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# Adbusting: Critical Media Literacy in a Multi-Skills Academic Writing Lesson

Media literacy is a field that began as a grassroots movement among educators concerned with the growing gap between popular culture, produced by corporations, and the literacy content in today's schools (Flores-Koulish 2005). Today, many educators recognize the pedagogical importance of training students to develop an awareness of how and why advertisements and other media messages often misrepresent and manipulate the facts. Consequently, teachers can find many resources on how to develop and implement a media literacy curriculum (Schwarz and Brown 2005).

According to Aufderheide (1993, 1), a media literate individual "can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media." Nevertheless, there are different degrees of media literacy. Many analyses are merely descriptive and do not examine with any depth how various media affect society and individuals; therefore, the term *critical media literacy* is often used to describe a more rigorous evaluation of the mass media's relationship to democracy, power, and social justice. As a classroom topic, critical media literacy encourages discussions about how the media conceptualize race, class, and gender, and how it promotes certain social values through its definitions of such concepts as beauty, prestige, family, love, success, sex, freedom, and consumerism, among others. Critical media analysis allows students to access, analyze, and evaluate popular texts in terms of their cultural, political, ideological, and socioeconomic ramifications. Because these are important and relevant issues for students and teachers, incorporating critical media analysis into the second language classroom is an excellent way to engage students' skills in communication and higher-level thinking.

This article will discuss the rationale for incorporating critical media analysis into the second language classroom and will describe a method

to combine it with a university level writing lesson based on the process-centered approach in which students plan, revise, and produce a written text with a special focus on the intended audience. In this writing lesson students will also produce an *Adbuster*, which is a parody of a commercial message. The primary goals of the lesson are to promote critical thinking and to develop formal and informal language skills through a variety of individual and group-based, task-oriented activities.

### Why integrate media literacy and academic writing?

There are many theoretical and practical reasons to combine critical media literacy with a modern academic writing lesson. Advertisements and other media messages are available virtually everywhere, and giving language learners the opportunity to evaluate them and create their own written texts allows students to develop their critical thinking and communication skills. Because of the interesting and relevant nature of the subject matter, this type of task-based lesson creates a student-centered environment that is the foundation of communicative language teaching. For example, a media literacy academic writing project:

- uses authentic materials to contextualize language, appeal to student interests, and increase their motivation;
- requires real language for meaningful communication, which develops students' cognitive and academic strategies in multiple skills;
- inspires small groups to create meaningful written drafts and quality peer review and revision;
- creates a positive social and affective working environment;
- permits teachers to include various activities that appeal to virtually any kind of learning style;
- provides a large amount of language input and output so students learn to use effective communication strategies;
- helps student evaluate and respond to arguments, which develops their analytical skills;
- allows for the integration of skills through a variety of linguistic situations that require the use of both formal and informal English;
- introduces students to codes and conventions of the target culture and activates their background knowledge;
- offers the possibility for portfolios and other forms of alternative assessment.

These aspects of communicative language teaching are evident in the following ten-step lesson plan.

### An integrated media literacy lesson plan

This lesson plan is designed for a college or university setting and is based on the process genre approach in which students not only plan and revise two texts, but also meet certain rhetorical and structural requirements based on the texts' audience (Badger and White 2000). In addition, this lesson will require students to plan and revise a piece of Adbuster art that will accompany the written texts. As students become more keenly aware of the role of their target audience, they learn how to modify language to communicate through various media and to establish a continuity of ideas between two very different types of expression—formal writing and art.

#### What is an Adbuster?

To begin, it is important for teachers and students to be familiar with an Adbuster, which is a form of media that looks like an advertisement but actually opposes the values and assumptions presented by a corporation through its advertising campaigns (examples of Adbuster ads can be found at the following website: http://adbusters.org/spoofads/index.php).

Advertisements sell not only products, but also ideas. For instance, an advertisement for a diet pill is not only selling the actual pill, but also the idea that being thin is important, perhaps more important than being healthy. Advertisements for diet products often target women by showing a young, attractive woman smiling and happy because she has lost weight. An Adbuster for such an advertisement could visually oppose the message of taking the actual pill by showing the potentially negative side effects, such as osteoporosis, depression, or organ damage. The Adbuster could also oppose the ideas or assumptions in the advertisement by challenging the definition of beauty or success as being extremely thin. The Adbuster could also offer a definition of beauty, happiness, and success not in terms of

outward appearance, but rather as connected to one's overall health and well-being.

Most advertisements have a central message: If you buy this product, then you will be "thin," "rich," "successful," or "fit," and therefore "happy" and "fulfilled." Usually, the central message can be ascertained by reading the slogan and understanding the story being told through the visual image. However, in addition to the central message tied to the product, advertisers also create and reinforce our assumptions of what it means to be a beautiful, rich, successful man or woman. Advertisers also offer us definitions of sexuality, happiness, family, love, health, freedom, and other values that guide our behavior. We may not buy a diet pill or a luxury car, but we may nevertheless absorb the idea that "you can never be too rich or too thin." Because we are surrounded by advertisements, which are an integral part of our culture, we are like fish in an aquarium, unaware that we live in water because we consider it a natural part of our existence. In requiring students to create Adbusters, we are not teaching them simply to resist advertisements. We are enhancing their critical thinking skills by making them aware of how culture is created through a set of assumptions or stories told over and again.

An Adbuster can be made for virtually any advertisement. For this lesson students must choose an advertisement, and they may initially seem frustrated or confused about which advertisement to choose so that making an Adbuster will be easy. However, we tell our students to choose advertisements from magazines that they read or that appeal to their interests. Thus, one group of male students made an Adbuster for videogames in which they explored the effects of violent video games on children. Their Adbuster contained pictures of children holding video game guns, of children spending hours in front of television, and scenes of blood and violence from video games that were very realistic. Students discussed the effects of video games on children's identity formation and the effects of television violence on society in general. Another student who practices weightlifting and was interested in bodybuilding as a hobby completed an Adbuster about the negative effects of using steroids to build muscles. Many girls who read fashion magazines did Adbusters that showed the potentially dangerous effects of dieting. Many also redefined the notion of beauty offered by popular women's magazines as inner beauty, health, and overall well-being rather than looking "perfect" or extremely thin. Hence, the assignment allows students to critically understand the very forces that shape their values, attitudes, and assumptions—their identities.

**Ten steps of the media literacy lesson plan**

The primary goals of the lesson are to promote critical thinking and to develop formal and informal language skills through a variety of individual and group-based, task-oriented activities. In these activities, students will collaborate with their groupmates to prepare a project that they will present to their peers. Unlike products of the average academic writing lesson, the texts produced here will be done as a group, not individually. This can at first create some difficulty for the teacher who is trying to maintain order in the class and ensure that all students contribute equally to the assignment. However, providing varied options to students for the creation of meaningful language at different stages of the lesson appeals to many different learning styles. As a result, such a lesson may not be best used to determine a student's placement or readiness to advance to the next level, but it is, nonetheless, designed to improve a student's overall proficiency in English. This is, of course, our ultimate goal.

First, students will create one paragraph that examines the assumptions and hidden messages in a particular magazine advertisement. A second paragraph will critically evaluate those assumptions. In addition to these paragraphs, each group will produce an Adbuster as a visual companion to their writing. The ten steps detailed in the following lesson are merely suggestions. Throughout the lesson, the teacher must help his or her students to practice the writing process used by successful students and professionals in the real world. Before beginning these steps, teachers should divide students into groups of three or four.

**Step 1: Focused freewriting**

To begin, the teacher tells the students they are going to look at an advertisement for a commercial product out of a popular American magazine. The teacher then gives each group a different advertisement from a

magazine. Teachers may also allow students to bring magazines that they read at home and have each group select one advertisement to analyze in the classroom.

Then, the teacher tells the students to get out a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil and to begin freewriting, which is a pre-writing exercise in which students write for a specified time on a specific topic without stopping and without making corrections. Typically, students keep their freewriting assignments and refer to them during later stages of the writing process in order to build on and further refine their ideas. In this lesson students are encouraged to write nonstop about their advertisement for five to ten minutes without making corrections or using a dictionary. They are free to write whatever they want, as long as it is in response to whatever they see in the ad. If they do not know what to write, the teacher should tell them to write "I don't know what to write." During this exercise, the teacher should monitor the students closely to ensure that they follow the directions.

When time is up, the teacher tells the groups to share what they have written with other members of their groups. They do not need to read their freewriting aloud; they only need to summarize their reaction to the advertisement. This should take no more than ten minutes, and while the students are talking, the teacher should walk around the room to monitor their progress.

### Step 2: Sample paragraphs and Adbusters

The teacher can now help students to better understand the genre within which they will be working to create their two paragraphs, which can be done by showing students one or more examples of successful writing by students in previous classes. Showing sample paragraphs is useful because the academic writing style, which uses one controlling idea for a paragraph and a topic sentence at or near the beginning, is a genre whose mastery will certainly help students to succeed in school.

Together with the teacher, students analyze sample paragraphs that are very similar to what they will be asked to produce and discover the paragraphs' structure on their own. The teacher can help, of course, and answer any questions that come up.

In this step, the teacher also introduces students to a variety of sample Adbusters produced by previous classes to provide them with clear examples of the designs they will be expected to complete. If teachers do not have sample Adbusters or paragraphs from previous classes, they may choose to create their own to use until quality student-produced materials are available. Sample Adbusters, however, may be found at the aforementioned website.

### Step 3: Understand, analyze, and evaluate—find the hidden messages

The teacher should explain that many advertisements sell not only products, but also ideas, by promoting certain values, stereotypes, and assumptions. The students will explore these "hidden messages" using a worksheet entitled *Deconstructing an Advertisement* that can be found online from the Media Education Foundation (2005). Using this worksheet, the students will complete the following tasks:

1. Describe the codes and conventions in their advertisement
2. Determine the purpose of their advertisement
3. Determine the assumptions their advertisement makes
4. Determine possible consequences of their advertisement

The students work together to complete these four tasks, and each member in the group will be responsible for writing down and reporting one of them to the rest of the class. Thus, each member completes a writing and speaking task as a part of this portion of the activity. If members within a group disagree with one another on their evaluation of the advertisement, the teacher can remind them that it is a good exercise in critical thinking to argue a point of view that you do not necessarily agree with. Also, if two members disagree, they can both share their different views with the class, thus setting up the opportunity for conversation, debate, and multiple interpretations.

As each group shares their advertisements and reports their four-point analysis, the other students listen and express their agreement or disagreement with the reporting group's interpretations. For example, a group may report that they found that an advertisement for ciga-

rettes draws a connection between "freedom" or "independence" and smoking by pointing out that the advertisement shows an image of young men and women sailing on a yacht while smoking cigarettes. Then, the group can evaluate the validity of this connection: Is smoking at all connected to a lifestyle of the rich and does it really increase your enjoyment of life? Finally, the group will determine the possible long- and short-term consequences of believing the messages presented in the advertisement. Is the advertisement effective? Will the target audience be persuaded to buy the product?

If a group decides that their advertisement has no hidden messages, the teacher can ask them additional guided questions about the advertisement based on the teacher's own analysis. In addition, if students offer an interpretation that is not obvious or may not be justifiable, the teacher should not be afraid to ask them why they made their decision and how they came to it. For instance, if a student says a woman in the picture looks "healthy," and the connection to health is not obvious, the teacher can say: "What is it in the picture that makes you think of health?" or "What is it about her that makes her look healthy?"

#### Step 4: Brainstorming

Working together, each group member writes the central message of the advertisement they analyzed in step three. Usually, the central message insinuates something like: "If you buy this product, then you will be more 'attractive,' or 'slim,' or 'free,' and, as a result, happier." This central message is usually found in the slogan or in the dominant images and texts within the ad.

Next, students locate their advertisement's hidden messages or assumptions and conduct a group brainstorming exercise about them. Students can refer to answers they came up with when completing the four tasks from the *Deconstructing an Advertisement* worksheet in Step 3. A graphic organizer word map would work well here, with both the central and hidden messages forming the center and all the evidence students find for the existence of hidden messages displayed in word bubbles around the center. For example, if the group believes that their advertisement promotes smoking as a way to achieve freedom and independence, they would list the following evidence:

- The wide open horizon in front of the yacht suggests that the people portrayed are "free."
- The fact that the people are dressed nicely, are attractive, and are on a yacht rather than a small boat suggests that they are rich and financially independent, so their freedom is also financial freedom.
- The social atmosphere on the yacht suggests that cigarettes are a good addition to "happy" social occasions when you are having a good time with friends and enjoying a sense of freedom.

Then, students brainstorm for their second paragraph, which will critique the central message as well as the hidden messages of their advertisement. To have the critical skills necessary to develop this second paragraph, it is important that students have understood and completed the *Deconstructing an Advertisement* worksheet so they can determine the advertisement's assumptions and its possible consequences. As a result, students may write the following:

- The ad falsely connects enjoying time with your friends to smoking.
- Showing attractive, young people hides the fact that smoking causes the yellowing of teeth, poor skin health, and smoking-related diseases such as lung cancer and emphysema.
- The ad falsely connects smoking with personal and financial freedom—smoking cannot make you richer or more free.
- The ad does not show that because smoking cigarettes creates a physical addiction to nicotine, it actually makes you less free.
- The ad does not show that rather than leading to freedom and enjoyment of life, smoking can often lead to death.

It is important for the teacher to be aware that many of the advertisements available worldwide come from Western cultures, in many cases the United States. This creates an opportunity for students to explore the ways in which culture of origin is portrayed in advertising. Analyzing the assumptions a culture makes can create a great deal of meaningful discussion in the classroom.

To take this further, the teacher can encourage students to analyze their advertisements based on the assumptions of their native culture. Students may find that this can lead either to a deeper understanding of an advertisement's hidden messages or, more likely, gross misinterpretation because of cultural differences. This can initiate a class discussion about the importance of knowing one's audience and of being aware that people of different backgrounds can interpret an individual message in many different ways. This knowledge and awareness is crucial to the development of academic writing skills.

Finally, the students decide on the theme of the Adbuster they will create. Using the content of their paragraphs, they will design a visual representation of their academic writing. The teacher may remind the students that an Adbuster may oppose either the purchase of the actual product, or the assumptions that the advertisement makes, or both. For instance, students may make an Adbuster opposing the purchase of a diet pill because it is unsafe. However, they may also simply make an Adbuster that defines beauty in terms of health rather than thinness. The choice is theirs.

#### Step 5: Outlining and Adbuster design

In this step the students write detailed outlines of their two paragraphs and then begin work on the Adbuster itself. Two students from a group of four use their work from both the freewriting and brainstorming steps to work on the first paragraph describing the hidden messages, and the other two students do the same with the second paragraph critiquing the hidden messages. Then all four members of the group work together to outline the Adbuster.

To assist, the teacher can give each subgroup an outline worksheet for an academic paragraph. Outline worksheets are easy to create and only require spaces for the topic sentence, supporting details, and the concluding sentence in its simplest form. The teacher can create a worksheet that is laid out in the same format as the target writing, but with headings denoting each important section and a certain amount of space below each one for the students to fill in their ideas.

For the Adbuster, the students can first decide whether they will "bust" the assumptions in the ad, or the use of the actual product. Then, they can determine the kinds of images they will use to express their ideas. The teacher may want to provide a worksheet the students can use to record these ideas. The worksheet should require the students to (1) write down the central messages of the advertisement, (2) make a list of assumptions made by the advertisement, and (3) analyze the possible effects of using the product that are not revealed in the advertisement (e.g., What is there about this product that the company selling it to you may not want you to know? How does the main message compare to reality?).

The *Deconstructing an Advertisement* worksheet (Media Education Foundation 2005) should have given the students the analytical tools necessary to complete this stage of the activity. Once the students have made a list of the central message, the assumptions, and the untold effects of using the product, they can begin considering which messages they will oppose in their Adbuster, or whether they will choose to explore the negative side effects of using a product, such as the negative effects of smoking on health or the use of cars on the environment.

#### Step 6: First drafts and peer review

Once the outlines and basic Adbuster design are completed, the groups begin the more detailed work of drafting their projects' final appearance. The length required for each paragraph is up to the teacher, but it may be anywhere from five to fifteen sentences. Student subgroups may work on their paragraphs and the Adbuster simultaneously, or they may choose to work on the Adbuster after they complete the paragraphs. When they write the paragraphs, the students should use all the work they have done up to this point (freewriting, brainstorming, and outlining) to help them to create their first draft. This first draft can either be handwritten or typed, but it must be neat so that they will be able to use it during the upcoming peer review activity. Since the Adbuster may take a while to put together, they may be given time to finish it outside of class.

When the subgroups finish the first draft, they can begin the peer review process by exchanging paragraphs within their groups and completing a peer review worksheet. This

worksheet should contain several open-ended questions about their groupmates' paragraph that require them to read it closely and think critically about both its structure and content. Example questions might be:

- How well do the paragraph's supporting details follow the topic established by the first sentence?
- Are there any details that do not belong? If so, what are they? Why don't they belong?

Students should then write comments that they believe will help their groupmates write a better second draft. It is always best for a teacher to prepare worksheets designed for his or her specific group of students, and various examples can be found on the Internet. Since the ideas in the second paragraph must "complement" or respond to the ideas in the first, it is expected that the subgroups will speak to one another and exchange ideas to agree on the main ideas of each of their respective paragraphs. For more information on the techniques and effectiveness of peer assessment, see Mendonça and Johnson (1994) and Bartels (2003).

A variation of this activity can involve groups sharing their first drafts with other groups, rather than simply exchanging within their own groups. This may give students more ideas on ways they can improve their writing and also provide a fresh perspective on their own work.

#### Step 7: Second draft and final Adbuster

Students write a second draft of the two paragraphs and make improvements based on comments they received from their group members. Upon completion of this step, the teacher should collect all the work done up to this point by all groups and provide specific feedback to help students create better final drafts. This work includes all drafts of paragraphs, worksheets, and the advertisement. Since it has been suggested that written feedback in the form of explicit language error correction may not be effective and, in fact, may have a negative effect on a student's accuracy (Truscott 2007), it may be most helpful to supply most comments on structure and content.

While the groups wait for the teacher to return their drafts, they can finish working on the Adbuster and begin drafting an outline of the presentation they will give to their classmates on the final day of the lesson. The teacher should tell the groups what will be expected of them.

#### Step 8: Class presentation and final draft

When students get back their second drafts, time should be spent during class to allow the groups to look over the teacher's comments and ask questions about them. Then, students can create their final drafts.

On the final day of the lesson, groups will give a 10- to 15-minute presentation of their work to their classmates and the teacher. In this presentation, they will (1) briefly share and describe their original advertisement, (2) share the ideas in their paragraphs with the class, (3) share and describe their Adbuster, and (4) field questions from their classmates.

We suggest that the teacher require all group members to speak. When they finish, they will turn in not only the most recent versions of their work, but also every previous draft. The paragraphs' final drafts must be typed and must conform to the standards of style the students will be expected to use in their later studies. In addition to class presentations, students can share their work with other classes at their school through exhibits or school-wide presentations and at gatherings of parents or other members of the community.

#### Step 9: Teacher assessment

Because this is a writing lesson, the teacher will evaluate the groups primarily on their work in the paragraphs' final drafts. But the teacher may also assess students' progression through the various drafts, their class presentation, and the clarity of ideas represented in the Adbuster. After delivering the final assessment, the teacher can also schedule individual group conferences to discuss the assessment in more detail and to answer any questions students may have.

In a conference setting, the teacher can provide suggestions for further improvement and also discuss the effectiveness of formative feedback provided both by the teacher and by their peers while students were working on their project. How can students better take advantage of this kind of feedback? What strategies can students employ to correct mistakes made in planning and implementation while they are still in the process of creating their work?

Finally, the teacher can post the groups' work on the classroom walls and later publish it in a class binder that can be used to inspire and inform future students.

### Step 10: Peer and self assessment

In addition to assessment from the teacher, the groups can also receive feedback from their peers. This can be done in the form of anonymous peer assessment worksheets that their classmates fill out during and after each presentation and give to the groups once all presentations are completed. The teacher may determine the exact nature of this assessment, but it would work best if students are asked to comment on their classmates' clarity of ideas and creativity and diligence of approach in relation to the description of their advertisement's hidden message and the extent to which they expose their advertisement's untruths and unspoken realities in their second paragraph and Adbuster. Like the peer reviews of the paragraphs' first drafts, this assessment should include open-ended questions that either allow for or require more than a few words from the evaluator.

The teacher may also provide the students with self-assessment worksheets. These worksheets can include questions about how well the students feel they completed each step of the process, how they felt about working on their particular portion of the project, and if they would choose a different role if or when they complete a similar project. The worksheet can also ask students to comment on which steps and segments of the project they found most difficult or easy and why, and how they felt about working in their group and subgroup. And, of course, the worksheet can ask students to provide an honest overall assessment of their group's final product. The peer and self assessments should not affect students' formal grades.

### Conclusion

Because of the nature of our ever-changing and ever-shrinking world and the increasing reach of American popular culture across the globe, students of English as a foreign language need more than simple language instruction. Indeed, these students need the critical thinking skills necessary to process and evaluate a constant barrage of multimedia information that shapes their values, assumptions, and attitudes. In addition, many students need instruction in university-level academic writing, which requires analytical thinking skills. Since advertisements are of interest to college-age students, and since research has consistently shown that meaningful task-based instruction is one of the best methods for improving students' language proficiency, the use of advertisements and Adbusters in a process-centered writing lesson is a worthwhile endeavor. Such an approach provides students not only with greater motivation to write and to engage their creativity, but it also leads them toward a higher awareness of contemporary social, global, and cultural movements.

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