

# Teaching Media Literacy to ESL and EFL Students in the Age of COVID-19

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**Joshua Gaston**

*Webster University*

## **Abstract**

Media literacy education is a field that is fraught with disagreement over definitions, approaches, principles, and purposes, but teaching media literacy is arguably needed now more than ever before, especially for ESL and EFL students. From the research available, it appears as though many ESL and EFL students are not taught media literacy in their home countries. Additionally, much of the research that does exist in regards to teaching media literacy to ESL and EFL students focuses on forms of media that are no longer relevant to most learners. Since ESL and EFL teachers support the development of their students' English-language skills, it is justifiable that at least some of the responsibility of media literacy education should fall on their shoulders. The widespread transition to virtual learning as a result of COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity for ESL and EFL teachers to teach media literacy to their students. However, because this period also presents numerous challenges to the public's collective media literacy skills, it is imperative that teachers integrate media literacy education into their pedagogy.

## **Keywords**

media literacy, ESL, EFL, COVID-19

## **Background**

Media literacy has been recognized as a necessary set of skills for students to develop for 21<sup>st</sup>-century life and work (Battelle for Kids, 2019). While there have been disagreements over definitions and approaches (Hobbs, 2011), modern conceptualizations of media literacy include a type of 'critical' approach (Hobbs, 2005), including those applied to ESL and EFL classrooms. However, there seems to be a scarcity of research regarding best practices for teaching critical media literacy to ESL and EFL populations in spite of their being a population potentially more prone to English-language misinformation and disinformation. Furthermore, what research is available does not address the current media literacy crises involving internet-mediated technology, and especially that of social media. Considering both the importance of accessing reputable streams of information during the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden transition from face-to-face learning to virtual and online learning, the author will advocate for teaching ESL and EFL populations critical media literacy by engaging them on the very online media platforms they use in their everyday life.

## **Definition**

Media literacy can be difficult to define. However, Aufderheide and Firestone's (1993) definition of media literacy as "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific

outcomes” (p. 6) sets a foundation for the future development of media literacy. One definition that was derived from Aufderheide and Firestone’s definition states that media literacy is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms” (Hobbs, 2004, p. 43; Martens, 2010, p. 2). While this is the most prominently used definition of media literacy today, many researchers and organizations continue to expand upon it. The Center for Media Literacy, for example, states that 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” (Jolls & Thoman, 2008, p. 22).

Many researchers have adapted their definitions of media literacy to add aspects of critical literacy. According to Hobbs (2005), most modern conceptions of media literacy now involve a “type of ‘critical’ literacy based on reflection, analysis, and evaluation, not only of the content and structural elements of the specific media texts but of the social, economic, political, and historical contexts in which messages are created, disseminated, and used by audiences” (p. 866). This definition of media literacy rejects an apolitical approach to media literacy education and necessitates that students engage media through a sociohistorical lens in which they can explore “how power and information are always linked” (Share, 2015, p. 14).

### ***Approach***

Since many modern conceptions of media literacy so often involve a type of “critical” literacy (Hobbs, 2005), it is no surprise that critical media literacy is the dominant approach to teaching media literacy. While there are at least four distinct approaches to teaching media literacy (Kellner, 1998), only critical media literacy will be addressed for the purposes of this article since it seems to appear most prominently in the literature for both general student populations and for ESL and EFL student populations.

Share (2015) argued that critical media literacy is the only approach to media literacy education that can “help marginalized students see the structures of oppression, analyze the role of hegemony in shrouding those structures, and find agency in the act of becoming subjects who can express their voices to challenge racism, sexism, classism, and all forms of oppression” (p. 42). Essentially, Share and others believe that critical media literacy is the only approach that has the potential to empower students.

This approach has direct applications to ESL and EFL students, and especially those who come from marginalized communities. One exemplary use of critical media literacy education with ESL students was described in Choudhury and Share (2012). In this study, Choudhury asked Los Angeles middle school students, most of whom were Hispanic and over one-third were English language learners, to analyze and critique representations of their communities in newspaper images. The students were then tasked with walking through their communities and taking photographs, interviewing people, and writing notes. Subsequently, they analyzed that data and co-constructed alternative representations of themselves and their communities. This study and others, such as Arikan (2002), Gruba (2007), Grigoryan and King (2008), and Hobbs et al. (2015), show the transformative and empowering potential of a critical approach to media literacy education for ESL and EFL populations.

In spite of the studies mentioned above, there is a limited amount of research on approaches to integrating media literacy education into ESL or EFL classrooms. Nonetheless, the critical media literacy approach that Share, Hobbs, and other researchers advocate for does indeed seem to be the approach that is most often applied by ESL and EFL-context researchers. However, what literature is available focuses on using source texts from outdated forms of media for today’s young

learners, such as TV or print media. If young English language learners are going to develop modern media literacy skills and become responsible and critical consumers of media, then they must be engaged with media they most often access in their everyday lives. Recent studies have demonstrated that the media literacy issues most pertinent to today's young learners are not as relevant to TV or print media; instead, they are most relevant to digital and social media.

### **Current State of Media Literacy**

The current issues in media literacy should still have as much to do with “analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (Share, 2015, p. 14) as they did before, but the most pressing problems are more rudimentary: students of all ages simply cannot differentiate between reputable and disreputable sources or between information and misinformation online.

Stanford researchers McGrew et al. (2017) reported rather disheartening results from their research into the media literacy skills of American middle school, high school, and college students (7,804 student responses total). When tasked with distinguishing between a site's news stories and native advertising (advertising that is made to look like editorial content), nearly 70 percent of high school students believed that the native advertisement was authentic content. Only 25 percent of high school students could distinguish between verified and unverified sources on Facebook, even though a blue checkmark is used to identify verified sources on that platform. Lastly, college students were tasked with comparing the websites of two organizations of pediatricians, one reputable (The American Academy of Pediatricians) and another one a splinter group that exists on the fringes (American College of Pediatricians). More than half of the college students concluded that the latter, designated as a hate group by Southern Poverty Law Center, was the more reliable source. These were college students from what has been one of the most prestigious American universities since its founding in 1885: Stanford University.

The issues of media literacy among middle school, high school, and university students highlighted by McGrew et al. (2017) are even more serious when considered with other recent research. Recent Pew Research data showing that, among American teenagers aged 13–17, 45 percent self-reported being online “almost constantly” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018, para. 1). Furthermore, 78 percent of Americans under the age of 50 are now getting their news through social media (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). What these three studies tell us is that young learners are spending a majority of their lives online, that they get a majority of their news online, and that they do not have the media literacy skills to identify reputable sources or valid information.

Despite all of the above suggesting an exigent need for media literacy education, there is “no standardized national curriculum or curricular guidance in the United States for media literacy, nor is there dedicated funding for supporting teacher professional development in this area (Lemish, 2015; Potter 2013). Rather, there are several states who have statewide standards related to media literacy (He, 2019) and most teacher training in media literacy takes place at the grassroots level (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

It is unclear to what extent the above studies included ESL student populations, if at all. Unfortunately, there do not seem to be much research available regarding the internet and social media usage, news-gathering methods, or media literacy skills of ESL and EFL populations. However, Bakla's (2019) study of the digital nativeness and productivity among 97 Turkish EFL university students and 30 American ESL university students shows that nearly all participants had access to the internet and nearly half of all participants used the internet 3 to 4 hours a day. What is more, the study showed that 20 percent of the EFL students and 43 percent of the ESL students

spent 5 hours or more a day on the internet. Although Bakla's (2019) study was rather small and not focused on the students' media literacy skills, it demonstrated that ESL and EFL students spend a great deal of their time online.

### **State of Media Literacy Education for ESOL Populations**

As mentioned above, there simply does not seem to be large-scale data regarding the internet and social media usage, news-gathering methods, or media literacy skills of ESL and EFL populations. However, according to Lessenski's (2019) research with the European Policies Initiative of the Open Society Institute of Sofia, there is a wide disparity of media literacy within the European Union as it concerns resilience potential to fake news. The index Lessenski created shows Turkey and most Balkan countries scoring much lower than Northern European countries such as Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Thus, it is apparent that at least a subset of ESL and EFL students may be in desperate need of the same modern media literacy skills that the students in McGrew et al.'s (2017) study so severely lack.

There appears to be little information or research into the existence or extent of media literacy education outside of European and Western, English-speaking countries (Share, 2015), such as New Zealand, the UK, Australia, and the United States. As one example, Argentina has been cited for having a media literacy program that went national in 2000 and which now exists in every primary and secondary school (Share, 2015). In Finland, primary and secondary school students examine and interpret media messages, engage in critical analysis of media messages, and learn how to "develop their own independent opinions about messages transmitted in mass media" (Lederer, 1988, para. 2). Hong Kong was also noteworthy in having 200 schools and organization which had media education programs by 2003 (Share, 2015).

To reiterate, there does not seem to be a prevalence of evidence suggesting that most countries even have media literacy education integrated into their national curricula. The reasons for the lack of widespread media literacy education are manifold, but this is all the more reason for ESL and EFL educators to integrate media literacy education into their language instruction.

### ***Need for Media Literacy Education for ESL and EFL Students***

There are three primary reasons why media literacy education is so important for ESL and EFL students. The first reason why it's so important for ESL and EFL learners is that media literacy education does not seem prevalent in most countries. Considering that nation-wide or nationally mandated media literacy education seems largely relegated to Central, Northern, and Western European and Western English-speaking countries based on the literature available, it could be inferred that media literacy education is not being conducted in many other countries around the world. Therefore, ESL and EFL students may not be exposed to media literacy-integrated curricula in their respective public educational systems.

The second reason is interrelated with the first. There are now more speakers of English who speak it as an additional language than those who speak it as a first language. It is estimated that 1.75 billion people speak English at a "useful" level which is approximately 1 in 4 of the world's population. It is a far greater number than the combined population of all Western English-speaking countries that one commonly thinks of as English-speaking countries, including the Australia, the UK, and the United States among others (Neeley, 2012). This means that there are millions and millions of students who learn English as an additional language and have the linguistic tools necessary to access endless amounts of information in the target language. The primary reason that this is important is that if their students are developing their linguistic abilities

to access English-language information and they have no educational background in media literacy, then they may be left prone to misinformation and disinformation once they have they have achieved a functional level of language proficiency.

The third reason why media literacy interrelated with the previous two. Based on the evidence available, it seems that young ESL and EFL students exhibit much of the same behaviors as other young learners: they spend much of their time online and access much of their information through social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Bakla, 2019; Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Furthermore, one survey found that fifty percent of teenagers are getting their news from YouTube and sixty percent of those teens say they are more likely to get their news from “celebrities, influencers, and personalities rather than from news organizations utilizing the platform” (Common Sense Media, 2019, para. 3). By default, therefore, young ESL and EFL students could be accessing more misinformation and disinformation from disreputable sources on a daily basis compared with their parents or older members in their communities.

### ***Approaches to Critical Media Literacy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century ESL and EFL Learners***

Unfortunately, there simply does not seem to be much research regarding best practices on teaching critical media literacy to ESL or EFL students in the way that centers media as it is currently conceived as a multi-platform, multi-directional stream of information primarily accessed through the internet and predominantly through social media.

First, it is important to note that it is insufficient to teach EFL and ESL students *with* media. They also need to be taught *about* media (Arikan, 2002). This is an important distinction to make. ESL and EFL educators often ask students to engage with authentic texts (articles, advertisements, videos, and audio segments) to examine textual characteristics, develop receptive skills, or to analyze the discourse. However, educators more rarely use media to teach students *about* media. For students to understand the ways in which the media operates, and how it can be used for malicious purposes, they need to be taught *about* the media: how media messages are constructed, how those messages represent ideologies and promote certain values, and how the form is intertwined with those constructions. Furthermore, teaching students *about* media needs to be focused on digital media in order to fit how students most often access information.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of research and descriptions of teaching practice regarding media literacy for ESL or EFL students seem to be focused on teaching students to take a critical approach toward representation and messaging in older forms of media, like TV and newspapers. For example, Grigoryan and King (2008) asked their student participants to engage magazine advertisements with *adbusting*, the practice of creating satirical advertisements that mimic the form but subvert the message. Hobbs et al. (2015) also used print advertisements to develop the critical thinking skills of new immigrants to the United States. Although the use of Facebook, Twitter, and WeChat for utilizing digital platforms to promote media literacy was recommended, these platforms were not part of the study. Choudhury and Share (2012), as previously mentioned, empowered disenfranchised students by teaching them to analyze and critique media representations of themselves and their communities and also to create alternative representations. While their critical media literacy approach was effective in empowering students, the source material came from newspapers — a medium that is increasingly lacking in relevancy to young learners. Finally, Quinlisk (2003) focused on the mediums of TV and film to develop media literacy skills among ESL and EFL students while Park (2011) used articles from *The New Yorker* to encourage critical literacy, which, although not exactly the same as critical media literacy, is very similar.

It is imperative that rather than contextualizing media literacy education in print or broadcast media, it should be re-contextualized in social media for students. If learners are no longer accessing information through newspapers, magazines, TV, or radio, then those are not relevant mediums for educators to be teaching media literacy with. As Buckingham (2003) so prophetically stated, “the proliferation of media technologies, the commercialization and globalization of media markets, the fragmentation of mass audiences, and the rise of interactivity are all fundamentally transforming our everyday experiences of the media” (p. 310) and this has created “a widening gap between young people’s worlds outside school and their experiences in the classroom” (p. 312). If educators are to reduce this gap between young people’s experiences with media outside of school and in school, and truly prepare students to be media literate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then ESL and EFL teachers must do away with the magazines, newspapers, and TV and instead ask their students to engage with podcasts, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok.

Furthermore, the focus of the critical approaches described in the research above also seem to be somewhat out of touch with students’ most pressing and foundational media literacy needs. While there is certainly value in focusing on critiquing ideology, representations, and power relations as part of students’ critical media literacy development, the pedagogical focus must shift to start at a more basic issues of accessing reputable information, identifying misinformation and disinformation, analyzing for bias and omission, and evaluating sources. From there, the students could take the critique deeper and “[analyze] the politics of representation...of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (Share, 2015, p. 14).

As an example, one could re-contextualize Choudhury and Share’s (2012) study to fit with learners’ current media literacy needs. Instead of analyzing representations of their communities in newspapers, students could engage in a similar process by engaging with social media posts about their communities made by businesses, organizations, groups, and/or individuals. First, they could identify misinformation, bias, or omission in the posts and the accompanying comments. Afterward, they could take the analysis deeper to understand how misinformation, bias, or omission was used to express hegemonic representations and reinforce structures of oppression. Finally, the students could co-construct new representations by collecting the same kinds of data from their community that they did in the study, but instead use the data to create podcasts, tell digital stories, or even engage in online activism.

Essentially, in order to address the needs of today’s ESL and EFL students, it is necessary for instructors to take critical media literacy approach which engages learners on media platforms that they use in their everyday life. The approach should begin with developing more foundational media literacy skills such as identifying bias, analyzing evidence, and evaluating sources. Then, teachers can ask students to engage in a deeper critical analysis of the digital media which explores the structures of oppression and politics of representation. Finally, students can co-produce their own digital media in order to counteract misinformation, challenge hegemonic representations, and ultimately, empower themselves. The current pandemic offers both opportunities and challenges for engaging in this very process.

### **Media Literacy Education During the COVID-19 ‘Infodemic’**

While a considerable proportion of the world has been bunkering down in order to defend themselves against COVID-19, *everyone* in the world is getting blasted with a constant stream of information regarding it. The World Health Organization and the United Nations has called this an “infodemic,” referring to the onslaught of misinformation that has been spreading about COVID-19 since nearly the beginning of the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). Moreover, an endless

information supply chain through social media and other mediums has been the source of new fact-based developments and scientifically-supported guidelines about COVID-19, but also conspiracy theories and scientific quackery.

As one example of the latter, a video entitled *Plandemic* became viral on social media. The claims found in this video have been ripped to shreds by more rational, evidence-based corners of the internet (Fichera et al., 2020; Shepherd, 2020). This is only the latest in a series of conspiracy theory phenomena regarding COVID-19 that have quickly rippled their way through social media. If people are overwhelmed with information while caught in the “infodemic”, and at least some of that information is made of mixed messages, false narratives, or bogus theories, even from those that the public has traditionally trusted, then it can be difficult to determine which sources to trust. Since there is simply so much information about COVID-19 available, and so much of it being tentative, it can be quite a tedious task sorting through it all not just to determine what information is most relevant and beneficial but also to determine which information is accurate or true. It is time-consuming and energy-draining just to stay up-to-date with the constantly-changing situation much less to make sure to get the most accurate information.

Considering that this infodemic, with constantly-changing facts among unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, is the reality for the foreseeable future — and considering the wildly different narratives that the public seem to be aligning themselves with — it seems like an opportune time for ESL and EFL students to hone their media literacy skills and for teachers to consider how they may nurture those skills in their students. As teachers and administrators around the world scramble to transition to online learning or other forms of distance learning (Meliboeva et al., 2020), it provides an opportunity to engage and develop students’ media literacy skills in the very place they tend to use them the most often these days: the internet (Khalid, 2019).

### **Teaching Media Literacy in the Current Situation**

Despite the number of issues that teachers, administrators, and institutions have had rolling out a sudden transition to distance learning, educators’ current reliance on online learning is a perfect opportunity to teach media literacy skills to ESL and EFL students.

### ***An Ideal Time for Media Literacy Integration***

There is a tremendous amount of stress involved in having to suddenly redesign and re-appropriate curricula for an online format like so many teachers have done or are currently doing. Additionally, curricula are not always flexible or malleable enough to be able to integrate the development of a skillset like media literacy. However, it could be an ideal opportunity for ESL and EFL students to explore issues of credibility, biases, and contextualization as part of the development of their media literacy skills.

For example, how might a media institution whose owners and/or reporters support reopening the economy show their bias in their online reporting on the science behind COVID-19? What ideologies are being reinforced by that institution’s reporting? How might an individual’s social media posts decrying shelter-in-place orders or mask-wearing requirements indicate political beliefs and cultural values? What narratives are fake online news sources manufacturing and what may be their motivations for doing so? These are some guiding questions that could be used in ESL and EFL classes to engage students in critical media literacy on digital platforms.

### ***Ideas for Teaching Media Literacy Online During the Current Crisis***

Even while educators are engaged in online teaching as a result of the pandemic, there are in-class activities to support the development of ESL and EFL students' critical media literacy-related skills. One important aspect to reiterate prior to exploring ideas for teaching critical media literacy in the current environment is the idea of focusing on media platforms that students use instead of traditional mediums like newspapers and magazines that are no longer commonly engaged by young learners. As discussed above, students are engaging with platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube.

Of course, the appropriateness of the following prescriptions will differ depending on the age, skills, knowledge, and the digital literacy of the students, but below are some basic ideas for getting started with teaching critical media literacy online for any course. They start with more foundational skills of identifying, move to analyzing and evaluating sources, followed by a more critical analysis and evaluation of representations and ideologies, and rounded out by a media production to counteract misinformation and empower students.

First, instructors can lead students through online articles about COVID-19 (or other timely issues) while using Zoom or other types of videoconferencing software. Instructors can start by simply using the *share screen* feature and encouraging their students to observe or notice the search results that appear from a search about COVID-19 or another topic. Which websites look more reputable based on their accompanying URLs and short descriptions? Next, instructors can also spend an entire lesson just asking students to analyze images and headlines from articles and evaluating how the image operates as an element of the article. The instructor can ask the students why the image or headline provokes specific feelings, why it provokes those feelings, and what intent the author or organization had in using that image or headline to provoke those feelings. Alternatively, students can do the same with images taken from social media posts on Instagram or Facebook.

Third, students can annotate images and articles using Zoom. While an instructor is sharing an article, students can highlight or underline loaded language, they can add questions or comments about questionable or unexplained claims, or they can add links to other sources that verify claims made in the target article. Instructors can then give their students a more challenging annotation assignment by using Thinglink ([thinglink.com](http://thinglink.com)). Thinglink is one app that can be used to annotate images. Not only can you annotate with comments and questions but you can also annotate with videos, links, or other photographs, demonstrating the interconnectedness of media and information. Students can use Thinglink to link to sources that provide support for the truthfulness of an image or the accuracy of an informational meme. They could link to news reports on YouTube that do the same. Additionally, they make a video or audio recording of themselves responding to the image.

After using Thinglink, students can use Padlet ([padlet.com](http://padlet.com)) to collect data. Padlet is an app that acts as a digital bulletin board. Instructors and students can post messages, images, videos, and links. Additionally, its interactivity allows for upvoting and for comments. There are a variety of ways that Padlet can be used to teach media literacy. For example, you can task students with finding photos that have been photoshopped and spread on social media as misinformation or disinformation. Students can use reverse image finders like TinEye ([tineye.com](http://tineye.com)) or Google's own reverse image search ([labnol.org/reverse](http://labnol.org/reverse)) in order to find the original. Since a Padlet board can have multiple sections, a teacher could create sections entitled "True", "Mostly True", "Misleading", and "False" to categorize the different media messages that the students find. This

allows learners to co-construct a database of knowledge surrounding a subject they are investigating.

Following the construction of their Padlet database, students can begin a critical analysis by investigating the ideological underpinnings and hegemonic representations in the media that they have collected. Students can be tasked with reviewing the media they collected on their Padlet in order to consider who is behind the messages, what values are being expressed in the messages, who benefits from the messages, and how might different people interpret the messages differently. Instructors can ask students to explore Wikipedia pages and other sources that would provide background knowledge on the values and ideologies of institutions and authors of the media they are investigating.

After their critical analysis of their collected data, students can create their own informational memes using Canva ([canva.com](https://www.canva.com)) or a similar digital design platform. Students can be tasked with creating one informational meme with completely accurate information and then a similar one with slightly (or wildly) inaccurate information. Students can send one another their memes to one another via Zoom or a learning management system (LMS) and then fact-check each other's memes while also critically analyzing the assumed values or ideologies of the meme.

Finally, students can include their Canva memes as part of a multimedia presentation through Loom or another screen-casting or video-producing app. These presentations can present their research and the evidence they collected on a particular topic regarding misinformation or disinformation, how they critically analyzed the assumed values and representations behind it, and discuss what further steps could be taken to counteract or subvert the original message. These are only a few possibilities for engaging learners in order to develop their critical medial literacy skills during this uncertain period of virtual learning.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the current COVID-19 'infodemic' and the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on social media, it is clear that the current primary objective of critical media literacy education should be for the purposes of combatting misinformation and disinformation. Recent studies have shown us that there is a severe lack of basic media literacy skills around the world that is having dire and dangerous effects on people, including ESL and EFL students. It calls for a return to teaching foundational media literacy skills, but within the context of social media and other digital technology favored by young learners. However, this foundation should be understood as a springboard for engaging students in deeper, critical analyses of representations, ideologies, and power structures.

The current pandemic period provides both opportunities and challenges for this to be accomplished. Teachers can take advantage of the sudden transition many of us have made to virtual learning by engaging learners in the very platforms with which they use to access information and entertain themselves. The challenges are manifold in that new scientific research regarding COVID-19 is constantly coming to light, contributing to the 'infodemic,' and leaders are disregarding the opinions of experts and calling into question their credibility.

It is uncertain just how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last. However, what the last five years, and especially the last six months, has made certain is that it is absolutely imperative that educators integrate media literacy into ESL and EFL curricula and practices. Teaching students media literacy skills during this uncertain time will benefit them in the short-term as they protect their health and the health of those around them, but it will also benefit them in the long-term as they continue to engage social media to access information for the foreseeable future.

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