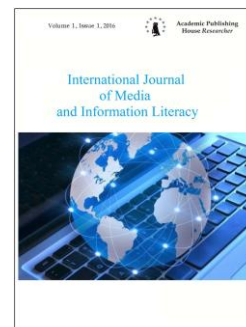


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Published in the Slovak Republic
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy
Has been issued since 2016.
E-ISSN: 2500-106X
2017, 2(2): 61-67

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2017.2.61
www.ejournal46.com



Implementing Media Literacy Education in the Junior Secondary English Curriculum in Hong Kong: Reasons and Limitations

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Abstract

We live in a world that is saturated with mass media, consumed on a daily basis. Students spend a lot of time on media and they are susceptible to the messages conveyed by the media. What can teachers do? Schools must help students develop their analytical and critical thinking skills, so that they can evaluate critically information that relates to important issues that affect the community and the implementation of media literacy education is called upon (Cheung, 2004; Considine et al., 2009). Through the questionnaire survey and also interviews of teachers, this study identifies the major reasons and problems of implementing media literacy education in English curriculum at junior secondary level. Most of the teachers perceived the flexible content of English language and the close relationship between the teaching of English four skills and media literacy education were factors favoured the implementation in the English curriculum. And the major limitations observed by the respondents are: the lack of time, heavy workload and the lack of teacher training.

Keywords: media literacy education, social media, Hong Kong, secondary schools, English teaching.

1. Introduction

Background to the study. During the past few decades, the mass media in Hong Kong have simultaneously developed an environment in which people now live. In order to keep themselves updated, the mass media have become a continuing necessity for all of the people. With the information explosion since the beginning of the new millennium, the media are considered major agents of socialization for young people today, becoming their major source of communication, knowledge and information. In view of this, the innovation of a new curriculum, media literacy education, has been recommended (Cheung, 2017). If media literacy education is to be implemented into the existing curriculum, the question will be how it can be done. The researchers want to see if it can be part of the English curriculum and as a start; it can be firstly introduced in junior secondary level before placing in all levels. The purpose of this study is to investigate the responses from the teachers towards this new curriculum innovation. Two questions regarding the implementation of media literacy education in English curriculum at junior secondary level in Hong Kong were asked:

1. What were the major reasons and factors perceived by junior secondary English teachers in Hong Kong towards this curriculum innovation?

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2. What were the limitations and problems that possibly hinder the implementation?

Local context. Early adolescence, as mentioned by Slavin (Salvin, 1994: 96), 'is a time of rapid physical and intellectual development.' They will undergo a swift transition in their physical appearance, cognitive change and socioemotional development. Thus, they react quickly and strongly towards what they experience, and are affected by the surroundings very easily.

Students in Hong Kong spend a large amount of time on the mass media (Cheung, 2015). They are living in a world with the prosperous mass media and growing technologies which dominate their daily lives. They entertain, obtain information and even communicate through mass media and telecommunications technologies. With this great consumption, thus, they are susceptible to the messages conveyed by the media. Nowadays, using social media is among the most common activity of today's students. Facebook has over 2 billion users and the number of people using Instagram and Snapchat is on the rise exponentially. While many young people use these sites for entertainment and communication, potential negative influences like cyberbullying, online harassment, and sexting should not be neglected.

There have been dramatic advances in new communication technologies during recent decades. As communication technology plays an increasingly important role in post-industrial society, Melucci (Melucci, 1994) conceptualizes this society as an 'information society' in which a great deal of social struggle has shifted from political ground to cultural ground. Mass media have become a site of struggle for the symbolic control of the new society. In short, with the rapid growth in communications and information technology in Hong Kong, adolescents are nakedly exposed to the media and continuously influenced by them. The commercialized and overloaded media information may impose negative influences on the youngsters in terms of their values, emotions, behaviors, etc. Hence, the innovation of media literacy education, primarily aiming at helping students develop critical understanding and analysis of mass media, meets the needs in Hong Kong.

Media literacy education and English teaching. Goodwyn defines the relationship between media literacy education and the English language. He claims that the definition of English is very broad, which is 'a study of the production and receptions of texts in English and the contexts in which those processes take place' (Goodwyn, 1992: 1). As to text, he defines as any meaningful utterance including speech and media output and writing. As to contexts, he refers to everything from society and culture to two speakers in conversation. Under this broad definition, undoubtedly, media literacy education falls in this domain.

Buckingham (Buckingham, 1991) also regards media literacy education as similar to English in the sense that both of them do not specify their content. They just go on naturally and spontaneously. Research done by Hart & Hicks (Hart, Hicks, 1999) noted the increasing popularity of media literacy education being taught within English lessons and Rother (Rother, 2000) stresses the important link between English teaching and media literacy education and the work of Dvorghets & Shaturnaya (Dvorghets, Shaturnaya, 2015) acknowledge the use of media literacy education in the teaching of English. Since its content is flexible, the introduction of media literacy education into the English curriculum is not difficult and in fact many teachers have used songs and movies to teach students listening and oral skills (Domoney, Harris, 1993; Cheung, 2001).

2. Materials and methods

First a quantitative questionnaire survey is conducted for collecting general and standardized data from a number of English teachers who teach junior forms in secondary schools. It is followed by several interviews so as to elicit individual opinions of introducing media literacy education to the junior English curriculum. The interviewees consist of voluntary respondents of the questionnaire for follow-up interviews and two specialists who are invited for elite interviews. The data collected from the questionnaire survey was processed by the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) programme. All of the interviews were tape-recorded.

The questionnaire survey. Totally, there are three questions. The first question is concerned with the personal data of the respondents. The second question examines the reasons of the innovation in the English curriculum. The third one seeks to find out the significant problems affecting the implementation. The name and contact number of the respondents are filled in the last question at their disposal.

After the pilot test, one hundred and twenty questionnaires were given out and one hundred were collected. The return rate was 83.3 percent. The sample comprised convenient sampling of teachers who taught S1 to S3 English. One hundred and twenty questionnaires were sent to the teachers, including thirty-five English teachers who were studying Master of Education (part-time) at the University of Hong Kong, sixty teachers invited by graduates of Bachelor of Education (English) and the rest invited by the researchers. The sample covered teachers from schools taking different academic levels of students. Among the respondents, eighteen were experienced teachers with more than 11 years of teaching experience. Twenty teachers had taught for 6 to 10 years while most respondents, thirty-eight teachers had been teaching English for 2 to 5 years. The remaining twenty-four were teachers who had 0 to 1 year experience in teaching English. Out of one hundred respondents, only five had claimed to have attended courses or seminars or workshops regarding media literacy education.

The interview. The follow-up interview was conducted on a voluntary basis. A total of ten respondents out of the one hundred returned questionnaires showed interest to attend a follow-up interview and six were chosen. These respondents included teachers of different gender, different English teaching experiences, from schools taking different academic levels of students.

Two elite interviews were also conducted. One of the interviewees was an English specialist who was a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong and had taught English for many years. The other one was a university lecturer, specializing in the study of the implementation of media literacy education in Canada. The same open-ended questions used in the follow-up interviews were asked.

3. Results

Major reasons of implementing media literacy education in English curriculum (Table 1)

Close relation to four language skills. English teaching involves the teaching of four language skills (Reading, listening, writing and speaking). Reflected by most teachers (80%) from the questionnaires, the most important reason leading to the implementation of media literacy education in the English curriculum was media literacy education has a close relation with the teaching of four language skills. From the interviews, teachers claimed that media literacy education was closely linked to English teaching in the sense that the mass media must be received by these four skills. For example, people listen to a song, read a newspaper article, write an electronic mail to a friend and ask for information from someone who speaks English. It is therefore quite natural for media literacy education to be implemented in the subject of English.

Flexible content. Respondents see another major reason why media literacy education is implemented in the English curriculum is the flexible content of English. Though guidelines and suggestions are provided in the Syllabus, what teachers teach and how they teach are up to them. More than three-quarters (76 %) of the teachers claimed the English teaching content is flexible. One interviewee stated, 'I have the freedom to use the materials and methods under the condition that it is healthy and suitable for the students in terms of their abilities and interests. So, I totally agree that English is very flexible in content and is suitable in teaching media literacy education.' Furthermore, this also matches what Buckingham (1991) mentioned that English and media literacy education are similar as they are not bound by specific content.

Students' interest. Around three-quarters of the respondents (74 %) think that the introduction of media literacy education in English lessons can motivate students to learn. Motivation is some kind of drive that can push someone to pursue a course of action. It 'is thus the starting point for learning' (Biggs, Moore, 1993: 258).

In a typical Hong Kong classroom, English learning activities are generally teacher-centred and form-accuracy-oriented. Mok (Mok, 1990: 1) regards these as "classroom English" which does not help students to apply what they have learnt in real-life situations. As "classroom English" does not function like a language for meaningful and purposeful communication, Chinese students either show little interest or feel no need to learn English.

As learning is a goal-oriented activity, the teachers' task is to involve students in a search for meaning and importance in learning materials with a pleasurable experience towards the goal. Since students spend a lot of their leisure time exposing to media, they will be interested to learn more about things related to media. If teachers can make use of it in a teaching context, in which students find a need to learn and have something to achieve, students' attention can be organized

through desire rather than coercion. When they see that their own experience is reflected and the work they do can meet their needs, learning is likely to occur. A teacher shared his experience in the interview:

Students respond well whenever I use examples from the media. It seems to be meaningful and relevant to their daily lives.

Table 1. Reasons of Implementing Media Literacy Education in the English Curriculum (%)

Reasons	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly disagreed
(a) Compared with other subjects, more native speakers teach English, who have more exposure to media literacy education in the west.	9	25	37	22	7
(b) Content in English is more flexible, e.g. using a song to teach both English and media literacy education.	19	57	15	6	3
(c) English is more important than other subjects.	8	24	45	15	8
(d) It can increase students' interest of learning English.	15	59	15	9	2
(e) Media literacy education has a close relation with the teaching of 4 skills. (reading, listening, speaking, and writing)	13	67	12	6	2
(f) There are more English lessons.	7	35	40	10	8

Major problems in the implementation (Table 2).

Heavy teacher workload and insufficient time. It is not surprising that teachers, particularly language teachers, are always complaining about the heavy workload in schools. Mok (Mok, 1997: 1) notes that 'English is a compulsory subject learnt in Hong Kong schools. It occupies about 20 % of the total teaching time in lower secondary classes and about 15 % in upper secondary levels.' In general, a junior secondary English teacher needs to give six lessons per day on average. Apart from the normal daily teaching duties, he or she has to participate in extra-curricular activities and school administrative work. The time is fully occupied by all these school work. Thus, it is very difficult for him or her to make time for developing media education. Therefore, it is understandable the two main problems the teachers reflected in the questionnaires are: heavy workload and insufficient time. Almost all teachers (92 %) agreed that the heavy workload chiefly affects the implementation of media literacy education.

Lack of training/resources. Training is essential to the development of a subject. From the findings, another major limitation regarded by the many teachers (80 %) which probably hinders the media literacy education development is a lack of training. This result matches the findings of Fullan (Fullan, 1989) and Cheung (Cheung, 2004). One of the factors contributing to a successful curriculum innovation is the provision of teacher training. Otherwise, like Germany, though it had the strong initiative to develop media literacy education, it was unsuccessful due to the lack of funding, as well as training (Bazalgette et al., 1990).

Besides the provision of teacher training, respondents during the interviews also commented on the lack of support to develop a new curriculum. It can be in terms of government support or the

provision of resources. Looking at successful examples like Ontario in Canada and England, people involved had systematic and careful planning. For example, organizations like Association for Media Literacy (AML) in Canada and the British Film Institute (BFI) in England were founded for further planning and development of media literacy education. Training and researches are continually held and teaching resources are also provided for the teachers.

The curriculum itself. While media literacy education is not a subject in Hong Kong, there is no such curriculum. Unlike other marginalized subjects like civic education and sex education where at least a set of guidelines had been developed, teachers who want to develop media education do not know where to search for syllabus and curriculum guidelines, let alone the search for teaching materials.

The language problem. The language issue was not addressed in the questionnaire but almost every interviewee recommended that despite all the favourable reasons mentioned above, English may not be the best subject to carry out media education. The reason is simple. As over 90% of mass media are conducted, presented and processed in the first language, Chinese, it would be more reasonable and suitable to integrate media literacy education into the Chinese language.

Table 2. Problems of Implementing Media Literacy Education at Junior Secondary Level in the English Curriculum (%)

<i>Problems</i>	<i>Strongly agreed</i>	<i>Agreed</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagreed</i>	<i>Strongly disagreed</i>
(a) Teachers think that there is no link between media literacy education and English teaching.	3	30	24	27	16
(b) The workload of teachers is very heavy.	50	42	3	3	2
(c) There is a lack of support from the Education Department.	14	41	38	6	1
(d) There is a lack of relevant and useful teaching materials.	18	45	25	11	1
(e) There is a lack of training for teachers.	25	55	13	6	1
(f) There is insufficient teaching time.	35	48	9	7	1
(g) There is no/unclear media literacy education curriculum guideline.	25	48	18	8	1

4. Discussion

Increasing awareness of media literacy education. Not every teacher knows what 'media literacy education' is. Some misinterpreted 'media literacy education' as making uses of mass media as teaching aids. Participating in this study, the respondents, particularly the interviewees, first got to know clearly and appropriately the idea of media literacy education. Their responses obtained from the questionnaires and interviews mirrored a current Hong Kong situation that people are continuously influenced by the mass media and the growing infotechnology. While some support media literacy education in the hope that the teaching of it can prevent students from the bad influence of media messages, the essence of media literacy education where media pedagogy is structured through active learning, collaborative problem solving, with high levels of motivation and enthusiasm should be made more explicit to teachers.

Providing teacher training and resources on media literacy education. From the interviews, the teachers showed positive attitudes towards the new curricular innovation, though they were not familiar with it. As mentioned, lack of training is one of the major limitations hindering the implementation of media literacy education. For developing this discipline in the future, teacher training is indispensable. Taking part in the training, teachers can get themselves more familiar with the concept and can learn the teaching methods and skills. Apart from the training in the pre-implementation stage, regular training courses or discussion groups are essential during the implementation stage. Teachers can share their experiences with other teachers, voice out any problems and solve the problems together. Furthermore, resources should be given to the development of media literacy education and the Education Department should provide financial and manual support.

Suggestions on implementing media literacy education in Chinese language. Despite the importance of media literacy education, the way it is implemented is another concern. In Hong Kong where most of the media messages are predominantly in Chinese, some teachers from the interviews suggest that it may be better for media literacy education to be implemented through the subject of Chinese Language.

5. Conclusion

Twentieth-century educators have been challenged by a fierce and irresistible competition: our students are overwhelmed by the information transmitted by the media. The media has become students' 'First Curriculum', with school taking second place. The importance of media literacy education is noted as it helps develop students' critical autonomy in understanding the mass media. The next question is where it could be placed. While it is implemented in the English curriculum in many countries, teachers in Hong Kong see the reasons as well as limitations in implementing media literacy education in the junior secondary English curriculum in Hong Kong. In view of some teachers' suggestions from the interviews, it is a good attempt to investigate the implementation of media literacy education in other subjects, rather than English, in order to compare the different views between this study and the future ones.

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