

FROM LANGUAGE SKILLS TO INFORMATION RESILIENCE – A MEDIA LITERACY-BASED APPROACH TO EFL FOR MILITARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary age is marked by the emergence of media literacy as a critical competency particularly due to the rapid dissemination of information and the development of more and more sophisticated misinformation tactics. This paper explores the imperative of integrating media literacy into military education, and more specifically into military EFL training. It also aims to demonstrate that there is a firm intersection of media literacy training with EFL teaching strategies. The paper analyzes definitions, significances, and pedagogical strategies that are tailored for military cadets, in an attempt to highlight the role that media literacy plays in enhancing not only language skills, but also critical thinking, operational effectiveness, and resilience against disinformation. Because it focuses on the inclusion of EFL strategies, the article proposes an innovative approach to media analysis and language proficiency with the aim to equip military students with the essential cognitive and linguistic skills for navigating complex media landscapes.

KEYWORDS:

critical thinking, digital literacy, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), media literacy, military education

1. Introduction

The digital age has revolutionized the way information is produced, disseminated and consumed. While it is true that these developments offer a variety of benefits, they also come with an array of challenges among which misinformation and disinformation are the most notable. As Mobley (2011, pp. 11) points out, *“[a]dvances in technology paradoxically offer ways to meet vast information and communications needs and, at the same time, they add more layers of complexity. Digital devices hold limitless promise to reach across time and distance to deliver information and connection – but they also foretell unending demands for change, training, supervision and resources”*.

When it comes to military students, who are on their path of training as future officers, it becomes paramount to develop the ability to critically evaluate information. Since effective communication in a foreign language is also a must for military personnel, interpretation of media sources in different languages – English in our case – becomes crucial. Integrating media literacy strategies into EFL (English as a Foreign Language) training thus becomes an important source of both linguistic proficiency enhancement and analytical skills development; this can further lead to acquiring skills related to cross-cultural information analysis and multicultural communication.

But how do military students cope with information overload, and do they have what it takes to interpret the messages conveyed daily through various types of media? This paper aims to explain the importance of integrating media literacy in EFL classes and to provide a broad overview of the fundamental aspects that should be included in the English classes.

2. Defining Media Literacy in Military and EFL Contexts

Media literacy is typically described as the ability to access, analyze, assess, and even produce media in a variety of formats. Extended to military education, the definition of media literacy should also include the following three fundamental skills: 1) recognizing and countering information threats; 2) comprehension of ethical dimensions of correct dissemination of information; 3) strategic communication through the effective use of media. In EFL training, media literacy competencies can be used to develop students' critical thinking skills, help them understand biases, and interpret language used in various media formats. It is important to combine all these perspectives in order to offer military students the opportunity not only to refine their English linguistic abilities but also to develop their skills to detect and counteract misinformation.

The Center for Media Literacy (<http://www.medialit.org>) defines the concept as follows:

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.

According to the definition provided by UNESCO (<https://www.unesco.org>):

Media and Information Literacy provides a set of essential skills to address the challenges of the 21st century including the proliferation of mis- and disinformation and hate speech, the decline of trust in media and digital innovations notably Artificial Intelligence.

A differentiation should be made between information literacy and media literacy, as the first term refers to a subdomain of the latter. Media literacy is the umbrella term that incorporates a series of concepts and competencies. It represents the ability of a person to assess media messages in order to correctly decode them; at the same time, it also incorporates the ability to use and create media with the aim of providing information. Information literacy, on the other hand, refers to understanding when information is required and the ability to find, assess and utilize that information correctly. Hobbs argues that these types of literacies should not be viewed as competing, but complementary, or as “*part of the same family*”. She further exemplifies the idea by pointing out that “*information literacy has typically been associated with research skills*” while “*media literacy typically has been associated with critical analysis of news, advertising and mass media entertainment*” (2010: 17).

Another definition is provided in the Study on the Current Trends and Approaches to Media Literacy in Europe; it states that media literacy “*is the term that describes the skills and competences required to develop, with autonomy and awareness, in the new communicative environment – digital, global and multimedia – of the information society. Media literacy is considered the result of the process of media education*” (European Commission, 2010).

Kolomiets (2020) argues that there are quite a few contradictions when it comes to providing a comprehensive definition of media literacy; however, it can be considered that the best way to integrate media literacy into the educational curriculum is through

cross-curricular subjects. Furthermore, Haynes (2004) suggests that media literacy is closely linked to the concept of “critical thinking” which could be best described according to the definition proposed by Halonen (1995: 75) as “*the propensity and skills to engage in activity with reflective skepticism focused on deciding what to believe or do*”.

3. The Importance of Media Literacy in Military Education

Although media literacy has started to be used on quite a large scale in education, there is still a lot that needs to be clarified in terms of methods to be used and the extent of its implementation. Kolomiets (2020) suggests that the young people who belong to the modern generation are thought to be digital natives in terms of their innate skills of searching for information. However, they still need to be trained when it comes to analyzing and assessing information from different media sources. Furthermore, Dvorghets and Shaturnaya (2015: 193) hold that “*teaching media literacy is especially important in university classrooms because students, as media consumers, tend to be more influenced in subtle but far-reaching ways by the media they encounter than adults*”. Through media literacy students are more likely to base their judgements on sound arguments (Halpern, 2003) and thus they become more prone to making better reasoning.

When it comes to foreign language development, the introduction of basic media literacy training into the syllabus can foster the progress of both academic and critical thinking abilities. It is important for students to know when to ask questions in order to be able to take into account different viewpoints, which helps them develop their metacognitive abilities. Therefore, through media literacy, teachers can guide learners to analyze both the information and the language they encounter. As a result, there can be observed both a growth in students’ vocabulary and a better understanding of

the language subtleties, which leads to the development of students’ creativity both in oral and written expression.

Media literacy should not be approached as a separate or independent skill while integrating it into EFL classrooms. As shown before, media literacy comprises information and digital literacy skills, as well as reading and writing literacy and audiovisual literacy. These can easily be superimposed on the four core EFL skills and developed as such.

Media literacy serves several functions in an EFL context: it gives students access to resources that allow them to practice all four language skills, it facilitates their immersion in the target language, and it offers them the opportunity to collaborate, all of which help students become more proficient communicators. Through these roles, it creates opportunities for more enjoyable and effective language learning.

The major reason why English teachers should include media literacy in the curriculum they teach is that, when learning a foreign language, apart from the four language skills that need to be developed (reading, writing, speaking, listening), there is also a desideratum to cultivate a fifth competency, i.e. the cultural one. Many students who are studying a foreign language use a variety of media to learn about history, pop culture, customs, and news related to that particular culture. Because they interact with authentic language, it is necessary that the students have knowledge about the historical and social context otherwise they will miss many of the cues given. Consequently, by cultivating wider background knowledge, students will develop the necessary schema to understand that particular culture. Moreover, developing language proficiency in a foreign language is inherently linked to media literacy because nowadays there is an intense exposure to diverse media content. When it comes to military students, learning a foreign language in relation to media content helps them develop both their linguistic skills and cross-cultural awareness.

Since military personnel often engage in international missions, understanding cultural and linguistic nuances in media reporting is essential for cooperation with allied forces.

The importance of media literacy in military education is derived both from the necessity of centering military education around the concept of adaptability and the fact that cadets, as future officers, need to be prepared to detect those media narratives that have been manipulated or altered as an information warfare tactic in order to confuse the adversaries. Educators can enhance military students' resilience against misinformation campaigns by training them to fact-check information, critically analyze media sources, and detect propaganda. Therefore, it is important for the cadets to understand the dynamics of media as they will be able to better assess the information environment. Additionally, the ability to interpret foreign-language media accurately is crucial not only for intelligence gathering but mainly for correct communication.

4. Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Media Literacy to Military Students in an EFL Context

Military students develop their personality and knowledge about the world in an immensely tense environment where sometimes there are little resources of time to implement creativity and innovation. Dos Santos et al. (2019, pp. 129) point out that *“it is common to find some reluctance in the Institutions of Higher Education regarding the adoption of new procedures, processes and models of teaching-learning, as it is sometimes more common for a conservative position to exist in a military institution”*. Although it is true that the military higher education environment is rather hesitant to adopt new methodologies and approaches, there has been however an increase in the emphasis on the use of critical thinking skills in military education, including the study of foreign languages. While learning a foreign language, reflective reasoning becomes an important approach that

language instructors can use in order to promote both critical thinking and language acquisition. In this context, it becomes more and more evident that it is necessary to shift our attention from information education, where students learn how to use computers to retrieve, produce and store information, to a critical approach, where higher order critical thinking skills are activated, and media literacy would undoubtedly be helpful in this regard.

Media literacy proposes a series of responses to the new challenges that have been brought about by the emergence of new media. These challenges have been defined by Rivoltella (2006, pp. 242) as follows: multimediality of contents and instruments, portability, high connectivity, multimediality of consumption, and interactivity. These require the development of new approaches regarding teaching and learning. When it comes to using media literacy as part of the EFL curriculum, teachers must pay attention to the fact that, as Dorr (2001) points out, content understanding depends on how the context influences production and interpretation.

Dongxue and Nagappan highlight the importance of developing innovative pedagogical strategies that can meet the demands of fostering valuable media literacy education. According to them, *“the spread of false information, hate speech, and other dangerous materials on the internet emphasizes how urgently students should be given the critical skills to properly and responsibly negotiate the digital media environment”* (2024, pp. 440). Additionally, Ventsel et al. (2024, pp. 1022) explain that *“[m]odern societies – and armed forces therein – are affected by the unprecedentedly broad and fast diffusion of various forms of false and harmful information due to complex sociopolitical, cultural, and technological changes”*. Furthermore, the researchers show that there has been a rise in media disinformation used during military conflicts which leads them to conclude that *“it is necessary to*

improve the media literacy of military personnel as social media users”. Therefore, active learning through practical activities acts as an important facilitator for the development of media skills. The following are just a few examples of stimulative and experiential learning strategies that can be successfully employed during EFL classes to teach media literacy.

4.1. Scenario-based Learning

This pedagogical approach is very helpful when it comes to teaching media literacy because it immerses students in authentic situations where media literacy is crucial. For example, in a realistic scenario, military personnel must analyze inconsistent news reports on an international conflict; this type of scenario helps students develop their critical thinking and fact-checking skills. At the same time, it is uncomplicated to integrate this scenario into an EFL class as it strengthens both analytical capacity, language structures, and comprehension of a foreign language.

For example, in a scenario-based game (<https://harmonysquare.game>) the players immerse in a story related to disinformation. The game starts after they are hired as Chief of Disinformation Officer whose only job is to make sure that he/she disrupts the peace of a neighborhood. As the game progresses, the players are presented with a number of manipulation strategies that can be employed to generate discord within an otherwise democratic community and set its citizens against one another. The game is effective when it comes to both EFL teaching and media literacy training since while playing it students practice their English skills and become familiar with disinformation and misinformation strategies. While the game maintains cognitive engagement from the students who need to process information in a foreign language and make decisions based on the options provided by the game, it could also be argued that its effectiveness lasts while the students are actively involved with it.

Therefore, it is important for the teacher to keep the students engaged by using a variety of other activities such as case studies, critical discussions, and media analysis.

4.2. Case Studies

According to Kreber (2001) a case study can be defined as an educational activity that is based on either a real or a hypothetical situation which includes complexities that could be encountered in a real place of activity. Case studies – such as analyzing media strategies employed during conflicts or the use of social media – provide practical insights into media literacy, aiding students to recognize propaganda techniques and misinformation tactics. Case studies allow students to develop their critical thinking skills, helping them to recognize bias – and most importantly their own biases – much easier. During an EFL class, to strengthen the linguistic component and to add depth to the learning process, the teacher can introduce a comparative analysis of media coverage in English language.

Amalanathan (2021, pp. 126) points out that teaching English in a military context can prove challenging as “*the military students and staff are duty bound, disciplined and should demonstrate utmost obedience in all situations*”. At the same time, an English teacher must bear in mind that teaching a foreign language within a military academy is an activity that needs to be adapted to an environment that is highly centralized, hierarchical, and culturally oriented through a series of very specific norms and patterns. That is why adapting media literacy material to the English classroom enables cadets to carry out analytical tasks while integrating case studies as a method in the language classroom can prove quite beneficial as it allows for a systematic development of the activity which leads to the improvement of cadets’ higher order skills.

4.3. Media Production Projects and Critical Discussions

Hands-on activities, such as students creating their own media content in English, enhances their understanding of both media construction and the use of language. By framing bias and demystifying media processes, teachers can reinforce students' critical evaluation skills. During the EFL classes, teachers can also organize debates on media ethics and misinformation strategies in order to allow students to articulate their thoughts in a foreign language and practice their language skills in structured settings.

By creating their own media, students become capable of shaping the media themselves and not just being shaped by what they read or hear. However, since their messages can now reach wider audiences than ever before, students need to be taught how to become responsible creators of media. They must consider how their messages and posts affect those who read or hear them and whether they accurately reflect both their own lives and reality. Therefore, teachers need to reinforce the importance of creating authentic media content and avoid media junk.

An example of an activity that could be developed during an English language class that has the potential to trigger critical discussions could be represented by a WebQuest where students carry out research related to the topic of *Who owns the media?* Students can research media outlets and decide whether the corporations own something other than media as well, and how this influences the way that they present news. Students could also determine whether the way the media outlets present their stories is biased due to ownership political preferences or whether the journalists who write the stories or present them on television can be subject to outside influences. Students should also become aware of the fact that various types of media have the ability to imply cultural values both overtly and covertly.

4.4. Integrating Digital Tools and Social Media Analysis

Students should be familiar with fact-checking websites and tools that can be utilized to recognize and analyze AI-based texts. Social media analysis is important because students can practice their skills to assess viral posts for credibility, thus scrutinizing digital content critically. EFL strategies, such as summarizing media reports in English or translating social media content, enhance comprehension and communication skills. According to Hobbs (2010), there are five essential competencies of digital and media literacy: access, analyze & evaluate, create, reflect, act. All of them need to be integrated into instructional practices in order to trigger long lasting and thorough learning in students. Furthermore, Hobbs points out that media literacy education "*activates independent thinking, authentic dialogue, collaboration, reflection, creativity, and social responsibility*" (2010, pp. 24). By integrating digital technologies and social media analysis into EFL classes, teachers can enable students to take charge of their own learning.

5. Challenges of Using Media Literacy during EFL Classes

5.1. Balancing Language Instruction and Media Literacy

Learning a foreign language involves more than just acquiring skills; it also involves understanding the cultural contexts in which the language is used. Reynolds-Young and Hood (2014, pp. 34) point out that "*the more students have an opportunity to build knowledge through thematic learning experiences, the more students will be able to build their content knowledge as well as their language abilities*". Therefore, the success of integrating media literacy into EFL classes depends on how well the content is delivered and how relevant it is for the students. Planning EFL classes through a media literacy approach leads not only to an increase in students' knowledge about various media formats but also to the improvement of their English language performance.

Language learning tasks should always include authentic materials and language that is specific to real-world situations. Consequently, reading has become a fundamental dimension of both language learning and media literacy; this skill can be used to do online research which ultimately strengthens students' reading comprehension abilities while cultivating an active approach to the process itself. Writing can also become more relevant in the context of designing instruction and learning around digital tools and media literacy.

Military education is often rigorous, leaving limited time for media literacy training, therefore integrating media literacy into EFL existing curricula can make the instruction more efficient and relevant.

Military students may have different levels of English language proficiency so their access to various digital media is going to also differ. In this case, while planning an EFL lesson that integrates media literacy, educators should consider these disparities to ensure equitable participation. However, class material can be adapted to fit each learner's abilities.

In order to be able to balance the teaching of English with the teaching of content, teachers need to dedicate a considerable amount to planning. The main question that needs to be answered is therefore *What kind of language would be necessary for students to use?* Starting from this, teachers can then decide what media literacy content intersects with the language they need to teach and plan accordingly.

5.2. Rapidly Evolving Media Landscape

As technology advances so quickly in the 21st century, the media landscape is also evolving rapidly. We now have access to augmented reality, AI, blogs and vlogs, and online news outlets. Students should be well versed in all these in order to be able to navigate this complex landscape. That is why it is important to help students become familiar with all of these technologies since future ones will be derived from them.

Hobbs (2010) emphasizes that including digital and media literacy practices in different types of classes does not mean merely transferring classroom materials from paper to computer or using computers for making PowerPoint presentations or simple internet searches. It takes more than just *teaching* with digital technologies as it is absolutely necessary to teach *about* the media, to cope with the rapidly changing media landscape and equip students with the critical thinking skills necessary to adapt to such a landscape.

Students must improve their assessment skills, i.e., their ability to sort through the abundance of information, in order to be able to adjust to the rapidly changing media scene. This means that they must be able to use filters that enable them to evaluate the quality of the information since coping with information overload has become a necessity for everyone. Livingstone (2004, pp. 10) suggests that the nature of the user's engagement with the Internet is related to the reception of information or on "*how the internet mediates the representation of knowledge, the framing of entertainment, and the conduct of communication*". This means that possessing media literacy skills becomes a prerequisite of educating students who are not only able to critically select and evaluate information but mainly to actively participate as democratic citizens. Thus, media literacy "*cannot be conceived solely as a feature of the user but must also be seen as a medium-dependent, a co-production of the interactive engagement between technology and user*" (Livingstone, 2004, pp. 12). Additionally, Bulger and Davison (2018, pp. 14) posit that this "*new engagement includes more active participation by individuals*" while also "*educating on positive action in addition to accurate interpretation*". Students become more informed and more responsible citizens when they understand the importance of media in shaping social, economic, and political issues. As a result, students stop being solely media consumers and start actively contributing to the media ecosystem.

6. Conclusions

As media literacy has been identified by the European Union as a priority for the 21st century, it becomes more obvious that this fundamental competence should be developed not only for the young generation but for individuals of all ages and in a variety of professions and occupations, which makes digital literacy, and consequently media literacy, a primary paradigm of lifelong learning. Although the majority of people use digital tools nowadays, this does not mean that they are also media literate. Owning and utilizing technology is not the same as having developed media literacy and critical thinking skills. For this reason, media literacy should become a core component of modern education.

Dorr (2001) suggests that it is very likely that media literacy will expand from a conceptual point of view as it will have to incorporate multiple perspectives. This means that teachers will have to focus more on activities that promote real-life application scenarios which ultimately encourage students' agency and their active participation. Through these activities, students will be able to link knowledge they acquire during class with their background experience which, in turn, will allow them to take responsibility for their own learning and education.

Despite the fact that EFL teachers sometimes lack enough training and qualification in the area of media literacy, the usage of materials related to media has proved its successful educational potential so far. But, as language teachers, we have the power to assist our students coping with the overwhelming amount of information in English that they can retrieve from media. This is where media literacy is activated so that the students can become more aware of both how media is produced and how they should interpret various messages that they

come across while using traditional media or the Internet. Media literacy skills help students not only enhance their language proficiency, but it also prepares them to become active citizens who support democracy. As Haynes (2004, pp. 62) points out, by using media literacy during the English classes "*students can come away with a more mature ability to question how they form their own attitudes and opinions on a wide variety of social issues [...] while maintaining a healthy skepticism of the media around them*".

Incorporating media literacy in EFL learning for military students enhances language learning through the use of authentic materials and develops critical thinking, ultimately leading to cultural awareness and a better understanding of the world. As the field of EFL education is changing, teachers need to be proactive in finding new resources and keeping up with the new developments by improving both the methods used and the content taught. Although integrating media literacy into EFL classes is a difficult task that calls for interdisciplinary knowledge from the teacher, it is also essential because it guarantees that the students acquire the abilities needed for cross-cultural communication.

Integrating media literacy in military EFL education is an essential part of preparing students for the complexities of modern information warfare. This integration allows educators not only to enhance students' language proficiency, but also their critical thinking. The ability to analyze media critically and to interpret foreign-language sources ultimately can aid students in identifying and countering misinformation and strengthen cross-cultural communication. As media landscapes continue to evolve, continuous updates to media literacy curricula will ensure that military students remain adept at navigating and responding to information challenges.

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