their own concepts. Or, as Brown (1991) states in his description of a curricular design by Dr. Aimee Dorr and her associates, "to help children assess the reality of TV content, to compare it with information from other sources, and finally to evaluate that content" (p.153).

Obviously, the next question would be, "What about their language learning?" Some might say that projects or critically reading reality are far too ambitious ideas for adolescents whose first language is not English. To begin with, this framework does not forget the second language reality, nor does it consider it a limitation or a liability. Critically reading reality is something you can do regardless of the proficiency level in a foreign language. Granted, an advanced learner has more possibilities to express his/her ideas than a beginner due to more vocabulary and fluency. Nonetheless, depth of ideas can be achieved regardless of your level. Depth is not proportional to amount of vocabulary. As I said before, these class projects will be conceived bearing in mind different proficiency levels, so that the students can make articulate critiques of what they watch and confront it with their reality using all their background knowledge. It also bears in mind that adolescents have more access to information and, at least in my local context, have more access to linguistic input than a decade ago. Maybe it was we the teachers who stayed seeing them as if we still were teaching a decade ago. A good amount of the course literature stresses that assumption.

The projects will be devised based primarily on age, catering to particular interests adolescents have at certain ages. For instance, a project that intends to confront the stereotypes

about American colleges with the reality while offering students a chance to compare and contrast American and Colombian colleges would not be appealing to a student in the sixth grade, but definitely a junior (grade 10 in Colombia) or a senior (grade 11) would find a lot of insights on that one⁴. On the other hand, watching TV commercials about toys in order to critique how they affect the way children see things can be an interesting challenge for a group of twelve-year-olds. Both these examples would be part of a broader unit, in which there will be discussion of linguistic concepts, vocabulary, and grammar, while expanding to cultural perceptions of a foreign culture and the local one.

The choice of topics would be linked to what we can watch on American-based television, and that leaves plenty of room to choose from. Advertisements, sports, fashion, schools, family are areas we can address as part of projects in which comparison and contrast as the basis of the refinement of concepts will be the common denominator. All these projects will be designed so that students have to practice the language using different resources: They will include:

- interviewing or surveying
- library/online searches
- preparation of written materials, and
- presentations to different audiences.

In fact, as Fried-Booth (1990) pointed out, “In project work the skills are not treated in isolation, but combined” (p.8). That is another advantage of devising media literacy units as projects: They open chances for multi-skills practice.

Let me go back to Considine’s “line of least resistance” idea. I can think of another where culture and language overlap: idioms and slang. TV and movies have proved time and again to be excellent allies if you use them wisely. The principle some learners use when they hear slang on TV is pretty simple, “If they say it in movies, people must be using them,” or might begin to (at

⁴I will present an example of this project in the appendices.

least that was the way I followed it). What I also learned years later is that hearing it in a movie is not enough. You also need to clarify the scenarios under which those expressions are appropriate. They can include geographical areas, gender, race, or social groups. And sometimes movies do not make clear references to those. In my reflection about different activities related to idioms and slang, I revised one activity I designed in 1997 for an advanced Vocabulary Building class I taught for several years. It was based on the film “Reality Bites,” in which I asked my students to try to infer the meaning of a series of idiomatic expressions found in the dialogs. As a linguistic and listening exercise, it proved to be challenging. Nevertheless, a further cultural discussion was missing. We never discussed the cultural background of the expressions, or who would be most likely to use them. Another example I can think of for using slang as a means of cultural awareness in the use of language was a class a former student of mine in high school taught about profanity (I mentioned it in the course as an example of Hargreaves’ idea of challenging the curriculum.) The outcome was interesting, even unexpected for some: I followed their language use for about a month, and they seemed to be cursing far less than they used to. Discussing dangerous language should be part of the class. They do not need to learn the words in class, after all movies and music do that job very well. Our responsibility as educators is to discuss with them that dangerous language is not to be used lightly, and if necessary, talk about when it might be socially acceptable and when it definitely is not.

What would a proposal like this require of the EFL teacher? To begin with, it is an invitation to be open-minded. We are going to visit the reality our adolescents live, not the one we lived, so we would have to shift our roles, and understand that adolescents would be, as Eisner (1991) would say, the “connoisseurs” and we are the “learners,” culture-wise. Language-wise, the tension between *connoisseurs* and *learners* would be a constant shift. One of our conclusions in the course was the need for the school to really validate the truths adolescents possess, not to disregard them by saying they are “nothing but raging hormones.” We as teachers have to understand that their constructs are not necessarily driven by philosophy but by the moment they

live. It is our responsibility to provide them with tools for them not to be totally manipulated by the media or allow them to actually take the chance for them to make their own intellectual constructs. Several references were made in the course about the effects of consumerism in the way adolescents do not shape reality on their own. Making room for that analysis, in this case, in the English classroom, is a way for them to grasp a better understanding of the advantages a second language provides: The fact that I can question reality from two different cultures without letting the foreign one distort how I value and appreciate my own.

It would also require for the teachers to be very well informed. A proposal that involves culture within the classroom demands being up-to-date on language and culture. Some may say the resources are not available. I would reply to those that it just takes a little while longer to find the information, but it is worth it. The Internet can be a very valuable source of information. Also, if our students are using it, should we not as well?

Another advantage I found in this approach is the fact that teachers and eventually parents can take a closer look at the reality our adolescents receive via TV, so we can help them better. As Considine (1992) stated,

Whether we like it or not, these elements of popular culture construct representations of the world and serve as socializing agencies, providing young people with beliefs about behaviors and the world. If they derive information from these sources, it is important for parents and teachers to know what these messages tell them (p.2)

It does not imply that we are yielding before MTV. Instead, we are taking that reality into account and using it in our favor. We can help them make better constructions of reality than the ones “Jackass” or “Friends” can actually invite to do. In fact, adolescents are always constructing their reality at a faster pace than we at times do. Livingston (1990) actually argues that

the point is that viewers must inevitably ‘do’ something with the text, but they are likely to draw upon their formidable resource of knowledge and experience to do so, and creativity of habitual response will be a function of the relationships between the structures of the text, the social knowledge of the viewer and the mode of interaction between them (critical or referential, mindless or mindful, motivated or apathetic) (p. 192). [I underlined the phrase]

This cultural critique approach in EFL takes for granted that our adolescent students bring to class that “formidable resource of knowledge and experience” which cannot be disregarded, but meaningfully incorporated into the curricular setting. Students really appreciate teachers who have a concern for their world. They are even willing to comment on that, provided you are not being judgmental.

I have also had time to revisit the idea of ‘Thematic Teaching’. I found that two of its principles, learning the language and through the language, are ideas I make reference to within my framework, as linguistic (the language) and cultural (through the language) aspects of instruction in the design of the activities were considered. Nonetheless, I do not subscribe my ideas to Thematic Teaching because I have seen that in isolation it might not be totally effective, especially when it comes to assessment and long-term usefulness (or, at least, those were some concerns I had about how it was being implemented in some places.) I link these principles to the design of the projects, though, because they are important considerations when dealing with a foreign language: A balance between good theory and sufficient means for further practice.

The last issue I would like to address is that regarding *assessment*. As Hargreaves (1996) concludes in his chapter on assessment and evaluation (conclusion the course agreed with),

This chapter has pointed to the importance of establishing a broad and balanced range of assessment strategies in order to capture the many different purposes of assessment, such as those of accountability, certification, student motivation, and effective diagnosis (p. 138)

If we are dealing with class projects as side companions of class instruction, we need a wide array of assessment alternatives. In the case of EFL instruction, we have to bear in mind that we want to balance *quality of contents* and *accuracy in language use*. In order to assess each of them, I propose a combination of criteria for quality and accuracy⁵, ranging from excellent to poor and a description of each. I also propose making the criteria public to the students, as they would be involved in *self-assessment* and *peer assessment*, the two other components of the entire process, in addition to the teacher’s assessment. It would be illogical altogether to present an

⁵ Examples of these criteria will be included in the appendices.

innovative proposal that does not bear in mind the students within the assessment process. In fact, taking their opinions into account in all stages but this one would be a terrible mistake and the loss of valuable information. Furthermore, asking students to assess the process (which would obviously include providing feedback to improve further projects) they and their peers did makes them more active participants of the process. Or, as Hargreaves (1996) would say, “When teachers work to promote student independence, they are really teaching students to be responsible for their own learning and giving them the tools to undertake it wisely and well” (p. 153).

4. ‘That’s all, Folks!’ or Conclusion

Being asked to rethink curricula is not a one-course task. It is a practice that teachers have been doing for as long as teaching has existed. Many have chosen to do it once they close their classroom doors, as I did too. I agree with Hargreaves (1996), “Teachers are the ultimate school reformers. Attempts at changing schools will have little or no impact on students unless they affect how teachers teach and young people learn” (p.150). If we do not direct all our efforts to make class instruction something our students and ourselves as teachers benefit on a daily basis and help us shape our future, we are wasting precious time.

I owe a great deal to television. After all, it helped me shape my English in ways I doubt I would have been able to otherwise. On the other hand, I know it is not enough. It will never replace the insights you can get from interacting to people, whether it is by being in a classroom or dating someone whose first language is not Spanish. I am certain I would have profited more from what TV had to offer to me had my teachers spent some time discussing cultural issues I watched on HBO or ESPN instead of repeating the same list of verbs in the past tense every year. Many do not remember what they learned in their English class, but will never forget their favorite movie line. My point is, schooling is a part of life, a very important one, and it cannot be place itself on the sideline. It has to be next to real life, complementing it.

As I stated earlier, this is nothing but an attempt to finally answer that question my students asked me. I hope the answer I just provided in these lines will be useful to those teachers who have students using television as a learning companion. Television will never replace teachers, but we can use its help. After all, there is one thing no cable network anywhere in the world can do almost any caring teacher will do for his/her students: Be there to lend them a hand and walk the distance with them. And, if while we do that we can change the curricula, that is even better.

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Appendix A: Draft of Class Project

“American Colleges: Are they really like that?”

Abstract: Ever since John Belushi starred in “Animal House” (1978), Television and movies have always depicted American colleges as places where homework seems to be the last thing you do, unless you are an exchange student. Though social life is an important part of what goes on, it is definitely not the only thing, and grades and term papers actually take most of

undergraduate and graduate students' time and efforts. This project wants to offer international high school students (Colombian, in my case) a forum to confront the distorted views from the media so they can construct a more accurate reality about college life in the United States while they make more sense of how local colleges are structures. An analysis of facts about college life will be conducted via readings and interviews. Also, a discussion of differences between colleges in both countries will be presented.

Purposes:

- To discuss the media stereotypes of American colleges depicted in motion pictures and confront them with the reality.
- To compare American and Colombian colleges, in order to establish similarities and differences.

Age/Grade: This activity is suitable for students in grades 10 and 11 in high school.

Length of unit/project: To be determined by teachers.

Suggested activities to develop within the project:

- Media projection: Students will initially work on selected excerpts from “Animal House” (1978), “Van Wilder” (2000). They can also watch “PCU” (1994) in its entirety. Prior discussion of impressions students have on American colleges can be included.
- Interviews to other students about stereotypes about American colleges.
- Interviews to people who have studied at American universities (they can contact local schools of education for such information), students in English majors about their impressions on American and Colombian colleges, or (if possible) Americans residing in town or Colombians currently studying abroad to find out about their impressions on college (design of interview protocol required).
- Internet search: College myths and facts, visits to U.S. university web pages
- Written reports or poster sessions on their findings about American colleges vs. prior stereotypes, as well as similarities and differences between colleges in Colombia and the United States. They have to make references to both the movies they saw, articles they read, and conducted interviews.

Appendix B: Assessment Criteria for Quality of Contents and Accuracy in Language Use within the Projects (Proposal)⁶

1. Quality of Contents (Inspired by Dr. Mark Dressman’s C&I 407 AC Course Evaluation Criteria)

- **Excellent:** Student contributions are meaningful and thoughtful; student displays a respectful attitude towards his/her classmates’ opinions; his/her work has solid elements of analysis beyond simple expression of emotions.

⁶I will use the words: Excellent, Satisfactory, Fair, and Poor, as that is the way school assessment is carried out in Colombia.

- **Satisfactory:** Student contributions are thoughtful; student displays a respectful attitude towards his/her classmates' opinions; his/her work usually covers the topic at hand and merely offers a report.
- **Fair:** Student makes occasional contributions; student sometimes displays disrespectful attitudes toward his/her classmates' opinions; his/her work shows little research, further elaboration of issues was missing or limits him/herself to expressing emotions.
- **Poor:** Student seldom makes contributions and shows no preparation; students displays disrespectful attitudes toward his/her classmates; his/her work shows no research and no elements of analysis are present.

2. Accuracy in Language

- **Excellent:** Student uses vocabulary and expressions to state his/her ideas beyond the average class content. His/Her discourse has a natural flow and little pronunciation faults do not affect message.
- **Satisfactory:** Student shows no difficulty with vocabulary and expressions related to class content. His/Her fluency is usually clear and little pronunciation faults do not affect message.
- **Fair:** Student has a few difficulties with vocabulary and expressions discussed in class. Minor faults in fluency and pronunciation affect message in some occasions.
- **Poor:** Student cannot use basic vocabulary and expressions discussed in class. Faulty pronunciation and fluency affect message,