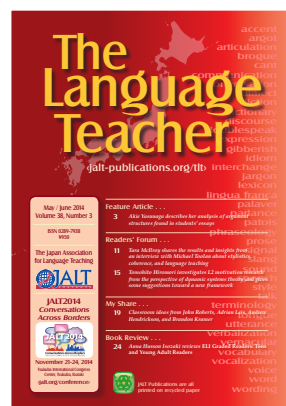


The Language Teacher

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Disclaimer

This article was first published in extended form in the journal below. The length of the original article was 3,614 words (without references). The modified length is now 1,498 words (without references). The original article focused on the teaching of ideas in three Shakespeare speeches, while this version now focuses in more detail on two speeches with less literary references. There is a new introduction and a modified conclusion.

Citation

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Critical media literacy for learner-empowering news media courses

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News media literacy is challenging but essential for English learners participating fully in the global community. Gaining news-comprehension skills is complicated by information overload; students need critical strategies to sort through sources and get a reliable grasp on current events. Critical thinking skills are crucial too, for engaging with news: from access, to discussion and participation. Building these skills is actually quite manageable, and a consistent focus on critical strategies can provide a solid base for learner-empowering news media courses. This condensed article introduces some resources and methods for helping learners develop skills and enjoy more critical, confident understanding and autonomy in engaging with and responding to news in L2 English.

ニュースメディアリタラシーは、グローバル社会の一員である英語学習者には難しいが欠かせない能力である。しかし、英語のニュースを理解するスキルは情報過多により複雑になっている。つまり、情報源を整理し最新の出来事を信頼して把握するには、学生は効率的な戦略が必要である。批判的思考(クリティカル・シンキング)も、多すぎる情報の中からニュースを理解するために役に立つ。クリティカル・シンキングとは、読んだり、聞いたりしたことをそのまま受け取ったり、否定したりせずに、自分で他の情報を得て、自分自身で決めることである。クリティカル・シンキングは、ニュースに触れる時や、ニュースについてディスカッションをする時、ニュースに関して積極的に問題に取り組む時にも大切である。このスキルを築くことはそれほど難しいことではなく、常にクリティカル・シンキングの方法に焦点を置くことで、ニュースメディア学習のための講座に

SIG Spotlight: CT SIG

Critical thinking in language education involves the creation and assessment of ideas, opinions, and beliefs among language learners. Just as important as the teaching of what language to use and how to use it, the teaching of critical thinking reinforces how to think and how to



produce such thoughts in a second language. The Critical Thinking (CT) SIG was established for the purpose of providing a clear but ever-reforming definition of critical thinking to provide a forum for the discussion of critical thinking and praxis; to provide research opportunities to language educators interested in promoting critical thinking; and to provide an area where language teachers can enjoy friendly, professional, and engaging examination of the rationale, validity, and the critical importance of its instruction in various environments.

確かな基礎を作ることができる。本論では、学習者がインターネット上の英語のニュースの理解と使い方を、自信を持って高めることができる情報源(ニュースメディアの参考ウェブサイトなど)を紹介する。

Critical media literacy for learner-empowering news media courses

Making sense of news media English is challenging but essential for university and adult

English learners who intend to become part of the global English-speaking community. Discussing news is also a popular intellectual exercise in many cultures, from brief small talk to in-depth consideration of events. Learners need skills to initiate or join in these critical thinking-intensive conversations, and workable strategies to activate in considering whether and when to act on reported news.

Information overload can make developing these competencies all the more challenging. Both on and off the Net, it can be difficult to sort through the deluge labeled “news.” Making critically informed judgments about what is relevant, which sources are usually reliable, and which are likely to be misleading or biased is especially daunting when that information is in a second language. These concerns about media literacy are not limited to Japan or to second language learners. Education expert Ken Robinson has said of the U.S. school system, “. . . in place of curiosity what we have is a culture of compliance” (Robinson, TED 2013). Anywhere there is a dominant “culture of compliance,” there is also reason for concern that critical thinking skills are not being encouraged.

Learning to think critically about news media empowers learners and provides a firm grounding for news and journalism courses that aim to build lifelong skills. Rather than lists of vocabulary and ever-changing acronyms or out-of-date articles, English learners need *strategies* to successfully track down current news of interest to themselves. They need a set of *skills* enabling them to get a confident grasp on current events, their backgrounds, and the forces likely to drive them as they unfold. This fundamental orientation is not just an academic point but a matter of practical, daily quality of living and empowered, full citizenship. As journalism and social activists Bornstein and Davis write, “The main role of a free press is to provide citizens with the information they need to lead good lives and to help society improve” (Bornstein & Davis, 2010, p. 117).

Courses intended to build media literacy and skills for constructive engagement with news in ways which learners choose based on their interest and desire to participate—rather than constrained by lack of confidence—can be designed to build toward three simple goals:

- *Individual empowerment:* learners can locate and comprehend news, check for more

sources, and understand and judge what they find with reasonable confidence.

- *Discussion empowerment:* learners can participate in discussions about news and current events, both sharing their own awareness and knowledge of the world, and actively learning from others.
- *Community and action empowerment:* learners can respond to news of particular concern to them by finding their “issue communities” with others who share similar concerns, participating as fully as they choose in solving the problems together.

Critical thinking is intrinsic to all three and they weave a safety net within well-informed people and communities—essential for a vibrant democracy. It is also surprisingly manageable with tools and resources freely available now on the Internet.

We need to see outside the box, to *think* outside the box

An important first step in class is to clarify the definition and process of critical thinking as it applies to media. English-Japanese and even English-English dictionaries still lack workable definitions for the term “critical thinking.” Practical demonstrations can help, and in combined Japanese and English, it can be explained that critical thinking is, “NOT *sonno mamma uketotte*” (Not just accepting things at face value), and also “NOT *sonno mamma hitei shite*” (Not just rejecting everything outright). With news, concrete examples of critical thinking can be as simple as listening or reading, than checking for more sources to make a better educated guess.

The head of Public Radio International, Alisa Miller, brings this concept to life in a short TED talk illustrating the unbalanced view of the world that results from the abysmally low international coverage in popular U.S. news (Miller, 2008).

Resources for learners

Working online, learners can choose topics related to their own interests and concerns. Unlike TV, pacing is user-controlled—this autonomy helps students making the effort to understand news independently maintain their motivation. A hyperlinked “Resources” sheet can support learners developing the habit of choos-

ing sources consciously, rather than relying on auto-generated, indiscriminate “headline news” aggregators, which tend to distract and confuse rather than inform.



Figure 1. From Alisa Miller on TED, map sourced from Worldmapper.org and Vanderbilt University Television News Archive

Excellent new designs in media applications lend themselves to evaluating news with a more critically aware perspective:

- *Newseum*: “Today’s Front Pages”: an interactive map of newspapers around the world, programmed so mouse-clicks make them visible as a full page. Using the map to compare headlines across continents immediately shows how the same happenings are given different prominence or reporting depending on local needs and editorial viewpoints. <newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/flash>.
- *Newsmap* instantly shows the importance given to different stories, with topic-boxes sized according to how many articles have been published on each topic, comparable across source-countries and newspaper sections. <newsmap.jp> (Weskamp, n.d.).

One example of using online resources for strengthening critical thinking habits is to have students choose an event and access one international news source, and then another news source that is local and reporting on the same event (Knapp, 2011). Comparing and contrasting the news reports can lead to a number of questions, such as “Do the reported facts match or

differ?” (they often differ to a startling degree) “Does the writing appear more objective in one source or another? How so and why?” “Let’s check the source—is it independent?” Considering the source of a report and possible motivations is a basic factor in critical thinking about media. It is worth noting together with students, if articles include context and explain the backgrounds of stories, whether an appropriate number of voices and views have been included, and whether articles are anonymous or have bylines.

Mainstream news sites online have been making strides in accessibility for English learners through developments in multimedia: *National Public Radio* (NPR, based in the U.S.) has archived listening-on-demand with transcripts or related articles, and *BBC News*, *CNN* and *The New York Times* often have combinations of written articles and video. Students say they appreciate being able to confirm content for themselves with tools like subtitles or transcripts, and academic research in listening-while-reading supports this observation as well (Chang, 2009).

Connecting understanding and discussion of current events with potential participation

Critical thinking merits emphasizing at all levels of classwork, from news searching and reading to discussions and opinion exchanges. Implicit in critical thinking is recognizing and accepting that it is usually impossible to be perfectly certain about news events and that we can only do our best: mutually sharing sources, checking further, and deciding independently. This encourages active participation in discussions because it creates an environment where all members are free to share information or opinions, and all are expected to take the initiative to check for other reliable sources to share in return. It is a pleasure as an instructor to observe this back-and-forth take place in class, with students calling up articles online to show and explain to each other.

English skills can facilitate discussions about issues across borders, and critical media literacy skills are needed for investigating further and choosing if and how to respond to news and events. Combining these skills is crucial. For increasing numbers of NGOs too, discussing news across borders and responding worldwide is the basis of their organized citizen action, from the well-known (Amnesty International), to the

new (350.org for climate action) or the popular (Avaaz.org, which claims 36 million members).

Conclusion

Finally, a word about journalism itself, and journalists. Reporting well is a public service, and quality journalists and their work deserve recognition, whether it is simply great effort, or, too often, a matter of serious personal risk. Conscious citizenship values those who help us get closer to the truth; we can share conscious world citizenship by fostering active news awareness and critical media literacy with our learners.

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