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Countering Disinformation Discourse in the English Language Classroom

Over the past several years, there has been a resurgence in efforts to develop curriculum and teaching skills in the area of media literacy for language educators and language learners. The increased focus on teaching media literacy in the language classroom may be motivated by the perceived increase in the intentional production of false information, the ease of distribution of disinformation online through social media, and the spread of conspiracy theories surrounding issues that threaten international diplomacy and national security, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The anti-democratic nature of disinformation, the role of disinformation in exacerbating ideological divides, and the potential for hate speech leading to real-world violence make the teaching of media-literacy skills in tandem with English language instruction an urgent and essential need.

Most if not all of our students are spending hours per day on multiple social-media platforms. The language-teaching community has mostly embraced the use of social media as a valuable and engaging learning tool, both inside and outside the classroom. In addition to the self-guided, informal learning opportunities social media provides, applications like Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), and TikTok are increasingly incorporated into classroom activities to promote intercultural competence, socio-pragmatic awareness, and literacy skills (Reinhardt 2019). Content shared on social media also provides students with easy access to information on current events and culture aligned with their own interests and learning needs.

However, learners of English are also at increased risk of consuming disinformation and unintentionally sharing false or misleading information without understanding the meaning or social impact of the message(s). The anonymity and lowered inhibitions when communicating with others on social media in English can benefit language development; however, the quality of information is paramount when sharing, commenting, and replying to others, as disinformation can have negative effects (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2017).

In this article, I explore current models of media-literacy instruction and the limits of applying these models in language classrooms around the globe. I then outline an original approach to teaching media literacy through the analysis of semantic markers present in disinformation discourse samples on social media. The goal is to provide direction for

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MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL-THINKING SKILLS

There are a multitude of media-literacy practices, and the list has expanded as media itself has grown to include not only professionally produced mainstream media but also individually created content posted online on YouTube, X, Reddit, and other popular and niche social media and news apps/websites. A general approach to teaching media literacy includes how to find and access resources online, assess the reliability of sources, distinguish between fact and opinion, "integrate knowledge from multiple sources," and "think critically about information that can be found nearly instantaneously throughout the world" (Bruce 2002, 17). Twenty-first-century literacy is defined by "the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms" (New Media Consortium 2005, 2). This definition positions students as *prosumers*, both consuming and producing information and potentially liking, commenting on, and sharing disinformation.

Most media-literacy instruction combines the teaching of research skills with critical-thinking skills such as recognizing bias in media discourse and identifying limited perspectives on issues presented in news stories. Critical thinking in L1 reading and writing instruction should include reflecting on what students already know about the topic under investigation, learning to recognize bias, finding and using diverse sources—that may be contradictory—on the same topic, and checking the validity of sources and authors (Lehman and Hayes 1985). Applying the processes of critical thinking in the language classroom adds a layer of difficulty, as second language learners must first have a level of understanding and fluency in the language itself before interpreting the intentions and qualifications of sources, or detecting and discussing implicit assumptions in texts (Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi 2014). Additionally, an examination of critical thinking in TESOL exposes it as an implied social practice, a culturally based concept that may be in opposition to the cultural practices of international students (Atkinson 1997). The teaching of critical-thinking skills to promote media literacy among English language learners across the globe may be problematic in that critical thinking requires language skills and may be an unconscious product of socialization in Western culture rather than a teachable set of behaviors that helps students detect disinformation.

Disinformation and Emotional Language

Another issue with the critical-thinking approach to media literacy is that disinformation is often deliberately affective and relies on emotionally charged language and images to provoke an emotional response (Bakir and McStay 2018). Previous studies show that emotionally striking content is more likely to capture the user's attention and influence decision-making, and the emotional content of disinformation "could be one of the key factors which prevents social media users from engaging in a critical assessment

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of the core message" (Preston et al. 2021, 2). Research also shows online discourse that includes negative emotions such as anger and fear can elicit negative emotions in viewers. Interestingly, the negative emotions caused by exposure to negative emotional language also result in an increased willingness to share the original negative news item with others (Corbu et al. 2021).

ANALYZING DISINFORMATION DISCOURSE IN THE CLASSROOM

The critical-thinking approach to media literacy is limited when considering the emotional appeal of multiple forms of disinformation discourse. For English language learners, reduced exposure to the common negative emotional language in disinformation discourse may be an additional barrier to understanding. The following classroom activities were designed as a way for students to examine the language of disinformation—and specifically language that conveys strong negative emotional content.

Activity 1: Coding Emotional Discourse

An extensive review of previous literature on the language of disinformation and testing with high school and university students in Lithuania over a period of two semesters found four semantic markers related to emotional content: (1) negative feelings, (2) distrust, (3) personal values under threat, and (4) external enemies. (See Table 1 for examples.)

In this activity, students choose a topic based on their interests, collect a discourse sample, code their sample using the four semantic markers, and then analyze their results.

Selecting a topic and collecting a discourse sample

I prefer to let my students choose their own topics, as their interests may vary from mine. However, I do give them tips for topic selection to make their eventual coding and analysis easier. The first tip is to select a recent topic—the more recent, the better. It is much easier to find tweets, YouTube videos, digital news, subreddits, and comments on items that are

1. Negative Feelings	• Words or phrases that portray anger, confusion, hate, rage, fear, suffering, etc. • Negative labels for groups of people, such as "losers" or "deplorables" • Racist, sexist, or homophobic language
2. Distrust	• Words or phrases that show doubt or accuse others of deception • Social hierarchies operating behind the scenes
3. Personal Values under Threat	• Perceived threats to family, health, freedom, occupation, values, religion, lifestyle, etc.
4. External Enemies	• Words or phrases that place responsibility for perceived social ills on the media, the government, banks, corporations, technology, billionaires, or religious or ethnic groups

Table 1. Four semantic markers of emotional discourse

currently trending than on older items. Topics do not have to be explicitly disinformation-related; the assumption is that almost any topic will have some disinformation incorporated into the discourse surrounding it, and part of the excitement of this activity is discovering disinformation in unlikely places. Students are often interested in exploring topics related to conspiracy theories. Popular conspiracy theories have their own hashtags (e.g., #plandemic, #saveourchildren), can quickly provide a large discourse sample from multiple online sources, and showcase some of the most extreme and easy-to-detect examples of the four semantic markers; however, they may also include disturbing images and content.

Another tip is to find news items on current topics with a large number of likes/dislikes, follows, and shares and then trace the evolving discussion across different platforms, with students copying and pasting the collected text into a single document as they go. Students should be encouraged to incorporate as many sources as possible into their data-collection procedure. Teachers can also find and create level-specific discourse samples for students or focus analysis on specific formats such as YouTube video transcripts or X posts and comments.

Coding the semantic markers

Coding the four semantic markers is a dynamic procedure that should incorporate an in-depth discussion among students and with the teacher about how specific words and phrases found in the discourse should be categorized and why. For lower-proficiency students, the words and phrases can be highlighted by the teacher beforehand, and important vocabulary can be pre-taught.

In Table 2 are two examples of posts commenting on the topic of the sudden death of American boxer Marvelous Marvin Hagler in March 2021. Notice that each discourse sample is taken from a different social-media source. Again, words and phrases that fit the four semantic categories can be highlighted by the teacher, or students can interpret the original text and make their own judgments on which words and phrases to include in each of the four categories.

Source: Twitter post **Author:** @WatchmanOTW, March 24, 2021	"AND FINALLY … **DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH** ON COVID 19. THE MASKS AND **SO-CALLED** VACCINES. NO ANIMAL OR HUMAN TRIALS. THESE ARE **EXPERIMENTAL** AND **DANGEROUS** AND **UNTESTED**. HANK AARON DIED. MARVIN HAGLER DIED FROM THE SHOTS. PLEASE DO NOT TAKE THESE SHOTS!"
Source: Comment on Daily Mail story: "Undisputed middleweight champion Marvelous Marvin Hagler dies at age 66 after one of his biggest rivals Tommy Hearns said he was 'in an ICU fighting the effects of the vaccine'" **Author:** Anon, March 14, 2021	"Remember this when the **government** tells you there is no evidence of any issues with vaccines. These statements are nothing but word **trickery**. There is **no evidence** that these vaccines are safe either because they simply haven't been around long enough for any such **evidence to surface**. The fact that **your friend, neighbor or a colleague are still alive** now after taking it doesn't mean these vaccines are perfectly safe. It could mean the adverse reactions **haven't shown themselves** yet."

Table 2. Disinformation discourse samples

Negative Feelings	Distrust	Personal Values under Threat	External Enemies
… *experimental and* ***dangerous*** …	***Do your own research*** *on COVID 19.*	… ***your friend, neighbor or a colleague are still alive*** …	… *the* ***government*** *tells you* …
… *nothing but word* ***trickery****.*	*The masks and* ***so-called*** *vaccines.*	Word count: 9	Word count: 1
Word count: 2	… ***experimental*** *and* ***dangerous*** *and* ***untested****.*		
	… ***no evidence*** *that these vaccines are safe* …		
	… *long enough for* … ***evidence to surface****.*		
	… *adverse reactions* ***haven't shown themselves*** *yet.*		
	Word count: 16		

Table 3. Sample coding table with word count

As students work through the discourse samples, they can use a table to organize their ideas. I recommend including some of the context in which the selected semantic markers appear. It may be necessary to include several sentences from the discourse to provide context for certain semantic markers. I also ask students to include a word count for each of the semantic-marker categories once they have completed coding the collected discourse samples.

I like to present students with several examples of coded discourse on different topics before they start the coding process for themselves. Table 3 is an example of how I would code the disinformation discourse samples, shown in Table 2, on the death of Hagler.

Analyzing the results

After calculating and coding the prevalence of a particular semantic marker across different topics and discourse samples, students can begin the process of critical thinking with a solid understanding of the emotional language used in the discourse on their selected topics. Further analysis could include discussions of how the prevalent semantic markers increase engagement, the intentions of the authors, and possible political and/or psychological motives for posting, liking, commenting, and sharing.

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

Exposure to disinformation and conspiracy theories on social media has been linked to a multitude of social ills, including decreasing engagement in politics and distrust of official information and government institutions (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017). Therefore, it is important for students to not only understand and practice how to detect disinformation in their daily consumption of social media and online content but also to practice producing and posting content that counters disinformation.

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Much of the previous research on the effectiveness of debunking disinformation emphasizes the difficulty in changing ingrained beliefs and behaviors. Nyhan et al.'s (2014) study tested the effectiveness of four types of interventions in an attempt to correct false beliefs positing a link between vaccines and autism. As it turned out, none of the attempts at correcting vaccine disinformation were effective in increasing parental intent to vaccinate their children and in some cases even reinforced beliefs in false claims.

Seifert (2002) argues that confronting false or conspiratorial beliefs through direct negation is an ineffective practice; instead, she suggests providing an equally strong and reasonable alternative explanation that can replace the explanation provided in the false account—preferably an alternative explanation rooted in fact, not fiction. Colliander (2019) found that social-media users exposed to comments critical of stories and posts that contain disinformation are more likely to have a negative attitude towards the post and also more likely to leave their own critical comments. Thus, even comments that directly negate the views of the post's author may be effective in preventing the spread of false narratives on social media, even if they are not effective in changing the original author's point of view.

An additional research-based tactic to confront the spread of disinformation is the use of suspicion (Fein, McCloskey, and Tomlinson 1997). The study found it was possible to correct prior prejudicial beliefs when the study participants were made suspicious of the source and intent of the information initially believed to be true.

Activity 2: Replying, commenting, and posting responses

In Activity 1, students collected a data sample of disinformation discourse on a specific topic, an activity focused on the consumption and analysis of disinformation on social media. Writing a response to disinformation in the form of a comment, reply, or post is also a valuable activity to practice producing content and an effective tactic to counter the spread of false and potentially dangerous information online. After completing Activity 1, students should have an abundance of examples of disinformation posts to reply to. Students can also choose to write an original tweet or Facebook post addressing a particular disinformation discourse or conspiracy theory rather than commenting on or replying to a post.

Students should use the following guidelines for crafting a reply, comment, or post as they plan and write:

1. Avoid the emotional language outlined in the previous activity. Make sure not to include words or phrases that convey negative emotions, place blame on external enemies, rely on distrust, or threaten personal values as a way to persuade. Although name-calling and blaming others are effective ways to get likes and shares on social media, these techniques should be avoided.

2. If possible, provide an alternative explanation to replace the false account.

Use facts, not opinions, and support your position with evidence from credible sources.

3. Raise suspicion by targeting the source of the false information, and raise legitimate concerns about the credibility and intent of the author.

Table 4 includes six steps for writing a reply, comment, or post. Note that Step 6—in which students post, comment, or reply on social media—is optional; many teachers may prefer to have students submit their comments to the teacher or share with classmates for discussion rather than posting the comments publicly.

CONCLUSION

Bringing disinformation into the language classroom as an object of study can be a valuable language-learning tool as well as an effective practice to counter the spread of disinformation online. The two activities shared here are meant to build on existing media-literacy teaching practices and to spark ideas for further development of teaching materials in this area.

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Step 1 – Paste or summarize the original post: Paste the original post or briefly summarize the disinformation topic you will be commenting on.
Step 2 – Provide an alternative explanation: Provide an alternative explanation for the occurrence of the events described in the original post. Rely on facts, evidence, and credible sources to support your position.
Step 3 – Raise suspicion: Write several sentences examining the source, credibility, and intent of the original post.
Step 4 – Write your post: Combine the information from Step 2 and Step 3 into a single post. Remember, some social-media sites have word or character limits.
Step 5 – Check for emotional language: Are there any words or phrases that portray negative emotions, distrust, personal values under threat, or external enemies in your post? If so, remove them.
Step 6 – Share your post, comment, or reply on social media. (optional)

Table 4. Six steps for writing a reply, comment, or post

After completing Activity 1, students should have an abundance of examples of disinformation posts to reply to.

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