TEACHING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN A DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines part of the complex relationship between linguistic and cultural diversity and the digital technologies that shape our social worlds. In particular, the author explores how digital media cultivate ideas about language practice in multicultural communities and simultaneously serve as a pedagogical tool for discussing controversial issues in a classroom setting. The author first discusses digital media as powerful storytellers about culture and language issues. The author then addresses the theoretical dimensions of media effects on audiences. Finally, she presents ways in which we can challenge all students to problematize their cultural and linguistic identities by using digital media in our classrooms.

Keywords: Media Literacy Education, Teaching English As A Second Language, Language Learners, Cultural Diversity, Intercultural Education.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades educators have seen a dramatic shift in how language teaching and learning are viewed. At one time, second language learning was all about learning linguistic structures and memorizing rules. Success was gauged by mastery of morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Today, second language learning involves not only the structure and rules of a language, but also an understanding of how language is used appropriately, how language is intertwined with culture and identity, and how various communities use language to (re)create and maintain identities. A successful language learner today knows how to use language in complex ways to participate in multicultural communities. Language education has moved from viewing language as a set of rules to conceptualizing language within broader sociocultural contexts (Johnson, 2009; Lantoff, 2000; Norton, 2000; Pennycook, 2010). Along with this movement, digital technologies have emerged and profoundly changed the second language teaching profession. Technology expands linguistic databases, offers insights as to how our brains process language, allows for worldwide student and teacher collaborations, and changes the behaviors, expectations, and patterns of communication that constitute our social worlds. As educators strive to promote cultural and linguistic diversity as a strength to our communities, they must consider technology not only as an educational tool but also as a contributing force to culture itself.

This article merges the idea of language teaching as a socially embedded activity with the idea that technology plays a critical role in shaping cultural landscapes. Specifically, the cultural stories conveyed through digital media have the capacity to construct social environments in which linguistic and cultural diversity may be met with ambivalence, resistance, or anything in-between. To teachers of languages and culture this means that they must question how stories told by media and technology affect students' willingness to participate in multicultural communities. The article begins with an overview of how stories about language issues are told in media, presents theories that explain how these stories might affect viewers, then describes ways in which students can be challenged to problematize cultural and linguistic identities by examining digital media.

Digital media as storytellers

Humans learn about other people, places, and events through stories. Stories transmit culture, and all cultures uphold their own traditions of storytelling through oral traditions, art, music, print, and numerous electronic formats. Hall (2005) affirms that narratives told and retold by the institutions in our lives (family, school, peers, religion,

media, etc) express values and serve a teaching function. Narratives, Hall states, teach us "the way the world works," "our place in the world," "how to act in the world," and "how to evaluate what goes on in the world" (p. 75). Through stories people learn about their identities and others' identities and what these mean in terms of social power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. These include stories about gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, politics, etc., that teach people how to evaluate and respond to the unknown and unfamiliar. These lessons are particularly important in intercultural interactions where one might be encountering a new language or culture for the first time and relying mainly on second-hand mediated images and stories for initial information (Weimann, 2000).

Media scholar George Gerbner and his associates have argued over the years that television has superseded institutions of family, church, and school to become the most powerful storyteller in the lives of Americans. (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980, 1994). Today, this theory extends beyond television to include screens of all shapes and sizes, from hand-held to those displayed on massive skyscrapers. Admittedly, significant gaps remain between those with access to technology and those without, and not everyone spends over ten hours a day in front of screens like the average American teenager (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). However, for areas of the world in which media has become the dominant storyteller, educators must pay attention to the stories being told. Those invested in intercultural education should pay attention to the stories being told in mass media about cultural and linguistic identities. These stories can ultimately influence an individuals' personal investment in intercultural relationships and attitudes toward multicultural initiatives.

The research on representations of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and other dimensions of identity fills volumes and has brought much attention to the need for media literacy education in curricula around the world (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2003, 2012a; Lee & Mok, 2007; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Nowak, Abel, & Ross, 2007; Scharrer, 2002; Semali, 2000). Focusing on the research on images of language learning and learners in media in particular,

several themes emerge that point to a less than positive portrayal of second/foreign language teaching and learning. First, in a study of the representation of non-native speakers of English (NNSEs) in popular Hollywood cinema, the researcher found that NNSEs are defined almost exclusively through accent, portrayed as child-like, naïve, and seem comfortable in their socially and economically inferior positions (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2012b). Second, Lippi-Green's (2011) extensive work on accent and discrimination in the United States affirms that accented speech defines the nature of animated characters on screen, with twice as many speakers with non-American accents linked to evil than U.S English speakers (p. 117). Third, mediated images tell stories about "ideal native speakers." Whether it be English or any other language, the images of "ideal speakers" in textbooks are often linked to race, dialect, political power, and social-economic status (Matsuda, 2002; Mendez-Garcia, 2005; Taylor-Mendez, 2009). In the case of English, mediated portrayals of ideal native speakers typically showcase white people from the U.K., U.S., Australia, and Canada, despite the fact that native speakers of English come from many countries and cultural backgrounds (Faez, 2011; Kubota, 2009; Phillipson, 1992, 2009; Ruecker, 2011).

Likewise, bilingual education and immigration are often examined in media such as newspapers and school curricula, revealing negative biases. In a critical metaphor analysis of newspaper articles covering a state proposition to no longer support bilingual education in Arizona, Johnson (2005) found that bilingual education was represented negatively as a failure, a pathology, a bad investment, a trap, etc. with students portrayed as victims or invaders. Similarly, a local newspaper article on providing English as a Second Language classes in a mid-sized U.S. community framed immigrant students as charity cases who need to be saved by native speakers, or saboteurs who bring down the average standardized test scores of a school and drain the schools' budgets (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2011). Similarly, Gardner, Karakasoglus, and Luchtenberg's (2008) comparison of German and Australian media discourse on Islam and Muslim immigrants show sources to be biased, though not openly discriminatory, toward negative representations. In

addition, documents from national curricula in Finland show that multicultural education is positioned as something for immigrants, leaving out any role for the indigenous population (Holm & Londen, 2010). Clearly, mediated stories of immigration and language learning like these do not contribute to positive endorsements of intercultural understanding and mutual respect. This leads to the question of how significantly the representations produced in digital worlds impact audiences' attitudes toward cultural diversity.

Transmission versus negotiation: How do media affect us?

When these stories told by media are presented to classes or at a professional conference, it is not uncommon to encounter the following reactions: "But it's just media, and we all know how biased it is," or "It's just entertainment, no one takes it seriously." With the proliferation of screens and digital communication in our societies, however, the potential impact of media on immigrant students and those who advocate for their education must be taken seriously. There may not be a direct effect of media on viewers, but an indirect and important relationship between media and audiences does exist. The following section provides a brief overview of how media interacts with viewers and calls for a merging of two main perspectives: transmission and negotiation.

The relationship between media images and effects on viewers has been examined through different theoretical lenses in hundreds of studies that explain how media create and maintain stereotypes of and prejudices toward certain groups. Volumes of research reveal a stifling of U.S. minority voices in television news and children's' programming, racist representations and misrepresentations of identity in electronic media, and politicized framing of issues of race, gender, and religion (e.g. Entman, 1998; Fiske, 1996; Hall, 1990, 1997; Kamalipour & Carilli, 1998; Lind, 2010; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin 2006,). Interpretation of how these media images affect a viewer's perceptions of the world, however, is not as straightforward as the actual identification and description of the content. Several communication scholars have proposed theories to explain media effects. For example, viewers may be overwhelmed by intense positive images

that wipeout more mundane, or real-life portrayals (Greenberg, 1988), mediated images may set up cognitive schemata that are later applied to social situations (Hansen & Hansen, 1988), consumers may see what they expect to see and that which satisfies their needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974), or viewers may look to media for social role models (Bandura, 1986). Although each of these theories focuses on different parts of the message-reception process, all assume that media are powerful storytellers in our culture, with great potential to influence behaviors and attitudes. In general, these theories reflect a transmission view, that is, media production as a one-way process that imparts information as a means of control (Carey, 1992).

A less direct and widely studied transmission perspective called cultivation theory, holds that media stories are powerful not through a direct relationship to viewers' behaviors, but because they create stable images that are seen over and over again through many different forms of media (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980, 1994). This consistency then normalizes certain images and cultivates attitudes and beliefs that guide decision-making processes. In this way, media such as television and film cultivate individuals' opinions about their neighbors and their attitudes toward public policy. Previous research shows that heavy viewers of television, for example, are more inclined than light viewers to see the world as a dangerous place and to see minorities in very limited roles (Gerbner, et. al., 1980, 1994). Such attitudes can build suspicion and distrust that can ultimately and profoundly change patterns of communication within communities (Putnam, 2000).

In contrast to these transmission theories, dialogical perspectives regard media characters not simply as representations of a culture that infiltrate the mind of a passive viewer, but as discursive, symbolic constructions (Carey, 1992). In other words, the stereotypes seen and heard on film represent a larger discourse of society that is advanced by those who write and produce screenplays, as well as by those who watch them. From this approach, ethnicity, gender, class and race are examined not as strict representations of reality, but as symbolic representations of social roles and expectations. The portrayals of groups

through mediated images are negotiated by a multitude of sociocultural factors, as well as producers and individual viewers. This negotiation recognizes tensions and contradictions of the communication process. Early American cinema, for example, explicitly exposed degrading and harsh stereotypes of immigrants, yet immigrants constituted some of the most successful filmmakers of the time and a large part of the audience. As their cultural heritage was being denigrated on film, many immigrants were also drawn into assimilationist stories of the American dream that were told on screen. Musser states that immigrant audiences "were assigned a role to play, then told not to play it" (1991, p. 49). This tension of early cinema is still present today in Hollywood films that try to acknowledge multiculturalism yet do so by molding "ethnic" characters into acceptable roles that reflect current, yet still narrow, sets of expectations.

The shaping of a cinematic character is not merely the function of those working in the movie industry. Likewise, all images on screens are not subversive plots of producers to undermine the tenets of multiculturalism. For a character to be acceptable to an audience (and thereby successful financially), the character must fit into a range of audience expectations that are influenced by individual choices, demographics, education, politics, etc. Musser asserts "…producers of mass culture cannot simply appropriate subject matter for their own purposes, but must engage the fantasies and experiences of ordinary people. A complex negotiation thus takes place between these diverse levels" (1991, p. 41). In the representation of language learners on screen, for example, accented speech forms a character's personality while also triggering audience responses based on personal prejudices, current social moods, and political tensions. So, while producers may be tapping into and reinforcing social climate, they are not always creating it. A poor economy, for example, might provide a fertile ground for media to cultivate negative attitudes toward immigration.

In second language teaching and learning, both the transmission and negotiation perspectives have something to offer as we engage with digital media. They are not mutually exclusive (Scharrer, 2007). A systematic analysis of non-native speaker characters in films or television programs, for example, can identify and quantify the occurrence of stable images over time and reveal the limited range of these portrayals. From this transmission approach we can speculate on the influence of media as a cultural storyteller. From a negotiation perspective, viewers are not passive receivers of information, and several questions can be examined that require a deeper look at the complex relationships among viewers, producers, and social climates. For example, how might the short duration and low frequency in which images of minorities appear on the screen offer little space to challenge superficial sterotype? If a character appears on screen for only a few seconds at a time, with limited verbal and nonverbal interaction, the audience is left with little time, or need, to reflect on this character. How does this fast and furious transmission of images affect interpretations? When non-native speakers are portrayed as main characters in films, offering more development of personality and identity, do these images leave more room for negotiation? Are these more complex images challenge superficial syerotypes? common in mainstream media? How does the sociopolitical climate in which media is being distributed impact the ways in which characterizations are accepted or resisted? Thus, it is useful both to look at the types of images that are transmitted to wide audiences and to examine the larger dialogical context of these images in order to realize opportunities for resistance and intercultural learning.

A good example of the potential for resistance comes from another media studies scholar. In her book on Latina images in popular American television, Molina-Guzmán (2010) frames her analysis in a theoretical framework of "symbolic colonization" and "symbolic rupture." This theory is compelling for two reasons. First, "symbolic colonization" recognizes the fact that although the minority presence in media has increased quantitatively in recent decades (though not for all minorities), the qualitative nature of these representations continues to subordinate and disempower many characters. Second, the idea of "symbolic rupture" refers to audiences' agency in challenging and resisting such portrayals. In her research, Molina-Guzmán looked at how viewers of certain programs reacted to images by

writing blogs. Here, technology provided a space for conversation and debate about Latina identity.

Media as Intercultural Education

Using both transmission and negotiation perspectives to examine intercultural issues in media, this section describes how a classroom can become a site for problematizing cultural and linguistic issues. Whether teaching TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) to pre-service or in-service teachers, courses in language and culture, or English as an additional language to immigrants or international students, technology plays a critical role in presenting controversial issues and giving students opportunities to respond to these issues. The following are just a few examples of how digital media can foster classroom opportunities to engage students in meaningful conversations about their own cultural identities, the stories about immigration and cultural diversity to which they are exposed, and the possibilities they have to reinvent themselves as participants in intercultural interactions.

While discussing the relationships among language, identity, bilingualism, and language policies in a multicultural classroom, the teacher (in this case, the author) is careful not to draw attention only to the multilingual students in the class who sometimes have experienced prejudice based on their accent or educational setbacks from being labeled "non-native speakers." These students may have some important stories that are relevant to the course content, but there are two main reasons why one cannot ask them to share these stories. First, because language is so strongly tied to identities, experiences surrounding language issues can be deeply emotional and personal. Students should feel no pressure to talk about such experiences in a public setting. Second, in trying to facilitate intercultural interactions in multicultural classrooms, calling attention to the language experiences of only immigrant or international students may serve only to deepen the divide that many students believe exists between monolingual and multilingual students (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2004). All students must feel as if they are participants in a culturally and linguistically diverse community; multiculturalism is not only for "others." Consequently, in order to confront the emotional

dimensions of language and identity and to include all students as invested members of a multilingual community, educators can rely on media and technology.

Images are a good place to begin. On screen in the front of the classroom the teacher shows images of diverse urban communities that many of the students know very well. These are images of markets, museums, and neighborhoods associated with different ethnic groups and signs in several languages. Whether the students are first, second, or later generation immigrants, many can identify at least a little bit with their heritage in these images. The images seem to evoke sentimental, or nostalgic responses. They build a positive picture of cultural diversity in their local communities. Then, the final image shows a famous neighborhood restaurant in which the owner (a second-generation immigrant) posted a sign reading "This is America. Speak English Only" for customers who must walk up to a window to place an order. And so the class begins a lively debate about "English Only" policies and the facts and myths surrounding immigrants and language learning. A couple of years ago, the restaurant sign sparked city-wide debate, so radio talk shows and newspapers covered the story well. Most students are already familiar with the story, and others are quickly drawn into it. By accessing such a local event through media and technology, the teacher is able to facilitate a discussion on an emotional dimension of language use without targeting specific students in the classroom. The images serve not only as a catalyst for talk, but also as a buffer that allows students to talk about a meaningful issue without necessarily drawing on their own experiences. However, once the discussion is going, many students do begin to share their own stories and those of their parents, grandparents, or earlier generations. This conversation about language policy becomes something to which they can *all* relate.

In courses with in-service teachers or teachers in training, the teacher asks students to explore digital media from the perspective of a newcomer to the country and local area. They select a local school and then have to find out how to enroll a child in the school, find the ESL services available to the child, and understand the responsibilities of families in

the school culture. The students quickly discover that this is a daunting task and that the reliance of schools on technology to disseminate important information is not always an effective means of communication. As they analyze the content of school, district, and community-based webpages, students become aware of the cultural and linguistic challenges faced by non-native speakers and the assumptions made in terms of access to and experience with technology. In some cases, students who are also current teachers have responded to this assignment by proposing alternative methods for schools to reach out to parents and families of immigrant students.

One of the more in-depth assignments used in most of the teacher's classes is a critical media analysis (CMA) based on the transmission and cultural negotiation theories introduced earlier. This assignment merges a content analysis (counting frequencies of what is seen) with a social/cultural analysis (interpreting the representations of characters and ideas in relation to social environments). Students see examples of CMA from previous studies, as well as samples of student work from past classes. In particular, the teacher talks about the representations of non-native speakers of American English in popular cinema and television programs produced in the United States. The class examines how characters are "symbolically colonized" as naïve, unambitious, and illiterate and how these representations can be "symbolically ruptured" through public responses and/or independently produced stories that are created and disseminated through digital technologies (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2012a, 2012b; Molina-Guzman, 2010). Students then choose their own sites for analysis, including electronic and print resources from various countries. They are often surprised by what they find and are able to talk about the meaning of these representations within larger cultural frameworks. An international student in one class, for example, chose to analyze a television advertisement from a non-English speaking country that she had never visited herself. Not only did the advertisement itself spark a lot of discussion, but the fact that this student did not choose material from her own culture signaled to the class that her international student status does not have to label her as a spokesperson for her country. What might have been a cross-cultural comparison that sometimes reinforces an "us versus them" dichotomy, became instead an opportunity for intercultural negotiation and learning.

Conclusion

The relationship between teaching language/culture and digital media is complex. Technology allows us access to popular culture from around the world, making it possible for language students to access authentic materials in the target language. Moreover, using popular media in the classroom gives students a fictional or public space in which to discuss controversial or emotional issues, leaving the sharing of personal stories as optional. At the same time, digital media tell stories about cultures, people, and places that may or may not be accurate and fair representations. The pervasiveness of screens in many societies renders these images as powerful storytellers that can ultimately cultivate negative attitudes toward cultural and linguistic diversity or nourish fears and myths about multiculturalism. These stories can be challenged, of course, through alternative media and the integration of media literacy education into our curricula. Consequently, intercultural educators must consider how access to technology and tools for creating digital stories can promote student agency and participation in multicultural communities. To promote understanding and respect among people from diverse linguistic and cultural communities, educators must consider technology as a means of simultaneously creating, problematizing, and challenging intercultural identities.

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