

# Horizon-building through Media English

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## Negative Evaluations of the Media

The media, now such an inescapable facet of modern society, has been getting bad press during the last two or three decades. It is said, of television in particular, that it numbs; it stymies intellectual activity; is 'chewing gum for the brain'; renders people passive. (Paradoxically, another tenet held is that, as it bombards us with violent images, the media promotes violence in people, make others indifferent to it or makes us accept it too readily in everyday life).

We are said to be, at the very least influenced by, if not controlled by, the media, and our children's tastes and desires are engineered by the men that make the programs. TV programme-related sales are a multi-million pound business—witness Disney worldwide, and Ampaman through Sailormoon, Cutie Honey and Pocketmon in Japan. Even those programs ostensibly stemming from educational motives—Sesame Street in the United States, and the latest hit in the United Kingdom, Tele-tubbies, which is viewed by 2 million people daily—mean business. By-products of Tele-tubbies are expected to generate 2 billion dollars in retail sales for a television program targeting 1–2 years olds (Time, 12 October 1998, p55).

Children and adults alike relax into their television dramas, soap-operas, game and quiz shows, passively absorbing what the media moguls choose to distribute. And they will tell you that 'this is what the public wants'.

Also reflecting the entertainment boom, in Britain a majority of the population prefer the tabloid newspapers to broadsheet or so-called 'serious' newspapers. Not only do the tabloids favour sensationalist news, but their ratio of pages of advertising, sport and entertainment to pages of news is also worthy of note. The 'Sun' offers 60 pages, of

which 16.5 (28%) are pages of news, 17.5 (29%) are devoted to sport and entertainment, and 26 (43%) are advertising. To compare, a broadsheet newspaper, the 'Guardian', offers 26 pages, of which 12 (46%), 6 (23%), and 8 (31%) are given over to news, entertainment and advertising, respectively. (Reah, 1998, p3) This illustrates how commerce and leisure affect even the type of information that newspapers offer.

What might be seen as a consequence of a widespread entertainment boom, is a move away from literary reading. I have observed (though I warrant such observation would benefit from statistical support), a decline in literary reading, in the younger population, as populations become more economically stable (the 60s in Britain and Europe, for example, the 80s in Japan), as well as a decrease in concern about global issues. Economic success promotes materialistic pursuit and pleasure seeking. Reading gets shelved (ironically as each industrialized nation becomes increasingly more literate). And if the results of four years' questionnaires surveying the reading habits of some 300 students is any indication, a large number of Japanese university and junior college students' newspaper reading is scanty, Most newspaper reading appears to be entertainment and sports orientated. Less than 20% of the students interviewed read the newspaper for news, and rare were the students with an awareness of world affairs.

### **The Media English Course**

The purpose of the media English course, which prompted this paper, is to stimulate students to explore issues that appear to be so far-removed from the concerns in their daily lives. For, notwithstanding the widely debated negative aspects of media, referred to above, there is much that can be selected from it and employed usefully and successfully in the classroom. For the 'media are a rich source of readily accessible data for (research and) teaching'. (Bell, 1998, p3). Students can be taught to be discerning in their treatment of the media, can learn to become more aware of global issues which affect everybody and not just people beyond their country's shores. They can learn that they are missing out, if they ignore the information aspect of the media in favour of its entertainment value. And of course, in the context of the English language-based Media course, students have the added advantage of accessing cultural knowledge and developing their language skills at the same time.

In an earlier paper (Lafaye, 1998) a personal development-based rationale for offering extensive reading courses in the tertiary-level English Language curriculum was proposed. In the same vein, the present paper introduces the Media English course, and illustrates how media studies can contribute to students' development. While the course is offered in the context of the language curriculum, 'development' here refers to personal rather than linguistic development. However, to a certain extent, these go hand in hand in this course.

### **The Media available for Study:**

**Newspapers; Television; Internet; Radio**

#### **Newspapers**

Newspapers are considered the most suitable media type for use in the Media English class, particularly in the initial stages of the course, for a variety of practical and pedagogical reasons. On a practical level, first, they are widely available. Next, they provide a vast range of subject and text type, so that suitable topics and text lengths appropriate for the purposes of a given exercise can easily be sought out. In addition, the students' language level being established, a particular paper title can be used on a regular basis, both for classroom use and for homework assignments. Most newspapers are consistent in terms of the language range they use. For the purposes of a course for intermediate level students, the Japan Times and Daily Yomiuri were found most useful, with occasional excerpts from the more linguistically-taxing Guardian also being used.

Pedagogically, newspapers are a good choice for the Media English course because students are familiar with newspapers in their own culture, making newspapers low-threat educational materials. Students soon learn that they can find their way round English newspapers rather easily, as they transfer the strategies they use in reading their first language newspapers to the foreign language context, and this is a motivating factor for students. Furthermore, students are exposed to authentic rather than contrived texts. Finally, as newspaper language now mirrors more and more closely the spoken variety, students can become familiar with the kind of English they might expect to hear from native speakers in an everyday context.

This course does not limit students to using English language newspapers. While they are encouraged to read and use these, and articles chosen for analysis in the classroom are taken from these, students are at liberty to use newspapers in Japanese when doing assignments, providing that they systematically acknowledge their sources and are able to convey the message of these articles in English.

In addition to their practical and pedagogical value, hence their increasing use in teaching, the desire to be able to read newspapers in a foreign language has been shown to be above average in students. In a 1993 study of college students responding about newspapers, for example, 54.4% of 10,264 student interviewees said that they hoped to be able to read newspapers and magazines in English. (Sugiura, 1997, p97) 'When one has learnt to read a newspaper in a foreign language, one begins to feel that one has gone some way towards learning the second language successfully' (Grundy, 1993, p5)

## Television

For the low-intermediate student, TV can be both daunting, but an exciting challenge. For, while news broadcasts, to take this genre as an example, are supported by written text on the screen and pictures, the speed with which they are delivered often discourages students. Excerpts from this type of media need to be presented with care. Choice of broadcast, length and subject matter should be selected with these difficulties clearly in mind, and for this reason, it is often more successful if the teacher presents Japanese news programmes (with which students are familiar), that are also broadcast in English, for example the 7 o'clock and 9 o'clock NHK news. Here students can benefit from hearing familiar news stories rendered in English, while having Japanese information written on the screen. Students invariably find American, British or other national news broadcasts overwhelming, and should therefore be primed before such excerpts are introduced.

Notwithstanding these provisos, television offers a huge range of exploitable material for discussion and analysis, including news, referred to above, documentaries and advertising. The latter, in particular, offer manageable bytes of visual and audio information. They are culturally-rich and afford a useful stimulus for analysis and discussion. 'Commercial messages' provide authentic language, their visual and verbal elements help integrate

language and culture study. (after Andrade, 1997, p3) Moreover, according to a recent study, they are a media genre popular with students in tertiary education. 74% of university students and 96% of junior college students interviewed (n75 and n50, respectively), showed strong interest in studying advertisements. (Andrade, 1997, p3)

## Internet

The internet 'revolution' has invaded our lives, in much the same way as television did some 30 years ago, but much more rapidly than television did. In the United States, where internet use is most widespread, some 79 million people 'surf' the net (Time, 12 October, 1998, p14). In Japan, user numbers are much smaller though they are expected to reach 14 million by end of 1998 (Nihon Kaiza Shinbun figures, reported in the 'Courier International'), but whereas domestic use of the internet is still quite low, organizations and businesses are taking the new media seriously and home pages and net sites abound in the business world. Most news programmes now appear with their web-sites clearly marked at the bottom of the television screen, newspapers print their web-site addresses in their publications and give e-mail addresses for contact purposes. Similarly, two traditionally conservative sectors of Japanese society, that is, educational establishments and government agencies, are also acknowledging the power of the internet phenomenon.

As the internet becomes a more and more integral part of modern society, those unable to use it are likely to find this a handicap within a few years, It therefore seems wise for students to master what will become a basic life skill, while they are still in full-time education.

For the teacher, not least the media teacher, the internet offers a wealth of material for classroom application. (See Yoshimoto, 1998, for examples of internet excerpts used in the Media English context). Moreover, once students are confident users of the internet, it offers them a convenient tool with which to search for information. Send students away to find information about, world pollution via the internet, for example, and they will have access to more information on the subject than they could ever hope to read. Yet they WILL be reading all the while. Therefore, teaching them to use the internet will, as a corollary, encourage them to read serious materials, and at the same time

teach them how to be selective in their reading. Because it is computer-powered, a principal advantage of internet searches is that, once a search is initiated vast tracts of information are accessed very rapidly. A manual topic search through newspapers (whether via hard copy or microfiches), on the other hand, is extremely time-consuming.

With the introduction of a skills course in Internet Use for all freshmen in the English Department of Tokai Women's College in 1998, the prospects for students and media English teachers in the second year media courses greatly improved. When students become familiar with the internet and begin to be intrigued by, if not fascinated by, the extent of information that can be accessed on it, a big step is made. They are reading, they are exploring or being directed to explore, and they are, all the time widening their horizons. This development can be well exploited pedagogically by the media English teacher, ultimately to the students' advantage as they begin to think, as well as absorb and analyse information.

## Radio

The position of the radio as a principal media source has been somewhat usurped on since the development of television. However, because of the position of English as an international language, the BBC World Service, for example, broadcasts extensively all over the world. This means that it is easy to tune not only into news broadcasts and language programmes, but into documentaries and programmes on all manner of topics, for example, education, social problems, health, the environment, science and technology, to name but a few. Radio does not offer a visual support, obliging students to use listening skills exclusively, which is extremely demanding and difficult for the language learner (just as telephone conversations are). However, the BBC World Service offers supporting materials in the shape of a radio magazine, and it is also possible to acquire the transcripts of certain broadcasts. This means that radio can be used in class, but it still presents the most difficult of media to use successfully in the classroom and its uses are generally confined to classes of advanced learners.

## In Sum

The media English course gives students the chance to explore news (specifically but not

exclusively in English), and explore ideas, while reading, hearing, and using English. The course sensitizes students to global issues, not least environmental social problems, introduces them to comparative culture and invites them to open their eyes to what is going on in the world at large. In short, it encourages them to look beyond the narrow confines of their daily lives.

The media English experience takes students beyond language learning, while remaining complementary to it. Students achieve vocabulary growth, and their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills benefit enormously from the course, but it is the area of personal development in which they stand to gain the most. To concur with a colleague by citation:

‘English lessons are not merely language skill training, but also language education is a vehicle to contribute to the personal development of learners.’ (Asakawa, 1993, p51) The Media English course is a pertinent example of this vehicle.

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