

***From Couch Potatoes to Critical Learners: A Theoretical Framework for
Television Use in EFL/ESL Classrooms.***

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Episode I: Situating the problem: A look at my past and present

Before I start my discussion, I would like to present these two brief vignettes from my experiences as an English learner and teacher back in Colombia:

Vignette 1: Some insights about television ¹ and my English learning (comments made in December 2003)

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| * | "When I was in high school, I used to get out of class at 12:15, and I was back home by 1, had lunch, did homework, and took a nap. By 4 pm, I was ready to watch World Championship Wrestling on ESPN, then NBA today, some Disney stuff... and I did this through high school. If you asked me today what I learned in my English classes at the time, I cannot be so detailed!" |
| * | "I liked basketball, and I wanted to know what was going on, the players' names, the key plays... so I had to pay attention and learn the words." |
| * | "If I heard the expression on TV, I guess it was popular so I tried to find a way to use it in conversation." |

Vignette 2: A conversation with my former seventh grade students.

<p>May 2002</p> <p>Student 1: Where is it that you're going? Raúl: To the University of Illinois. Student 2: Illinois? Where's that? Raúl: Ok, do you guys know Chicago? (Students nod heads affirmatively) Well, Chicago <i>is</i> in Illinois. Where I'm going is a city three hours south of Chicago (at that point, I didn't even want to bother talking about Champaign-Urbana). Student 3: And Chicago is the capital of Illinois? Raúl: No. That would be Springfield. Student 3: Ah, where the Simpsons live, right?</p>

The fact that I can still remember what I watched and learned on television or that my students associated Springfield with *The Simpsons* are not examples of random events. In fact, it shows to some extent how adolescents abroad (in 1988 and 2002) use television as the basis of their reality constructs. Globalization has allowed people everywhere to access information at much faster speeds than they used to, sometimes with very little differences across socio-economical backgrounds, in fact making certain issues of class such as what Bourdieu (1984) described as high/low brow culture more difficult to distinguish. Television viewing might not solve some of these matters, but it makes much blurrier to tell what cultural items belong to

¹ I refer to television throughout the paper, but most of the ideas I will discuss can also be applied to movies. In fact, when I talk about "television," I expect the readers to also assume that movies are included in my discussion. For the sake of economy, I do not mention it, but I thought the caveat was worth it.

which class. Between the mid-eighties and the earlier part of this century, satellite dishes and cable-access television have rapidly spread through residential units and neighborhoods in my hometown, Medellín, Colombia, allowing students to have more access to English outside the classroom. However, I was, probably one of the very first people who would make a public statement about learning English influenced by American television. In the 80s and early 90s, the more legitimized ways to learn English were going to an American-modeled school in town (only accessible to the wealthiest), taking English courses in recognized language institutes, or living in the United States or another English-speaking country, or being there as an exchange student in high school. Back in 1992, when I was an undergraduate student, people did not really consider the satellite dish as a reliable source. Later on in my teaching practice, I came across several students who were extremely fluent partly because they spent several hours per day in front of their TV sets. Some of them had never studied overseas, nor did their schools have a strong English curriculum. This led me to ask whether these youngsters or I were simply geniuses or there was a little more than meets the eye, if there were any explanations as to how we picked up language information from the comfort of our living rooms, and how we can turn these “random acts of geniality” into an event we can integrate to the classrooms.

In fact, the widespread immersion to English media was a Latin American phenomenon at almost the same time. In his study of Mexican youth, Levinson (2001) points out how the influence of media affected the vision of the world these youngsters were building in the late eighties. “What has characterized the growth of San Pablo youth culture above all in the past twenty years has been its increased reliance on the cultural media.” (p.160).

English instruction², and education in general for what matters, cannot stay aside in the discussion of these cultural issues. It needs to constantly rethink its practices and reinvent itself from time to time by providing further challenges to learners other than learning grammar, while

² I will use the terms “English instruction/curriculum/learners” and “EFL instruction/curriculum/learners.” Since the setting I use as a frame of reference is Colombia, where English is a Foreign Language, I ask the reader to assume these terms as synonyms whenever I use them.

aiding in the possibilities they have to construct their own knowledge. In her analysis of adolescence, Lesko (2001) suggested:

“We must move between and against the confident characterizations of youth, which involves including teenagers as *active participants* (not tokens) in educational and other public policy deliberations. I am not just trumpeting one “student voice,” but calling for the imagining of concrete practices in which youth demand and exercise adultlike responsibilities, acknowledging that teenagers are also affected by the commonsense reasoning about their age group” (p.199).

This view of adolescence and how it has to be redefined is also addressed by Grace and Tobin (2002) in terms of how we see children and adolescents as media viewers:

“Children are believed to be hopelessly and helplessly vulnerable to them [i.e. the media]. Such concerns and fears have resulted in a growing body of articles and studies on the relationship between children and the media. Although studies by such media education scholars as Hodge and Tripp (1986) and Buckingham (1990) have shown that children are sophisticated media viewers, a narrow, often distorted, and limiting view of children’s interest in and knowledge about the media persists” (p. 199).

This idea is complemented by another reality that many teachers face, according to Grace and Tobin: “Students often know more than their teachers do about popular television shows, movies, and video games. In this domain, the children are the experts.” (p.199) Teachers need to realize that the expertise students bring to the classroom is just as valid as the one they gained through their studies, and that together they can build a better curriculum. I found that my students had a lot of information about TV shows in English and they in fact incorporated the expressions they heard (as I did when I was a teenager) into their daily language. Joey’s (from *Friends*) “Hey, how you doin’?” or Cartman’s “Oh no, they killed Kenny!” in *South Park*, as well as many other expressions they hear in movies and shows, are included in their language, sometimes not fully aware of the context these expressions carry or the different nuances of their meanings. EFL instruction is not addressing these cultural issues first hand, and that is a reality I felt as part of my daily practice. Talking about television or video is usually reduced to linguistic awareness activities, such as vocabulary practice or pronunciation skills via listening comprehension. In a review of literature for this project, the farthest video was taken was in a proposal by Harmer (2001), in which he considered video useful for “Cross-cultural awareness.” Albeit interesting, I will explain later how it can go further.

Being an English teacher, concerned about learning and teacher education in Colombia and interested in curricular change, I found another good reason to consider this curricular proposal in Kenway and Bullen's question in 'Consuming Children' (2001), "What notions of schools, teachers, pedagogy and curriculum do these changes necessitate?... we think these times require educators to look at schools and kids very differently, to ask new questions, to work in new ways and with different ideas but also to keep the notion of educating to the fore." (p. 189). There is a consensus that English instruction cannot limit itself to the regular means we are accustomed to. After all, our learners' needs have radically changed, whether we really want to open our eyes or not. English television cannot be simply set aside as something we use to 'spice up' the class or make them more varied and dynamic. We need to validate the use of the media in English classes, to make it a better instrument. Belonging to what I would call a "first generation" of English learners via TV, I have a responsibility to help other educators improve how we use television. It is difficult for me to assume that our learners are "couch potatoes," as we sometimes take them when we disregard their experiences as viewers, and think that they are constructing their realities dictated by the mandates of "The Real World," or thinking that Colorado is in fact what "South Park" shows or California is exactly what they see in "Baywatch," when what happens is that they are engaging in a dialog with the TV program, using it to construct their own realities beyond any mandates. In fact, that implies that they need our help now more than ever to help them grow to be even more critical than they are or think they may be. I believe that our EFL learners are not as passive as we may think, and that more than couch potatoes, we need to open our eyes and realize that they are critical viewers, and we need to help them turn into more critical learners.

Episode II: Taking a Step Forward: Why we need a new vision

My reflections on learning and teaching I have done throughout my career and especially over the last two years while in graduate school made me conclude that engaging in a conversation about designing a framework for media literacy in EFL classrooms would be a

good, challenging possibility to revise the curriculum. Nevertheless, I have not really explained why I consider thinking of such an idea would help me explore one of the 'final frontiers' of teaching. To begin with, in my review of literature for this proposal, I found very interesting examples of media literacy projects from all over the world. Brown (1991) mentions some examples of media literacy projects carried out in Latin America, specifically in Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and ... Colombia? To my dismay, it was Uruguay. Not only did I feel terrible that no Colombian institution carried out any research on media literacy or that no examples that might be happening were documented anywhere, but I also noticed that none of these approaches discussed television as part of English learning and development. These two conclusions were also supported by a review of media education projects by Unesco (1984). In that sense, I believe my approach to critical viewing skills within the classroom has not been addressed by many, if any has addressed them at all.

Also, I realized that pleasure *is* a part of learning, provided it is engaging. What makes learning boring is the apparent disconnection between reality and school. I have already addressed that disconnection between reality and writing in the English classes (Mora, 1999) and how we cannot remain stagnant without finding a solution. There are many reasons to be afraid of pleasure, some relate to the idea that it does not contribute to learning at all. Academic pleasure is not about diminishing rigor, but maintaining it in more engaging ways. That, to my belief, would be another contribution this proposal would make that could be thought of a kind of novelty in the approach: Not the inclusion of pleasure, but the lack of fear when having it. Some might argue that bringing television and its intake of popular culture is harmful to the classroom setting. Considine (1992) explains that "When concerned teachers and librarians attempt to do this by integrating mass media into instruction, they are often rebuked and rebuffed by a system that resents the intrusion of popular culture into the school" (p.2). The truth is, we cannot keep believing that schools are 'bubbles' isolated from reality. As Levinson (2001) pointed out, schools and the outer world actually affect one another in an interesting symbiosis we cannot

deny. He stated that societal values are revalued and rewritten in schools and vice versa, engaging in a sort of Deweyan experience, whereby both parties affect each other and change mutually. Media, as the object of serious analysis within the classroom, can in fact allow us to confront local and global values, especially if we do not want our learners to think that European and American values are the model to follow and that (in my case) Latin American or Colombian values are outdated, or that you should actually strive to have an “American” or “British” English accent and that having a local accent is unacceptable or that accents are what make teachers more or less qualified, an assumption that some students still have, oftentimes erroneously fed by local teachers themselves.

Therefore, the English classroom has to become the arena where this clash of values takes place. That, in fact, is a very strong shift of roles. English teachers cannot simply limit their work as providers of knowledge and literacy, or as facilitators of classroom projects that are not meaningful enough or do not have a lasting effect in the learners’ lives. That validates the contribution of this framework. We are dealing with something that will not disappear overtime, especially when modern households have one television set per bedroom, and more TV-related technologies (such as TiVo) are reaching our rooms. Television is part of our homes and our classrooms. We need to learn to deal with its influence better.

Hargreaves (1996) stated that, “a key issue for secondary schools in reforming the curriculum is not just how to generate higher expectations in the diffuse sense that effective schools advocates once called for, but also how to build regular experiences of real and significant challenge into students’ experiences of the secondary school curriculum” (p.85). Hargreaves also argued that there were three factors to be considered for curricular change: Relevance, Imagination, and Challenge. This proposal covers all three factors: It is *relevant* because it addresses the students’ own realities and how they use the media to shape those perceptions. It is *imaginative* because it is an invitation to all teachers to reflect on creative ways to do what others have not done and should be done. And it is *challenging* because it demands of

teachers and students to go beyond things we have done before. This proposal lies under the assumption that, when students are intellectually challenged, they respond (to some extent, educational ideas such as Critical Race Theory dwell within this assumption.) and demand challenging teachers. As I said earlier, this proposal firmly believes that adolescents deserve more credit as critical viewers than we give them, aligning with theorists like Fiske (1987), Jenkins (1992), Arnett and his colleagues (1995), and Lesko (2000), who argue that adolescents and television viewers in general are not passive and are in fact using the media in ways that even the own producers have not considered at all.

Episode III: A Television Framework

I have first stated my case about why we need a different view of television in EFL, yet I have not really discussed what I plan to do. The next two episodes of what I like to call my “theoretical saga” will address this question. I will first present some considerations for my theorization of how EFL learners might use television for their learning purposes. Then, I will discuss some ideas I deem valuable as initial considerations to help us debunk some ideas that television offers, as the entry stage for my ideas on media literacy.

Part I: Dealing with Learning

This first part intends to present some elements offered by various theorists that I have “poached” for my own purposes, and with the very particular agenda of relating them to EFL instruction, since the original texts do not make any explicit references to such.

The Bliss of Poaching

The first concept I related to English learning was that of “[postmodern] poaching” as described by Melrose (1996) and Jenkins (1992). Jenkins (1992), in his discussion of what poaching refers to, explains

“... fans enthusiastically embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience. Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literacy and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use,

reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions.” (p. 18)

Melrose (1996) adds to the idea of poaching,

“In the process of making meaning – and this process occurs in even the most casual interaction with a person, a book, or a blank page – we become shameless poachers, filling our conversation, our reading and our writing with fragments of discourse (verbal and somatic ‘texts’) plundered from fields that belong to the guardians of society and culture.” (p. 173)

How can we relate this idea of poaching to an EFL context? Learners *are* viewers and fans, and they interact with different texts (as Melrose points out), taking what they find more useful. In the case of English, people may watch shows, music videos, and movies and pay attention to what they say, and then they appropriate the expressions and eventually start to use them. I know that some of the idioms I have picked up over the years (which includes sports lingo, for instance) used television as a source. I recall some of my students picking up expressions from MTV’s former cartoon series “Beavis and Butt-head,” and they needed little explanation as to what some of those expressions meant. Students incorporated these expressions as part of their conversations, either mocking them (as in the case of some of my male students using expressions from the movie “Clueless,” which tried to play out with the stereotype of the “Valley girl.”) or using them in real conversations. Some might argue that there is nothing real about a classroom conversation, that they are fictitious attempts to simulate an English-speaking context. I digress. For poachers, the real context in which they use what they picked up from the shows and videos is their own lives. Jenkins (1992) makes a very strong case, in his own research, about “Trekkies,” and argues that their fandom is not isolated from their lives. It is us who think otherwise, and he contends that maybe we are the ones mistaken. In the same token, I argue that if students use the language they poach in my classroom, that is as real as using it elsewhere. In my case, my interactions with my students in English in Colombia, which included what we all poached from television, and what they poached from me (I, too, am a text, and therefore am likely to be poached!) were just as real as my interactions with my classmates and professors (from whom, as shameless as Melrose explains poachers are, I am still poaching.)

There is a second issue in poaching that relates it to learning: The pleasure of watching television, the enjoyment of the text you watch. Barthes (1975) expanding on the idea of bliss, contends, "...the text: it produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am lead to look up often, to listen to something else." (p. 24) Television, thus, can be seen as a text of bliss. Most of the television texts you watch on regular networks do not really intend to teach you anything, especially in the case of EFL. It is not attempting to teach us the language, just giving us the language for our own pleasure. In a way, that is one of the positive effects of television: It gives us the choice to choose what we want to learn, although it is in a way imposing the text we watch, it leaves enough space to learn what we want. This makes in itself the act of poaching so pleasurable: I choose what I want to learn (as opposed to some curricular decisions our students face). After all, we have the choice of changing the channel at any given time, and it is in that sense of freedom that we can learn the language we later use.

Barthes, in a further discussion of the texts, gives us another reason why television offers an extra appeal to learners:

"The more a story is told in a proper, well-spoken, straightforward way, in an even tone, the easier it is to reverse it, to blacken it, to read it inside out (Mme de Ségur read by Sade). This reversal, being a pure production, develops the pleasure of the text." (1975, p. 26)

Barthes complements the argument I have been building so far: Television lends itself to be played with. The style of text and the way the message is conveyed actually allows learners to be freer to build their own agendas, something that they can seldom do with the curriculum, if at all. The fact that I can reverse the text and reread it according to my own interests, which in the case of language learners can be how they use the expressions and how they can appropriate them in opposite contexts to the original message (which is not to be confused with misuse, different contexts require different signifiers), is one of the advantages television can offer us in terms of language acquisition process. Television does not always have particularly overt language

agendas *per se*, and we can use this to our own advantage (they might be related to culture, which I will address later). What EFL learners are doing is benefiting from the pleasure of viewing and the bliss that being in their own room can offer. I insist, however, that this bliss alone cannot really make a meaningful learning experience, as I will expand in my upcoming discussion of heteroglossia.

There is another argument regarding poaching that we need to consider: Is it really legal to poach? If we are talking about computer software or mp3 files, I guess the answer would be simple. However, in the case of language, the line is almost invisible or you do not even bother to acknowledge its very existence. I prefer to look beyond the possible legal implications of poaching language (after all, in that case, we are all guilty as charged) and consider the importance of poaching for a foreign language learner. Learning any language means taking risks, playing with the language, and being open to a multiplicity of sources. Language poachers are aware of these sources, and are willing to learn from them. Not everything is found in the textbooks, and all discourses available are “fair game.” Also, I believe that the school should provide an environment for students to take such risks with the language, and learn how to use the expressions they have poached better. Melrose (1996) states that

“Given a choice between a wholly creative individual with all the creativity of a word processor, and an individual open to the risk of being inscribed on by the discourses of the State, but equally able to poach these same discourses, I know what choice I would make.” (p. 174)

We oftentimes talk about our students becoming risk-takers. They do not need to become, they are already. We need to acknowledge this reality, as long as there are media to pick up information from, we will poach information and expressions which we will then suit to our own needs and contexts. In fact, I believe that we need to learn to poach better as English learners, an idea I will return to when I present the practical stage of the proposal.

Engaging in a dialog: Television and EFL viewers

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia (1981, as cited by Fiske, 1987, and Jenkins, 1992) plays an important role in my attempt to theorize television. Jenkins (1992) defines it as "the conditions against which any creator must struggle in specifying a term's meaning within a particular context." (p. 224). Fiske (1987) refers to heteroglossia to describe television's discourse, stating that television is a pretty good example of heteroglossia since it is first of all composed of a multiplicity of discourses, which in turn are in constant tension with one another. Whenever we talk about heteroglossia, we need to relate it to struggle:

"Writers' mastery over their appropriated texts does not come easy; old meanings are not stripped away without a struggle. Writers can never fully erase the history of their previous use of the complex grid of associations each term sparks in the reader's mind... The finished *text*, then, represents an attempt to coordinate the different materials the writer has appropriated, to evoke or to erase previous meanings, to bestow coherence and consistency." (Jenkins, 1992, p. 224, emphasis in original.)

Heteroglossia, then, in terms of what foreign language learners might deal with, is about how those students make sense of what they are learning or picking up, in a (using another Bakhtinian term) dialogic between their contexts, the messages, and their own selves. Fiske (1987) argues that "Language, and that includes television, cannot be a one-way medium... viewers, differently situated socially, enter into a "dialogue" with the television program, contributing their point of view, their voice, to the exchange of meaning." (p. 90).

As we can see, English television in a foreign society has to negotiate its meaning with the local cultural and social contexts, the students' particular interests, how they conceive culture, and the information they watch. I mentioned earlier that since people have widespread access to similar contents from English-spoken television, some elements of high/low-brow culture are blurred. However, going back to this Bourdieuan conception, those cultural elements from the local setting become part of the negotiation process. A person's cultural capital, then, becomes a factor that plays out on how this person engages in the dialogic with the texts. The issues of social class and culture, as described by Bourdieu (1984), will not disappear. They will simply define how different people dialog with the texts, what they poach from it, and the new texts they make.

Heteroglossia, in the end, is what helps us systematize the act of poaching, and finally situate it better in the context. Both Jenkins and Fiske make cases for how these two ideas are woven. "Each social group relates differently to the linguistic community, and each is in a constant struggle to draw words and meanings into its own subculture in order to reaccent them for its own purposes." (Fiske, 1988, p. 89) Poaching, unless you place it in a particular situation and give it a specific agenda, is an isolated act. It gains more value once it is contextualized. The expressions I learned on television only became effective once I was able to use them as part of my discourse, once I was able to give them my own meaning within a context, and once I shared them with others. Once I combined the different voices involved in this discourse (mine, the television's, and those of my peers), did the text become meaningful. In alignment with Jenkins (1992), I see poaching and heteroglossia as complementary items. Only through the socialization of what I poach does it become more valid.

I also find validity in Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia and dialog to justify my argument that when I speak in English in a non-English speaking country, it is just as real as doing so in the United States, England, or Australia, which contradicts the popular belief that people study English so that they can use it overseas, some which many EFL teachers still believe in. We are preparing people to use the language in different contexts, to appropriate it as theirs. In a heteroglot society, you use languages and discourses to make more sense of the world you live in. Since I use English to access information, that makes the context real, and helps me make more sense of my own reality. It helps me understand that it is not any better or worse, just different.

Part 2: Dealing with Culture

So far I have talked about some of the elements that comprise my theory of how EFL learners can make sense of what they watch on television and how they use it for very specific purposes. Now I want to discuss some elements of television and how we can decipher and debunk some ideas that television might try to impose upon us as viewers. Being able to "read

between the lines” does not happen in blissful ignorance. You need to be aware of some elements present, and some of this awareness actually takes place in the classroom.

Television as Myth

Barthes (1972) offers an interesting explanation of how myths operate: myths are defined by how they convey the messages, which are directly aimed at the “myth-consumer,” but never in a completely direct fashion. Myths resort to more subtle ways to convince you that their message really makes sense. They want to cloud you such that you do not doubt that they are not offering you just one signifier, and they expect you to construct your own reality from the information they conveyed. The myth takes the historical reality the context feeds it and turns it into a revised version, which in turn it sells as the actual truth.

In this sense, and although Barthes does not directly address it, television can be conceived as a myth: It has a particular way to convey the message, playing out with a *portion* of the reality it stems from and then tries to convince the audiences that, in fact, reality is what they portray. So, as a myth, television presents us a series of portrayals of different groups that only focus on one portion of reality. Harris (1999) analyzes (albeit not under Barthes’s lens) how television portrays the group to which I belong, College students:

“According to movies, television shows, and advertising, how do college students spend their time? Perhaps foremost is drinking beer and other alcoholic beverages. Sometimes excessive and destructive behaviors are presented as normal... Where is the studying? Where is the struggle to earn enough money for the next month’s rent? Where is the work in finding a job when you graduate?” (p. 69)

Harris adds, “Some people in some communities have limited interaction with college students, and this media image becomes reality.” (p. 69). This is all but one example of how television turns a myth into reality: It relies on the fact that sometimes you do not have enough access to the reality to compare and contrast. It relies on the fact that, although you might be an active viewer, you may not have enough access to information to actually deconstruct that reality. (In fact, one of the projects I proposed in the appendices deals with this particular issue of college students in the US)

So, how can we deal with a myth? Barthes was kind enough to provide us with the blueprints to address the situation: "It thus appears that it is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside... the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this deconstructed myth will in fact be a mythology." (1972, p. 135, emphasis in original) In the practical stage of this paper, I will return to this idea and how to construct these artificial myths. Barthes's argument is pretty simple: We have to be aware that this is just one possible vision of reality, that there is more than this rather simplistic vision that television wants to sell us. Active viewers can also be made, and the more you empower them, the easier it will be to play with the myths.

Negotiating Meaning

Part of understanding the myths of television and the act of poaching has a lot to do with how you negotiate meaning with the television texts. Fiske (1987) argues, "No text is simply a pattern of signifiers; a text is a bearer of meanings, and relating signifiers to meanings is not just a matter of supplying them with appropriate meanings... But within those terms there is considerable space for the negotiation of meaning." (p. 84) However, just like Barthes's myth, it helps to know how to negotiate meaning. Television is a polysemic text, however, that polysemic reading is not something the text is going to entice you to do. It might actually lure you otherwise. Fiske adds, "We can then characterize the television text as a site of struggle between the dominant ideology working to produce a closed text by closing off the opportunities it offers for resistive readings, and the diversity of audiences who, if they are to make the text popular, are constantly working to open it up to new meanings." (1987, p. 94)

Fiske contends that one of the ways in which you can open up the text to find that covert polysemy is by recognizing the devices that go against the text, causing a clash of discourses, which in turn creates new meanings: Irony, metaphor, jokes, contradiction, and excess. They are all framed in terms of expressing one idea by using something else. This "something else" in the case of the EFL scenario can include the local culture and the learners' own experiences. The

main point of negotiating meaning, as a possible step to debunk the myths television offers, is to make it collide against other discourses: We can use, for instance, Harris's (1999) example of the college students as the basis of a discussion of whether or not, if that were the whole truth, any parent overseas would allow their children to attend a university, or if a professional would actually consider graduate school in such environments. This recognition of the contradictions and ironies of the message (they want to advertise college as a wonderful experience, but another reading might refrain you from actually going there) is a way to find those readings the text refuses to unveil by itself. This again relates to the ideas on heteroglossia I discussed earlier, and the importance of situating the texts we are negotiating within certain contexts. A true negotiation of meaning of television is not an isolated act, and the end goal of negotiating meaning is not to leave the learner in a disadvantaged situation vis-à-vis the texts.

Television offers a series of messages that the viewers have to deal with, and for which they have particular agendas. However, the negotiation process they have to engage in on a daily basis with the message can be a much better process if the curriculum itself offers ways to make them more cognizant of the different readings you can make of television. The next section intends to take a more practical look as to how to integrate these elements into the curriculum.

Episode IV: Media Literacy in the EFL Curriculum

Defining Media Literacy

Media Literacy is the vehicle through which I plan to carry out my proposal. But, what is media literacy? Worsnop (1994) defines it as “the skills of experiencing, interpreting/analyzing, and making media products” (p.x). Considine and Haley (1992) state that media literacy should enable students “to comprehend the media and to analyze and evaluate media messages. In addition, they should be able to design and produce media products that successfully communicate information and feelings” (p.12). Complementing these definitions, Schwartz and Matzkin (1999) also add that “Teaching children and youth the skills of how to use, discriminate, and enjoy the mass media, particularly television, should begin early in their primary

education.” (p.205). Media literacy, as an integrated proposal, should cover all ages, and the school and home settings. I see media literacy about taking a more critical look at how we are using TV in the classroom, what our students are picking up from it, how they can benefit better from it in a linguistic and cultural sense. In accordance with Harris (1999), “the contemporary emphasis is more on empowerment for choice rather than protection from some pernicious influence.” (p. 256)

Since I do not want to be unrealistically ambitious, I will eliminate the idea of devising products Worsnop and Considine & Haley talked about. Even though it is pretty interesting, I would rather limit my proposal at this time to the elements of analysis and evaluation. I want English learners to be critical of the TV they will watch in class first before I ask them to produce their own media.

Media Literacy in the Classroom

The first concern regarding Media Literacy is how to articulate it within the EFL curriculum. Considine (2000) also had a similar concern,

“Building a bridge between media literacy concerns and the traditional curriculum is likely to be most successful when we approach the discussion of compatibility by addressing curriculum areas that would represent the line of least resistance” (Teens, Substance Abuse and Media Messages, ¶ 1).

In this case, the “line of least resistance” would be the easiest way to bring TV input and making it the basis of further language practice in the EFL classroom. As I realized a few years ago (Mora, 1999), Project Work was a feasible alternative to bring real life into the classroom³. Fried-Booth (1990) also states how Project Work is such an alternative:

“Often, there is a gap between the language the students are taught and the language they in fact require. It is this gap that project work can help to bridge” (p.5)

Projects can be easily integrated into the syllabus, as long as you take your time to reflect on the means to do so. In fact, the proposal implies designing sets of culturally-based units, transcending Harmer’s idea of “Cross-cultural awareness.” That only implies noticing that there are other things out there. I want my students to read critically the “Cross-cultural issues,”

³ Back then, I used Project Work as part of a series of units to develop writing skills.

confront the media portrayals with the reality and then construct their own concepts. Or, as Brown (1991) states in his description of a curricular design by Dr. Aimee Dorr and her associates, “to help children assess the reality of TV content, to compare it with information from other sources, and finally to evaluate that content” (p.153).

Obviously, the next question would be, “What about their language learning?” Some might say that projects or critically reading reality are far too ambitious ideas for adolescents whose first language is not English. To begin with, this framework does not forget the second language reality, nor does it consider it a limitation or a liability. Critically reading reality is something you can do regardless of the proficiency level in a foreign language. Granted, an advanced learner has more possibilities to express his/her ideas than a beginner due to more vocabulary and fluency. Nonetheless, depth of ideas can be achieved regardless of your level. Depth is not proportional to amount of vocabulary. As I said before, these class projects will be conceived bearing in mind different proficiency levels, so that the students can make articulate critiques of what they watch and confront it with their reality using all their background knowledge. It also bears in mind that adolescents have more access to information and, at least in my local context, have more access to linguistic input than a decade ago. Maybe it was we the teachers who stayed seeing them as if we still were teaching a decade ago.

The projects will be devised based primarily on age, catering to particular interests adolescents have at certain ages. For instance, a project that intends to confront the stereotypes about American colleges with the reality while offering students a chance to compare and contrast American and Colombian colleges would not be appealing to a student in the sixth grade, but definitely a junior (grade 10 in Colombia) or a senior (grade 11) would find a lot of insights on that one⁴. On the other hand, watching TV commercials about toys in order to critique how they affect the way children see things can be an interesting challenge for a group of twelve-year-olds. Both these examples would be part of a broader unit, in which there will be discussion of

⁴ I will present an example of this project in the appendices.

linguistic concepts, vocabulary, and grammar, while expanding to cultural perceptions of a foreign culture and the local one.

The choice of topics would be linked to what we can watch on American-based television, and that leaves plenty of room to choose from. Advertisements, sports, fashion, schools, family are areas we can address as part of projects in which comparison and contrast as the basis of the refinement of concepts will be the common denominator. All these projects will be designed so that students have to practice the language using different resources: They will include:

- interviewing or surveying
- library/online searches
- preparation of written materials, and
- presentations to different audiences.

In fact, as Fried-Booth (1990) pointed out, “In project work the skills are not treated in isolation, but combined” (p.8). That is another advantage of devising media literacy units as projects: They open chances for multi-skills practice.

This media literacy proposal also offers some considerations regarding how to deconstruct television and tackle cultural issues. The discussion on cultural issues draws from Barthes’s (1972) idea about demythifying the myth, Jenkins’s (1992) reminder that technology has to be placed to the service of fans, or in our case, teachers and students (“Videotape expands control over the programs, allowing us to view as often or in whatever context desired.” (p.71). “This [new] relationship to the broadcast image allows the fans’ liminal movement between a relationship of intense proximity and one of more ironic distance,” (p. 73)), and Fiske’s (1987) idea of reading the texts as polysemic. In some communities, most schools have access to a VCR and a TV set, and in many others, EFL teachers have access to more audiovisual equipment. In addition, this empowers students, as they can choose the material they are going to work with.

Some of the projects that we can design are based on Jenkins's (1992) "ten ways to rewrite a television show" (pp. 162-177): Recontextualization, Expanding the series timeline, Refocalization, Moral realignment, Genre shifting, Cross overs (playing with different texts to write a new one), Character dislocation (giving characters alternate identities), Personalization, and Emotional Intensification (I leave out the tenth, Eroticization, in order to avoid extreme controversy around the proposal, at least for some grades). This rewriting allows the students, if not to create their own media, at least to reverse the roles, and manipulate the media and direct the messages it might send. (Couture (n.d.), for instance, offers some examples as to how to use Jenkins's ideas in a global context in a media literacy unit with Grade 11 students)

A second consideration about language learning relates to the previous discussion of poaching, and the idea that the EFL curriculum should actually benefit from this situation. Instead of disregarding poaching, we should teach our students (and even we ourselves should learn) how to poach better. In his discussion of learning strategies, Mayer (2002) talks about *mnemonic strategies*. These strategies actually align with the idea of schema "knowledge structures or frameworks that organize and individual's theory for people and events." (Harris, 1999, p. 26) (I actually argue that mnemonic strategies actually count on schemas to really operate). When you watch a TV show or a movie, you do a lot of association by relating the expressions to the scene or situation in which you heard them, providing a solid point of reference. This idea of mnemonic strategies also draws upon the ideas of Atkinson and Raugh (as cited in Meyer, 2002, p. 144) and their concepts of "acoustic link" (there is a correlation between the word and what you hear, you can relate word and pronunciation) and "imagery link." (There is a context, a scene, a whole situation you can use to remember the expression). The idea of developing (or fine-tuning) poaching skills as part of the EFL curriculum is an attempt to address some of the questions about how to better benefit from TV in the classroom as a more effective learning tool. The vocabulary and expressions, and even pronunciation keys are present there, sometimes the problem is that we do not know what we are looking for. This work on poaching skills, in the end, is another way to

help students and teachers negotiate the content of the texts they are watching, and it even helps you address how to negotiate the curriculum with your students. Poaching, we have seen, is empowering, and so should the curriculum.

However, relying on television is not enough, nor is it limiting the strategies to how to pick up more information. You also need to clarify the different scenarios under which what is poached can be used. They can include geographical areas, gender, race, or social groups. Sometimes television and movies do not make clear references to those. In my reflection about different activities related to vocabulary, last year I reflected on one activity I designed in 1997 for an advanced Vocabulary Building class I taught for several years. It was based on the film "Reality Bites," in which I asked my students to try to infer the meaning of a series of idiomatic expressions found in the dialogs. As a linguistic and listening exercise, it proved to be challenging. Nevertheless, a further cultural discussion was missing. We never discussed the cultural background of the expressions, or who would be most likely to use them. Another example I can think of for using slang as a means of cultural awareness in the use of language was a class a former student of mine in high school taught about profanity, back in 1998. The outcome was interesting, even unexpected for some: I followed their language use for about a month, and they seemed to be cursing far less than they used to.

Discussing dangerous language should be part of the class. They do not need to learn the words in class, after all movies and music do that job very well, and adolescents keep showing us they are more effective as poachers. Our responsibility as educators is to discuss with them that dangerous language is not to be used lightly, and if necessary, talk about when it might be socially acceptable and when it definitely is not.

The last issue I would like to address is that regarding *assessment*. As Hargreaves (1996) concludes in his chapter on assessment and evaluation,

"This chapter has pointed to the importance of establishing a broad and balanced range of assessment strategies in order to capture the many different purposes of assessment, such as those of accountability, certification, student motivation, and effective diagnosis" (p. 138)

If we are dealing with class projects as side companions of class instruction, we need a wide array of assessment alternatives. In the case of EFL instruction, we have to bear in mind that we want to balance *quality of contents* and *accuracy in language use*. In order to assess each of them, I propose a combination of criteria for quality and accuracy⁵, ranging from excellent to poor and a description of each. I also propose making the criteria public to the students, as they would be involved in *self-assessment* and *peer assessment*, the two other components of the entire process, in addition to the teacher's assessment. It would be illogical altogether to present an innovative proposal that does not bear in mind the students within the assessment process. In fact, taking their opinions into account in all stages but this one would be a terrible mistake and the loss of valuable information. Furthermore, asking students to assess the process (which would obviously include providing feedback to improve further projects) they and their peers did makes them more active participants of the process. Or, as Hargreaves (1996) would say, "When teachers work to promote student independence, they are really teaching students to be responsible for their own learning and giving them the tools to undertake it wisely and well" (p. 153).

Challenges for Teachers

What would a proposal like this require of the EFL teacher? To begin with, it is an invitation to be open-minded. We are going to visit the reality our adolescents live, not the one we lived, so we would have to shift our roles, and understand that adolescents would be, as Eisner (1991) would say, the "connoisseurs" and we are the "learners," culture-wise. Language-wise, the tension between *connoisseurs* and *learners* would be a constant shift. The school needs to constantly validate the truths adolescents possess, not to disregard them by saying they are "nothing but raging hormones." We as teachers have to understand that their constructs are not necessarily driven by philosophy but by the moment they live. It is our responsibility to provide

⁵ Examples of these criteria will be included in the appendices.

them with tools for further their empowerment vis-à-vis the media. Making room for that analysis, in this case, in the English classroom, is a way for them to grasp a better understanding of the advantages a second language provides: The fact that I can question reality from two different cultures without letting the foreign one distort how I value and appreciate my own.

It would also require for the teachers to be better informed. A proposal that involves culture within the classroom demands being up-to-date on language and culture. Some may say the resources are not available. I would reply to those that it just takes a little while longer to find the information, but it is worth it. The Internet can be a very valuable source of information. Also, if our students are using it, should we not as well?

Another advantage I found in this approach is the fact that teachers and eventually parents can take a closer look at the reality our adolescents receive via TV, so we can help them better. As Considine (1992) stated,

“Whether we like it or not, these elements of popular culture construct representations of the world and serve as socializing agencies, providing young people with beliefs about behaviors and the world. If they derive information from these sources, it is important for parents and teachers to know what these messages tell them” (p.2)

It does not imply that we are yielding before MTV. Instead, we are taking that reality into account and using it in our favor. We can help them make better constructions of reality than the ones “Jackass” or “Friends” can actually invite to do. In fact, adolescents are always constructing their reality at a faster pace than we at times do. Livingston (1990) actually argues that

“...the point is that viewers must inevitably ‘do’ something with the text, but they are likely to draw upon their *formidable resource of knowledge and experience* to do so, and creativity of habitual response will be a function of the relationships between the structures of the text, the social knowledge of the viewer and the mode of interaction between them (critical or referential, mindless or mindful, motivated or apathetic)” (p. 192, my emphasis).

This cultural critique approach in EFL takes for granted that our adolescent students bring to class that “formidable resource of knowledge and experience” which cannot be disregarded, but meaningfully incorporated into the curricular setting. Students really appreciate

teachers who have a concern for their world. They are even willing to comment on that, provided you are not being judgmental.

Episode V: Final Considerations

Rethinking the curriculum is a practice that teachers have been doing for as long as teaching has existed. Many have chosen to do it once they close their classroom doors, as I did too. Hargreaves (1996), stated that “Teachers are the ultimate school reformers. Attempts at changing schools will have little or no impact on students unless they affect how teachers teach and young people learn” (p.150). If we do not direct all our efforts to make class instruction something our students and ourselves as teachers benefit on a daily basis and help us shape our future, we are wasting precious time.

Dewey (1949) referred to *transaction* as a process of inquiry and widening of our knowledge sources, in connection to our behavior, our context, and the texts we read. Television is a text that keeps gaining influence. We need to learn to read it better, to play with it, to even mold the texts to our particular realities. Adolescents are doing this, and it is time we follow suit and maybe teach them how to make the best out of the medium, not only at home, but in our classrooms. They are no longer simple couch potatoes: They are critical viewers and learners of their own reality, who seem to find more and more ways to rewrite it.

I owe a great deal to television. After all, it helped me shape my English in ways I doubt I would have been able to otherwise. On the other hand, I know it is not enough. It will never replace the insights you can get from interacting to people, whether it is by being in a classroom or dating someone whose first language is not Spanish. I am certain I would have profited more from what TV had to offer to me had my teachers spent some time discussing cultural issues I watched on HBO or ESPN instead of repeating the same list of verbs in the past tense every year. Many do not remember what they learned in their English class, but will never forget their favorite movie line. My point is, schooling is a part of life, a very important one, and it cannot be place itself on the sideline. It has to be next to real life, complementing it.

This is part of my ongoing attempt to improve the connection between the classroom and the world, the media, and those who use it. I hope the insights I just provided in these lines will be useful to those teachers who have students using television as a learning companion. This is just part of my reflections and ideas. I have never considered this work as finished. After all, what I am doing is setting a path for further research and work on how people around the world are learning and interacting with the media. I have never believed I am the only one, and eventually I will try to find more examples I can use for inspiration.

Television will never replace teachers, but we can use its help. After all, there is one thing no cable network anywhere in the world can do that almost any caring teacher will do for his/her students: Be there to lend them a hand and walk the distance with them. And, if while we do that we can change the curriculum while we reinforce and validate our local cultures, it is an effort worth going the extra mile.

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Appendix A: Draft of Class Project

“American Colleges: Are they really like that?”

Abstract: Ever since John Belushi starred in “Animal House” (1978), Television and movies have always depicted American colleges as places where homework seems to be the last thing you do, unless you are an exchange student. Though social life is an important part of what goes on, it is definitely not the only thing, and grades and term papers actually take most of undergraduate and graduate students' time and efforts. This project wants to offer international high school students (Colombian, in my case) a forum to confront the distorted views from the media so they can construct a more accurate reality about college life in the United States while they make more sense of how local colleges are structures. An analysis of facts about college life will be conducted via readings and interviews. Also, a discussion of differences between colleges in both countries will be presented.

Purposes:

- To discuss the media stereotypes of American colleges depicted in motion pictures and confront them with the reality.
- To compare American and Colombian colleges, in order to establish similarities and differences.

Age/Grade: This activity is suitable for students in grades 10 and 11 in high school.

Length of unit/project: To be determined by teachers.

Suggested activities to develop within the project:

- Media projection: Students will initially work on selected excerpts from “Animal House” (1978), “Van Wilder” (2000). They can also watch “PCU” (1994) in its entirety. Prior discussion of impressions students have on American colleges can be included.
- Interviews to other students about stereotypes about American colleges.

- Interviews to people who have studied at American universities (they can contact local schools of education for such information), students in English majors about their impressions on American and Colombian colleges, or (if possible) Americans residing in town or Colombians currently studying abroad to find out about their impressions on college (design of interview protocol required).
- Internet search: College myths and facts, visits to U.S. university web pages
- Written reports or poster sessions on their findings about American colleges vs. prior stereotypes, as well as similarities and differences between colleges in Colombia and the United States. They have to make references to both the movies they saw, articles they read, and conducted interviews.

Appendix B: Assessment Criteria for Quality of Contents and Accuracy in Language

Use within the Projects (Proposal) ⁶

1. Quality of Contents (Inspired by Dr. Mark Dressman's C&I 407 AC Course Evaluation Criteria – Fall 2002 – University of Illinois)

- **Excellent:** Student contributions are meaningful and thoughtful; student displays a respectful attitude towards his/her classmates' opinions; his/her work has solid elements of analysis beyond simple expression of emotions.
- **Satisfactory:** Student contributions are thoughtful; student displays a respectful attitude towards his/her classmates' opinions; his/her work usually covers the topic at hand and merely offers a report.
- **Fair:** Student makes occasional contributions; student sometimes displays disrespectful attitudes toward his/her classmates' opinions; his/her work shows little research, further elaboration of issues was missing or limits him/herself to expressing emotions.
- **Poor:** Student seldom makes contributions and shows no preparation; students displays disrespectful attitudes toward his/her classmates; his/her work shows no research and no elements of analysis are present.

2. Accuracy in Language

- **Excellent:** Student uses vocabulary and expressions to state his/her ideas beyond the average class content. His/Her discourse has a natural flow and little pronunciation faults do not affect message.
- **Satisfactory:** Student shows no difficulty with vocabulary and expressions related to class content. His/Her fluency is usually clear and little pronunciation faults do not affect message.
- **Fair:** Student has a few difficulties with vocabulary and expressions discussed in class. Minor faults in fluency and pronunciation affect message in some occasions.
- **Poor:** Student cannot use basic vocabulary and expressions discussed in class. Faulty pronunciation and fluency affect message.

⁶ I will use the words: Excellent, Satisfactory, Fair, and Poor, as that is the way school assessment is carried out in Colombia.