I believe that [it] is easy to understand American society if we have a good comprehension of American media. In some way, American media create an image of American life that sometimes become[s] real. For example, the study of advertising is very important to understand not only idiomatic expressions, but dreams of the society and its corporations.

—Juan, Colombian graduate student

Why teach media literacy?

Children in the United States sit in front of the television for as many as three hours a day, and spend an average of 5.5 hours with all types of media (McClain, 1999). Given such media usage, calls have increased for media literacy to teach students how to watch, interpret, and resist the media. Some researchers and critics of the mass media consider media literacy necessary to protect children (and adults) from the pernicious effects of modern (visual) mass communication. Kellner, for example, argues that we must provide students with the ability to ‘resist manipulation by consumer capitalism’ (1988: 43). Brookfield urges adults to develop a ‘critical skepticism regarding the products of the mass media’ and describes such work as ‘ideological detoxification’ from ‘simplistic explanations of complex political reality’ (1986: 151, emphasis original).

Other theorists acknowledge the permanence of the mass media, arguing that it also offers viewers pleasure and an accessible range of manifestations of cultural meanings. Giroux and Simon propose taking popular culture—including mass media—as appropriate texts for education. ‘Popular culture and pedagogy represent important terrains of cultural struggle which offer both subversive discourses and important theoretical elements through which it becomes possible to rethink schooling as a viable and important form of cultural politics’ (1989: 238). Shor notes that students disillusioned by traditional text-based curricula are often excited by the use of popular media. Thus ‘student interest in everyday subjects has led [Shor] to use themes from everyday life for critical inquiry’ (Shor and Freire 1987: 6). Furthermore, the visual mass media play an increasingly important role in forming our identities. Angus and Jhally point out,

In contemporary culture the media have become central to the constitution of social identity. It is not just that media messages have become important forms of influence on individuals.
We also identify and construct ourselves as social beings through the mediation of images. This is not simply a case of people being dominated by images, but of people seeking and obtaining pleasure through the experience of the consumption of these images. (1989: 7, cited in Dietzel and Pagenhart 1995: 129)

Visual media thus become implicated in the construction of identity; at the same time they convey messages of consumer capitalism. How can a pedagogy of media literacy account for and grapple with this range of functions and meanings? Clearly, a traditional ‘banking’ pedagogy in which the teacher puts a predetermined, encapsulated knowledge into the students' heads is grossly insufficient (for all students but) particularly for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Freire 1971). Instead, media literacy offers an opening for the multiple viewpoints that viewers/users of media can generate. In laying out the theoretical framework for using semiotics in teaching media literacy, I will provide both my own readings of a television program, ‘Friends,’ which reflect my own position as a white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, highly politicized, well-educated U.S. woman, and students’ comments on the episode they viewed in class. As their comments demonstrate, my students will not necessarily develop the same interpretations as I do of the program. In fact, I may not agree with or enjoy their readings. Thus a media literacy curriculum needs to create spaces for different voices and interpretations. Yet because students come with worldviews and subject positions that are necessarily different from those of most of their teachers, a natural space for these differences exists.

This article discusses how concepts from semiotic theories may be adapted to teaching this form of media literacy to English language learners. Semiotic theories, including those that can be considered structuralist, poststructuralist, and postmodern, offer useful approaches to examining texts as embodiments of a society's myths, ideologies, and hegemonic struggles. Many of these notions are grounded in Saussure’s (1983) proposition that language and other sign systems have a fundamentally arbitrary nature.1 This concept allows us to sever the connections between what we see as natural semiosis in our cultures and to gain perspective for analysis. Semali and Hammett argue that ‘by taking a critical stance in the curriculum, students learn about the constructedness of literature and media texts and the arbitrariness of assigning meaning to texts’ (1999: 370). In this article, I will interweave a discussion of the theories with experiences from my teaching practice. Far from offering a perfect model, I use this discussion both to present some successes and to discuss the challenges inherent in the approach.

Although the focus of English language instruction generally points learners to just that, language, and less to images, sounds, and other forms of communication, it is important to consider how nonlinguistic messages produce cultural meanings. ‘Meaning resides so strongly and pervasively in other systems of meaning [than verbal language], in a multiplicity of visual, aural, behavioral, and other codes, that a concentration on words alone is not enough. . . . No single code can be successfully studied or fully understood in isolation’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988: vii). Media analysis includes the consideration of the visual aspects of image, photography, typography, and color as well as the words used. Advertising analysis has provided an accessible starting point for media literacy in my teaching; however, the semiotic theories I discuss point to a more subtle, complicated, and perhaps rewarding approach that goes beyond critique to add an increased
understanding of various cultures.

For the past few years, I have experimented with incorporating aspects of media literacy into writing and English-language courses I have taught at the universities of Massachusetts and Wisconsin in the United States. My experiences of teaching both native and nonnative English speakers in a managerial communications course are detailed in Curry (1996). Often at the University of Wisconsin I have taught a credit-bearing academic writing course, English 118, which fulfills first-year composition requirements. Because of these factors, the course curriculum is more rigidly determined by university requirements than others.2

Besides curricular constraints, another challenge lies in the abstract nature and difficult reading level of many of these theorists, particularly for English language learners. While students have readily understood and enjoyed more popular articles on advertising (Clark, 1997; Kilbourne, 1989), more abstract articles have proved difficult. I have experienced the greatest successes with high-level English learners and graduate students who are perhaps more accustomed to thinking abstractly than are undergraduates. Furthermore, as students do not choose my sections of English for their content, but for scheduling reasons, there is no guarantee that they are interested in media analysis. However, few students are unaffected by the pervasiveness of the media. As one Thai graduate student noted, ‘I [had] thought studying media was easy to understand. In the fact that media are very complicate which most people don’t clearly understand. . . . Due to the fact that medias are all around us, if we can understand the media, we will get more benefits [, which] I got from the media class.”

An important function of media literacy is to demystify and defamiliarize the production of images (and text). In the process, we can examine which issues of cultural anxiety arise in the content of both television programs and commercials. This process can occur on many levels, from undertaking a minute deconstructive analysis of an image or text, to examining the context of the production of the image, to questioning and challenging the social forces that enable such production. In this way, media literacy can engender critical thinking skills. In addition to raising issues of how arguments are constructed and deployed, media literacy can ask such questions as: Who is allowed to speak in this medium? Whose voices are heard or omitted? What subjectivities do media offer viewers, and which might be the ‘ideal subject’ for whom programs and advertisements are designed? How do viewers who do not fit neatly into the model of the ideal subject viewer respond to, relate to, and resist such constructions and the messages that circulate in media?

Print media versus film/video/television

Another challenge in doing media literacy with English learners results from the strengths and weaknesses of different media as texts. Although the university students I know tend to watch a lot of television, the aural comprehension levels of English language learners may hinder them from fully understanding and analyzing what they see, or hear on the radio. As one anonymous student in English 118 noted in an evaluation: ‘I think apply[ing] the concepts to TV shows are not that easy. Those concepts are more applicable to hard copies, e.g., magazine cover, pictures.’ Of course a large part of comprehension comes not from students’ ‘listening skills’ per se, but from their (un)familiarity with the content and conventions of the foreign media. Thus for many students print media’s static and easily transportable nature offers pedagogical benefits.

Much of the curriculum I have developed to analyze advertisements has relied on the ease
with which both students and I can find advertisements. While I require students to search for advertisements that exemplify the principles we study, I have also created overheads that demonstrate particular “claims” (Schrank 1994) and “appeals” (Fowles 1994) of advertising. Advertising analysis links itself easily to a linguistic curriculum that focuses on language form and usage. For example, Schrank highlights the use of ‘weasel words’ such as ‘helps’ and ‘virtually’ in advertisements, which weaken their claims. Students develop the ability to pay attention to the details of language by seeking such weasel words in advertisements. However, much of the humor, puns, and cultural references inherent in advertising slogans and claims are not transparent to people from other cultures. (Native English speakers can experience this disjuncture simply by looking at advertisement copy from other English-speaking countries.)

Advertising analysis can provide a bridge to other issues connected to the media. After requiring students to write a short paper in which they describe and analyze a set of advertisements they choose for a similar product, I have asked them to extend these issues to larger societal issues related to the media. Resulting topics for a longer paper have included the relationship between advertising and eating disorders, child aggression and violence, the role of women in the media (as subjects and agents), privacy and censorship on the Internet, and public broadcasting and threats to its funding. Some students have carried their interest on to their final independent project, including a paper researching the links between television commercials for sugary foods and childhood obesity.

However, once students have adopted the critical stance toward advertising encouraged by the course readings, it has proved difficult to move to the more abstract semiotic theories that foster a different reading of the media as representing cultural values and conflicts. Perhaps for this reason as well as its longer narrative duration, television has worked better for applying and understanding a semiotic approach. Its popularity with students and multidimensionality also offer pedagogical benefits. DeVaney notes that in addition to words and images, ‘units of construction such as frame, shot and sequence in television may be considered signs’ (1991: 252) that should also be studied. Because, as Hall posits, ‘much of television's power to signify lay in its visual and documentary character—its inscription of itself as merely a “window on the world”, showing things as they really are’ (1982: 75), media literacy can de-familiarize this world. Thus, despite the difficulties in using television noted above, it has seemed worth the effort. In an informal survey I conducted of 23 students, the television shows *Friends* and ‘The X-Files’ emerged as the two most popular programs. As students have mainly written about *Friends* in my courses, I will use it to exemplify applications of the semiotic theories I include here.

**Applying semiotic theories to *Friends***

Societal anxiety and the anomalous category

*Friends* covers the issues of contemporary urban life for members of white, middle-class Generation X living in New York City—a life in which friends replace the nuclear family structure as the central unit of society. Compared with the life stages of more traditional societies (or eras), the twenty-something members of the cast of *Friends* comprise an anomalous category, in Levi-Strauss’s terms, that straddles the border of childhood and adolescence in their postponement of
marriage and children but crosses over into adulthood as they hold jobs and live apart from their families. These characters ‘partake of characteristics of both the binarily opposed’ categories (Fiske, 1990: 117), in this case, youth and adulthood.

In the *Friends* episode that aired in the United States on December 11, 1997, (which I chose randomly), two major storylines were intertwined. In one, a crisis of lost youth enveloped the male characters on the show. Because they had lost the habit of partying, they needed Gandolf, an out-of-town friend, to lead them on all-night binges; when Gandolf cancelled and Ross, Chandler, and Joey tried to replicate their experiences, their youthful stamina was gone. This episode exemplifies a rite of passage from youth to adulthood in a process of ‘separation, margin, and aggregation’ (Kottak, 1982: 44). The male characters leave the females, embark on unknown adventures in the marginal period, and enact aggregation by returning to the café Central Perk, where the group regathers (without the women).

In the other major storyline, Rachel, who works at Bloomingdale’s department store, applies for a promotion to assistant buyer. Her supervisor thwarts Rachel’s ambition by offering backhanded compliments about Rachel to the other managers conducting the interview. Students who analyzed this storyline proposed the job interview as another rite of passage: ‘Rachel is look[ing] for promotion, which is a rite of passage from the lower to higher position. It is an ideology held by U.S. society that getting promoted to higher rank is a good sign of their career.’ They also considered Rachel’s boss as an anomalous figure, straddling upper management and Rachel’s lower position: ‘Joanna is the boss of Rachel and at the same time she is working at a lower class than that man [one of the interviewers]. She is in between and therefore, this is anomalous.’ Students noted that Joanna’s interference relied on the use of negative stereotypes of women to put Rachel down.

**Exnomination**

Barthes (1972) offers the concept of exnomination, by which media remove from the discourse counter-dominant ideas, messages, symbols, or images. Their structuring absence becomes essential to the framing of the worldview presented. On ‘Friends,’ therefore, rarely does the question arise of why certain jobs are more available to women than others. Thus when Joanna intentionally prevents Rachel’s promotion, the show presents the conflict as personality-dependent instead of part of a system of discrimination against women or an older woman’s insecurities in the image-heavy fashion industry.

**Naturalization, representation, and ideology**

Television also demonstrates the naturalization of cultural practices, ‘a shaping of the whole ideological environment: a way of representing the order of things which endowed its limiting perspectives with that natural or divine inevitability which makes them appear universal, natural, and coterminous with “reality” itself’ (Hall, 1982: 65). The process of identifying and explicating these seemingly obvious characteristics of media productions challenges viewers to rethink our basic assumptions. Gramsci called the ‘inventory of traditional ideas, the forms of episodic thinking which provide us with the taken-for-granted elements of our practical knowledge . . . “common sense”’ (Hall, 1982: 73). Media literacy calls into question what comprises societal common sense. In
‘Friends,’ the gender separation in the apartments where the show's male and female characters live naturalizes their gender roles and reinforces a traditional morality that frowns on premarital opposite-sex cohabitation. The physical environment of the characters’ lives links to other aspects of their lives. One student, Mary, noted that in Friends, ‘the female role in the working society is described in a negative aspect. Women are seen as sex objects to their bosses. This is a naturalization that male bosses like to have relationship with their employees, and in return they provide promotion for these women.’

Naturalization likewise encourages viewers to see as commonsensical the occupations of the women, despite their strong gender stereotypes: Rachel is an assistant to a fashion buyer; Monica works as a professional cook/caterer; and Phoebe is a folk singer/waitress. In this episode, when Rachel's boss half jokingly tells her that she ‘had to sleep with the ugliest guy to get [her first] job’, the joke implies that women no longer have to exchange sexual favors for professional advancement. However, one of the backhanded compliments that Joanna makes about Rachel is that she conducts inappropriate sexual relationships with clients: as Mary wrote, ‘during the interviewing, Rachel is [said] to have a “personal relationship” with her client.’ When viewers consider such female occupational roles and experiences as normal, seeing these roles on television encourages viewers to conceptualize television as a mimetic media, reflecting a “reality” that viewers already know. However, Hall notes, the media do not simply reflect reality, but represent it; ‘representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean.’ Thus ‘the message [has] now to be analysed, not in terms of its manifest “message”, but in terms of its ideological structuration’ (Hall, 1982: 64).

A primary task in media literacy is to identify the choices made to include or exclude topic, character, scene, etc., and what these choices represent in terms of dominant ideologies. The plot twist that resolves the storyline of Rachel’s promotion—the accidental death of her supervisor—evoked interesting interpretations of U.S. culture by students. Without exception, they were shocked by Rachel’s lack of mourning for Joanna, and judged her harshly for her ambition. One student, Jeffrey, commented, ‘rather [than] lamentation, Rachel is more concerned on whether the boss sent the documentation of saying Rachel to be the boss. This brings up the issue that U.S. people are selfish and only thinks about the[ir] own future. They don’t care about the situations of anybody. This scene is an ideology of reality that I think is common sense of lamenting people who are dead.’ To my mind, the students took away a very strong message about U.S. culture that may have struck a chord with their own experiences or understandings, although some blurred the distinction between U.S. and their own cultures. In contrast, a U.S. audience may have identified this turn of events as a convenient device to remove an actor from the program as well as to preserve the status quo in terms of Rachel’s job and the series’ values.

An important concept in teaching media literacy is the notion of ideology, defined as ‘a system of coding reality and not a determined set of coded messages’ (Veron cited in Hall, 1982: 71). Looking at how different meaning-making frameworks can operate simultaneously opens up various interpretive possibilities. In some cases ideologies can be represented or activated simply by one word. Barthes, for example, ‘argued that the associative field of meanings of a single term—its connotative field of reference—was par excellence, the domain through which ideology invaded the
language system. It did so by exploiting the associative, the variable, the connotative “social value” of language’ (Hall, 1982: 79). On ‘Friends, the use of the term ‘dude’, particularly with the inflection the male characters give it, evokes the world of young, white, male, middle-class, carefree partiers. Phoebe draws attention to the value of the phrase by saying, ‘dude alert’, in the episode.

In addition to the use of language and visual images in constructing ideologies, ‘many other codes play a part, including clothing codes, gestures, and so on, and others, such as architectural codes, which establish not simply the status of a context but also what pattern of relationships will prevail in it’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 45). The ways in which details such as clothing contribute to communicating an ideological stance emerge in the Friends episode as well. In their midterms, many students wrote about gender-related choices of clothing, noting the symbolic value of the female characters’ attire: the function of business clothing and its symbolism of the differences among the characters. One student, Peter, noted that ‘Rachel and her immediate boss [Joanna] wore pantsuits, which is in contrast to the culture where men wear pants while women should wear skirt[s].’ Another student, Helen, added that ‘Rachel always wears pants when she’s working in the office. And so do[es] her boss, Joanna, while the secretary always wear[s] skirts. From this we can see a ‘binary opposition’ between those designers [sic] and secretary, which may have a higher working status, than [the] secretary do[es].’

Viewers—especially those who make ‘dominant-hegemonic code’ readings of media texts (Hall, 1983: 137)—consent to the hegemonic positions embodied in television shows partly by supporting the programs and their advertisers, even incorporating elements of the programs and advertisements into life by discussing them and by patronizing the advertisers. At the same time, if what happens on television appears as natural and normal, viewers may work to adjust ourselves to fit our lives to match that image of normalcy. Especially for women, the idealized images of women presented in the media—in commercials as well as in the bodies of the actors themselves—discount the acceptability of other ways of being and encourage us to work toward the ‘ideal’ presented.

Modes of address

How do viewers feel comfortable identifying with and relating to characters, storylines, settings, and all the other elements that comprise media texts? Ellsworth's explanation of mode of address offers a useful way to consider this relationship:

In order for a film to work for an audience, in order for it simply to make sense to a viewer, or maker her laugh, root for a character, suspend her disbelief, cry, scream, feel satisfied at the end—the viewer must enter into a particular relationship with the film's story and image system. . . . There is a ‘position’ within power relations and interests, within gender and racial constructions, within knowledge, to which the film's story and visual pleasure is addressed. It's from that ‘subject position’ that the film's assumptions about who the audience is work with the least effort, contradiction, or slippage. (1997: 23-24)

In Althusser's terms, television programs interpellate their viewers, naming their ideal subject positions even as they seek conformity to the norms they present. For example, the Friends theme song, ‘I'll Be There for You,’ offers clues to its ideal viewer; in fact, the song interpellates the viewer directly by using the second person pronoun, ‘you’:
So no one told you life was gonna be this way.  
The job's a joke, you're broke, your love life's D.O.A.  
It's like you're always stuck in second gear.  
Well, it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year.  
But I'll be there for you  
When the rain starts to pour.  
I'll be there for you.  
Like I've been there before.  
I'll be there for you.  
'Cause you're there for me, too.

The neo-folksy musical style of the theme song, reminiscent of the Beatles, underlines this interpellation, reinforcing the identification of the audience as younger than Baby Boomers who would listen to Bob Dylan or other 1960s folk musicians, but probably too mainstream to listen to alternative rock, heavy metal, or country-western music.

**Advertising also constructs the ideal viewer.**

The commercials shown during and between the programs also contribute to the creation of ideal subject positions and the lack of slippage between ideal and real viewers. Commercials for *Friends* envision a young, white, heterosexual audience interested in television and films, attracted to the convenience of fast-food restaurants. Commercials for durable products were in the minority. As well as the products purveyed in the commercials, aspects of their production should be analyzed. Commercials aimed at a younger audience, for example, are more likely to use tilted camera angles, faster editing of sequences, brighter graphics and visuals, and more and louder music than those aimed at older viewers. The choice of actors in commercials also reflects the producers’ notions of the ideal viewer in terms of the age, race, gender, and class signs in commercials. However, television is a broadcast medium reaching millions of viewers; its producers therefore must find a balance between targeting a narrow band of ideal viewers and a broader spectrum of viewers who may not fit the ideal image. The audience can be envisioned demographically, as some characteristics mentioned above touch on, or ideologically, as the next section discusses—in many cases these overlap.

**Narrative structure**

In addition to the subject matter itself, the narrative structure of the television program or advertisement itself works (or fails) to resolve the issues raised. Hodge and Kress (1988) point out that the seeming simplicity of Aristotle's narrative cycle—beginning, middle, and end—can be viewed more complexly as a ‘classic narrative of the status quo’ in a cycle of equilibrium, disturbance/complication, and crisis resolution/return to equilibrium (230), as the *Friends* partying crisis exemplifies. In fact, television has been criticized for its readiness to resolve all of the problems of a storyline neatly and tidily in 30-minute segments. What may seem unrealistic about this cycle is perhaps not its tidiness but how quickly it transpires, since much of Western literature
follows a similar narrative structure.

Stances for Analysis

It is important to recognize that different audiences find multiple readings at different times. Hall formulates three positions that consumers of media may occupy when decoding messages: the dominant-hegemonic position—‘When the viewer takes the connoted meaning . . . and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded’ (1982: 136); the position that employs a negotiated code—‘a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements . . . it operates with exceptions to the rule’ (137); and a stance using the oppositional code, decoding ‘in a globally contrary way . . . [that] detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference’ (137-8). Teachers must therefore expect to encounter a range of interpretations of the media they analyze with students as well as be able to identify the dominant myths and codes of their society. Hall notes that ‘dominant definitions connect events, implicitly or explicitly, to grand totalizations . . . they take ‘large views’ of the issues: they relate events to the ‘national interest’ or the level of geo-politics’ (1983: 137). These same definitions inform commercially produced curricula, so dominant media representations usually fit comfortably with messages students and teachers already know. Without their own critical distance, however, teachers may find it difficult to explain the dominant definitions of society and deploy these strategies of media analysis—therefore teaching media literacy may begin in teacher preparation programs.

For English language learners, media literacy offers the possibility not simply to witness another society's representation of itself, but a way to make sense of what is viewed. Few immigrants or international students will have had no exposure to media products from the countries in which they are studying, however. Students from other cultures can contrast what they see in the foreign media with what they know of their own cultures and global stereotypes about life in that country. At the same time, learning the hegemonic practices of another society provides new ways of examining one’s own culture and experiences. The dominant meanings encode as well the relationship of the United States and other purveyors of English to the countries from which students come. Indeed, English-speaking media products embody and reinforce the status of English as the global language of capitalism. Media literacy can help students unpack how representations of the other reflect the dominant values of U.S. and other Anglophone societies. According to Barthes (1972), how a society represents the other says as much or more about itself. The outright absence of various ‘others’ in much media representation also indicates important meanings about contemporary culture. Other issues may arise for students: Do their previously held images of the cultural stereotypes in the foreign media mesh with their lived experience as students or immigrants? How do the construction of difference and similarity affects students who may not have seen themselves as ‘ethnic,’ ‘of color,’ ‘minority,’ or as identified by global region rather than by specific country (e.g., Asian as opposed to Thai)? Likewise, what mismatch in gender or other roles do they experience and possibly try to comprehend through media? Previous experiences often make students aware that ‘different kinds of meanings could be ascribed to the same events.’ Thus, Hall writes, in the creation of hegemonic meanings ‘in order for one meaning to be regularly produced, it had to win a kind of credibility, legitimacy, or taken-for-grantedness for itself. That involved
marginalizing, down-grading or de-legitimating alternative constructions’ (Hall, 1982: 67). While students may easily find alternate readings in these messages, they may not be prepared for the force with which alternate readings may be disparaged or dismissed in the dominant culture.

Another issue is how to teach media literacy without also devaluing its pleasurable aspects or those who enjoy media products? Even without linguistic differences, class and ideological differences always exist. Buckingham criticizes the trend in media literacy instruction in which elitist middle-class teachers wittingly or unwittingly transmit their preferred deconstructions of media to their students such that decoding media becomes another rote task with previously known answers. ‘Critical discourses about the media often embody a form of intellectual cynicism, and a sense of superiority to other people. They may result in a superficial irony or a contempt for popular pleasures which is merely complacent’ (1993: 146). Simply being critical of the media itself thus becomes problematic—and overly simplistic. Rather, an approach that allows for engagement with the multiple meanings attached to various media texts provides an opening for teaching media literacy without imposing a monolithic point of view. Furthermore, Buckingham notes that for both teachers and students ‘condemning programs . . . provides a powerful means of defining one's own tastes, and thus of claiming a particular social identity’ (1993: 144). Barthes identified a similar problem in undertaking analysis of one's own cultural myths:

The mythologist cuts himself off from all the myth-consumers and this is no small matter . . . To decipher the Tour de France or the 'good French wine' is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them. The mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality; for him, to be in society is, at best, to be truthful. . . . His connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm. (1972: 156)

Students who achieve a critical distance from media products by means of media literacy may also mourn the loss of their innocent participation in the media system. Some viewers discover a new pleasure in unmasking the techniques used in advertising and other media forms. After studying advertising analysis, students may feel empowered or disappointed to learn how to see through the workings of advertisers. Fiona, an undergraduate from Hong Kong, reported,

In the past, I [was] always persuaded by the claims [that] appeared in the advertisement. I bought a lot of useless things just because I like the advertisement. . . . Now when I walk on the street, I will try to focus on different advertisements and then understand it. I find it is very entertaining. I can predict how those advertisers think of their target group, from that I know what is the preconception about certain types of people.

One Hong Kong undergraduate, Betty, both appreciated and resisted the new approach.

I feel like I know so much more and I am really happy about it. . . . Yet, I think I am still the same. Besides doing English homeworks, I still look at ads the way I used to. That is, I just look at all those beautiful graphics and models only and try not to analyse it. . . . I like the feeling that ads give us, a feeling of hoping with the use of their product, I can achieve or change something.

Postmodern theories may offer a path of escape for Barthes's mythologist or students of media literacy. By encouraging multiple readings of media texts, teachers can help to preserve the pleasure
viewers take in the media.

Other media literacy techniques

Semiotics can be useful in media literacy on many levels including analyses of content, production methods and techniques, narrative structure and visual images, competing ideologies, and autobiography (Brookfield, 1986). Critical media literacy suggests taking analysis to the level of praxis, engaging students in activities that transform their lives and/or media experiences. Semali and Hammett specify that ‘critical viewing entails critiquing texts in a way that challenges their ideology—their values, views, and representations of reality’ (1999: 367). In teaching adults, Brookfield suggests asking adult students to make comparisons between their observations and real-life experiences (1986: 167). Buckingham concurs: ‘Unless the discussion of ideology in media is related to students' own experience, to their sense of their own identity, it will remain a purely academic exercise: students will do images of women in the same way that they do medieval poetry’ (1993: 147). Other methods include rewriting scenes for television programs, or writing prequels or sequels, to enable students to offer different representations of the story, characters, and setting.

Fehlman also offers a useful model of classroom analysis for ‘critically reading TV’ (1992). He shows a segment of a program for different groups of students to focus on ‘audio cues: dialogue, music, and natural sound—or—quiet. What kinds of meanings are made through these codes?’ Another group ‘focus[es] on elements of costume, make-up, character gesture and placement, set design, and props.’ The third group looks ‘at how the camera is placed and moved or the why individual shots are framed and generally composed’ (1992: 20). The next level of analysis is genre, looking at how a program's ‘stories and style use formulaic language and conventions common to other [similar programs] on television’ (20). Fehlman next suggests a level of analysis that looks for cultural and ideological meanings by identifying how ‘media texts are indirectly supportive of a status quo system of values: for example, beliefs about ‘happiness’ and ‘security’, ‘authority’ and ‘patriotism,’ ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity,’ ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’,,’ supplemented by an analysis of similar programs from the 1950s (22). Finally, Fehlman raises issues of the role of media in capitalism, including analysis of commercials and the economics of making television programs.

By allowing space for the constant struggle of ideologies, hegemony theory enables teachers to situate themselves alongside their students as multifaceted subjects. In opening up possibilities for multiple interpretations, the teacher of media literacy, unlike Barthes's mythologist, does not have to stand at a total remove from students as subjects of media representations. Pedagogically, we can benefit from the fact that ‘there are many alternative frameworks or positions from which it is possible to interpret a text, and that different interpretations exist for the same set of images’ (Graham, 1989: 158). We can teach critical media literacy without imposing totalizing interpretations of media texts on learners.
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Biographical Note
Mary Jane Curry is a Ph.D. candidate in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her dissertation undertakes a sociopolitical analysis of a second-language composition course at a community college. Her research interests include immigrant college students, second language learning and composition, academic literacy, media literacy, critical thinking, discourse analysis, and curriculum theory. A version of this paper was presented at the 1999 TESOL conference. She wishes to thank John Fiske, Michael Apple and the Friday Seminar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Allan Luke, and the anonymous reviewers of this article.

1 I have attempted to teach the concept of arbitrariness by assigning students to read the article, S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa (1990) Giving Things Names, in *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. Harcourt, Brace, & Co.

2 Students learn the conventions of academic writing and oral presentation as well as library research, citation style, and the evaluation and use of evidence. For the three papers they write in the course, students begin with a set of readings (on varying topics) the instructors provide for the first paper, then receive a partial set for the second paper (usually a different topic), and none for the last paper. Instead, students choose and develop their own topics for the final research paper, undertaking the research independently. This description of the course structure demonstrates the constraints under which the inclusion of media literacy has occurred.

3 There were 15 male and 8 female students, both undergraduate and graduate, in my two English grammar and writing courses. Their ages ranged from 18 to 37 years old. Students came mainly from Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. The survey was conducted in November 1997.

4 Because the English 118 syllabus required students to take an in-class essay exam, I used this episode of *Friends* to gauge how well students had learned the semiotic concepts under study. In previous classes we had watched the ‘X-Files’ episode to practice identifying the issues and approaches suggested by these concepts.

5 In their midterm essay, students were asked to choose one storyline to examine.

6 While I support and agree with the goals of critical media literacy, I have refrained from proposing my teaching experiences here as fully ‘critical’, given the constraints of the academic English-language classroom. Although my goals coincide with Semali and Hammett’s focus on critique of ideology, in practice the teaching may not have achieved the praxis they deem necessary to “critical literacy.” Any praxis that resulted from the media literacy that students engaged in occurred outside the curriculum and the classroom, although one student changed her major from nutrition to communication studies as a result of taking my course.