

Information overload: An EFL classroom mediation project to develop media literacy

Lena Katzinger, Barbara Köstlinger, Katharina Steinau,
Katharina Tischler¹

This study

- highlights the relevance of critical media literacy for teachers and students;
- describes the steps of a genre mediation project;
- explains the enormous potential of such a project in developing critical digital media literacy;
- suggests a concrete example of how to apply the gained knowledge in a school context.

1. Rationale

Regarding the fact that “media consumption is growing exponentially” (Christian, 2020, p. 14), with some researchers even speaking of our society as being “saturated by media” (Koltay, 2011, p. 211) and people spending an increasing amount of time on screen (Koltay, 2011, p. 212), it is not surprising that in the face of this overload of information, the quality of engagement with individual texts or media has become superficial and less critical (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. XV). Moreover, it has been found that social media function as the main source of news for 35 per cent of people (Mitchell et al., 2018, paragraph 13), with young adults preferably using Facebook in this respect (Christian, 2020, p. 186-187). These developments, together with the circumstance that “democratic societies depend on media literate citizens who are equipped with accurate information, who understand how to mobilize using social media to exercise free speech and who can evaluate propaganda and see it for what it is” (Christian, 2020, p. 8), highlight the urgent need of (critical) media literacy and especially digital media literacy in 21st century EFL classrooms.

In the context of Austrian schools, the government has introduced *Digitale Grundbildung* (basic digital literacy) as an obligatory part of the curriculum in 2018. Every teacher, irrespective of the subject, has to include digital literacy in their lessons. In most cases, however, having grown up in an environment of rapid technological developments and social media, students are more familiar with media culture than their teachers (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 7), which does not necessarily imply that they are also able to critically engage with different kinds of

¹ lena.katzinger@univie.ac.at, b.koestlinger@gmx.net, katharina.steinau@bildung.gv.at, a01446560@unet.univie.ac.at (University of Vienna, Department for English and American Studies)

media. This appears to be a major challenge for educators who want to equip their students with digital media literacy and, as Kellner and Share (2019, p. 7) put it, “critical media pedagogy is in its infancy; it is just beginning to develop, and is more open and experimental than established print-oriented pedagogy”. For such a pedagogy to emerge, “media literacy needs to begin with teachers, preferably during their formal schooling” (Butler, 2020, p. 1). In this respect, Kellner and Share (2019, p. 13) further explain that “[e]ducators need to critically engage new technologies and social media to expand literacies from book to media to new digital literacies”. Based upon a project, which was conducted in the context of a university language course for pre-service teachers in the Master of Education program, this paper aims to offer a possible way for teachers to develop critical digital media literacy. Thereby, we hope to provide a contribution to the development of critical digital media pedagogy.

As media literacy also encompasses the ability to deconstruct texts in order to critically analyse their elements and to understand their importance for conveying a text’s message (Christian, 2020, p. 78), we conducted a genre analysis for *online articles* on the one hand and *captioned social media news videos* on the other hand. We chose these genres because we considered them relevant for our target group of teenage and young adult learners. The second genre especially raised our interest as it is newly emerging and mainly appearing on social media channels like Facebook. In these videos, users usually receive the most important facts concerning major events or news stories through imagery and a small amount of text in the form of captions in under one and a half minutes. In addition, the time needed to read extensive newspaper articles is often not available. Consequently, a growing audience relies on the information gained from captioned news videos (Martin, 2018). Together with the current topic of ‘fake news’, it seems crucial to critically analyse what and how much information is omitted when complex issues are reduced to short videos.

Researchers have already investigated the impact of video subtitles on EFL learners’ listening comprehension skills (cf. Alabsi, 2020; Basaran & Köse, 2013) and on productive vocabulary (cf. Hsu, 2013). In these videos, subtitles reproduce the spoken content in a written format and can thus be considered as an additional feature. However, in the videos we analysed, the captions present essential information since there does not occur any spoken text. This also ties in with the remarks of Goryachev and his colleagues (2019, p. 243), who describe a shift towards more “visualized information”, as “the consumer of mass information does not read this information as a whole but looks at it” (p. 234). For reference to this specific type of video and due to the lack of respective terminology, we coined them *captioned social media news videos*. In our university project, we transformed an online article into a *captioned social media news video*, meeting the demand of being able to also produce different genres in order to approach critical media literacy.

2. Theoretical concepts

In this section, relevant terms and concepts for our project will be explained in more detail.

Critical (digital) media literacy

According to the National Association of Media Literacy Education (2020), the more general term of media literacy “engages in the thoughtful understanding of all texts in our media environment, including print, visual, audio, interactive, and digital texts” (paragraph 3). Critical

media literacy, then, is being described as the ability to “decode, comprehend, critically engage with and produce the texts of everyday life” (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. VIII).

Critical digital media literacy focuses on digital genres such as the ones we focussed on in the course of our project and this concept includes the students’ ability to “evaluate and use information critically if they are to transform it into knowledge” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 25). Moreover, “[t]his means asking questions about the sources of that information, the interests of its producers, and the ways in which it represents the world; and understanding how these technological developments are related to broader social, political and economic forces” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 25). In this respect, Kellner and Share (2019) mention that “training in critical media literacy [...] must not only provide access but the ability to use and reconstruct new technologies and media to engage in social discussion, media production and creation, and socio-political participation in contemporary society” (p. 2).

Especially the aspects of reconstructing, producing and engaging critically with digital genres have been in the centre of our project. By providing a detailed description of the various steps of our project and by suggesting a possible implementation in the English language classroom based on our insights, we hope to contribute to the field of critical digital media literacy pedagogy.

Text transformation and mediation

In our context, text mediation can also be understood as text transformation and as such refers to the process in which the content of a text of one genre is transformed into the text of another genre (Caudery, 1998). In terms of critical digital media literacy, this is of relevance insofar, as by transforming a text from one genre to another, one not only has to critically engage with genre-specific features and thus deconstruct a text, but it additionally involves the production of a text.

Mediation, which “can be defined as the act of adapting and reformulating content from one context to another in order to make the content comprehensible to different audiences” (Smith-Dluha, forthcoming), is also part of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. In this document, mediation is described as a process in which “the user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes across modalities [...] and sometimes from one language to another” (CEFR Companion Volume, 2020, p. 90). More specifically, we focused on *Processing text*, which “involves understanding the information and/or arguments included in the source text and then transferring these to another text, usually *in a more condensed form*, in a way that is appropriate to the context” (CEFR Companion Volume, 2020, p. 98, emphasis added).

Multimodality

The concept of multimodality “refers to the various resources - among them, images, sounds, document design, and graphics - that authors tap to create meaning in all kinds of texts” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014, p. 514). The analysis of multimodality in the context of critical digital media literacy is highly relevant as “[d]igital texts gain new potential to be *multimodal* (combining different formats)” (Beach, 2009 cited in Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 56). The concept of multimodality is a central issue in our analysis and will be explained in more detail in section 4.2.

3. Research questions

As mentioned above, the article at hand emerged from a mediation project conducted in a language competence course at the Department of English at the University of Vienna. While the research question in this initial project was mainly focused on linguistic aspects of different genres (How does multimodality influence the coherence and cohesion of captioned social media news videos in contrast to online articles on climate change?), for this paper, our focus shifted more towards educational and socio-cultural aspects.

During our university project, we became aware of how the thorough genre analysis and text transformation profoundly promoted our critical digital media literacy. Therefore, we thought of how we could share this knowledge with colleagues, and, for this article, we tried to answer the following research question:

How can a mediation project between online articles and captioned social media news videos help to build critical digital media literacy in (pre-service) teachers and students?

The attempt to answer this research question includes a detailed description of our university project and a critical discussion of our findings, which highlights the relevance of critical digital media literacy for the teaching context and includes a possible application for the language classroom. Thereby, we will illustrate how and what teachers as well as students can learn from text transformation projects involving digital genres.

4. Study description

In the following section, the material and methodology used in the university project are described. The materials consist of two online articles and two captioned social media news videos compared by means of a genre analysis, i.e. “uncovering rhetorical patterns and their linguistic realisations” (Bremner, 2018, p. 29) and an analysis of multimodality, i.e. “breaking down the object of study into its component parts, working out how the components – or modes – work together to make meaning” (Flewitt, Price, Korkiakangas 2019, p. 3). These concepts will be further developed in section 4.2. As a last step, one chosen article was transformed into a captioned social media news video.

4.1 Materials

The genres under analysis are online articles published in well-known news magazines, on the one hand, and captioned social media news videos retrieved from Facebook, on the other. While all chosen texts focus on the overall topic of climate consciousness, they vary considerably in length and representation of the issue.

The online articles, taken from *BBC Future* (Timberely, 2019) and *TIME Magazine* (Abend, 2019), were chosen due to two main reasons. First, they provide typical examples of extensive online readings, structured in a genre specific way with images typical to online articles, and offer a similar move structure (BBC, 2020). The move structure identified consists of the following elements: headline, telling photograph, teaser, author, date and time, lead-in anecdote, main body, ending, email address, links. In addition, online articles are suitable for

a transformation into a captioned social media news video due to their coherent structure and topic relevance.

Moving on to the captioned social media news videos, this new and emerging genre is characterized by the shortness of the videos and the use of subtitles (see Example 1 below). The subtitles are supplemented by motion pictures, still images and background music. These items combine to inform a broad online audience about recent news. For our project, we chose videos produced by *World Economic Forum* (2019) and *1 Million Women* (2019) due to their similar design: their shared move structure (introductory statement, sources, main body, question or directive, logo), audio as well as visual representation and lack of speech.

Example 1: Screenshot of a typical captioned social media news video



(World Economic Forum 2019)

4.2 Methodology

Genre analysis

By following Swales' approach to genre analysis, which combines rhetoric and linguistics to make sense of a speech product, the texts' communicative purposes were discovered (Tardy & Swales, 2014, p. 168). In the course of this genre analysis phase of the project, a move analysis was carried out to determine the macro structure of the four chosen texts, where both obligatory and optional moves were identified. Based on Swales' (2004) understanding, a move analysis is the study of a "discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse" (p. 228).

Apart from the move analysis, a lexico-grammatical analysis provided insights into the micro-structure of the speech products. To put it succinctly, the analysis of the micro-structure

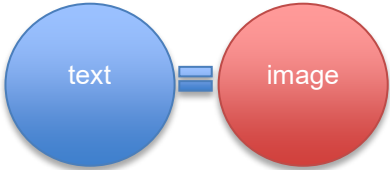
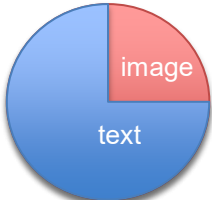
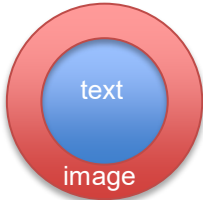
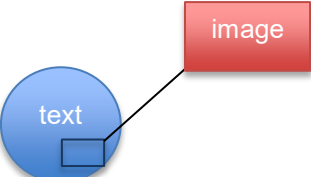
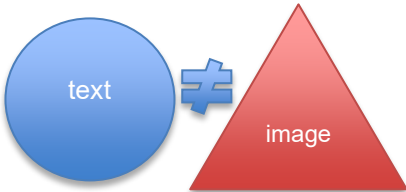
revealed comparatively long and complex structures in the online articles, opposed to short and simplex structures in the videos.

Multimodality

The texts chosen were analysed with regards to multimodality, with a particular focus on how images and text interact and on the logic of writing in contrast to the logic of images.

As far as the interaction between images and text is concerned, the model by Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 60) was applied in our analysis, according to which images and text can frame each other in three ways. To illustrate the ways in which images and text can frame each other, we have created the graph below (see Table 1). First, the information of image and text can be *concurrent*, meaning that both provide the same information. Second, they can be *complementary* in three different ways, namely by explaining the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a certain phenomenon or situation, by providing additional information to the text or by just restating or specifying the main text’s information. Third, text and images can also convey *divergent* meanings, which might be used for provocation.

Table 1: *Ways in which image and text can frame each other* (based on Jones & Hafner, 2012, 60)

concurrent information			
complementary information			
divergent information			

The second concept used for the analysis of the primary texts is the one of the logic of writing as opposed to the logic of image. On the one hand, it describes that writing is *sequential*, due to presenting one point after the other. On the other hand, images provide the audience with *spatial* and *simultaneous* information, since the whole picture and therefore, even polysemous meanings are shown at the same time (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 52). However, a video is both, namely sequential and spatial/simultaneous. In the sense of a narrative, not only visual information is presented through the pictures but also textual information due to the pictures appearing in a sequence (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 63). Therefore, the succession of pictures might even add elements of coherence and cohesion.

Text transformation

For our text transformation, the online article published in the *TIME Magazine* (Abend, 2019), was chosen for a transformation into a captioned social media news video. Thereby, the video was produced with a software called *Vidnami* (Noble Samurai Pty Ltd, 2020), which is available online as a free trial version. Concerning the production process, first, we worked carefully to shorten the content of the online article and to produce a transcript which still maintained the most important content elements. However, shortening the 2200 words text to 129 words undoubtedly led to some loss of information. In our case, concrete names (e.g. *Greta Thunberg*) and places had to be left out. Secondly, we entered our transcript text to the software and cut it into smaller chunks according to the slide layouts. This was followed by a selection of suitable photos and motion pictures that matched with the captions. As a next step, the transitions between and within the slides were adapted. Finally, background sound was added to reflect the mood of the video's overall message.

5. Findings

Based on the concept of Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 60) on how images and text can frame each other, namely *concurrently*, *complementarily* and *divergently*, it could be found that in both genres, images are used to convey different types of information. The analysis of the two online articles revealed that both genres used images in order to convey mainly concurrent information in terms of the message, although the small captions under the pictures and collages often provided complementary information since they often informed the reader about when and where the pictures were taken. However, it can be claimed that the images were not at all essential for the understanding of the text or the main messages in the more conventional online articles; they rather fulfil an aesthetic purpose and visually help to structure the text, i.e. they mainly present concurrent information. In the captioned social media news videos, on the contrary, images frequently provided the audience with complementary information to the text – in this case the large bold white sans-serif font captions – and explained mainly the 'how' and 'why', as well as specifying information of the main text. Thus, images are much more important in the videos in order to communicate information and messages and to ultimately create a completer and more comprehensible source of information.

Example 2: *Complementary information in captioned social media news videos*

The 'what' (*growing of more than 50 kinds of seasonal plants*) is expressed by the captions, but the 'how', namely the way in which these plants are grown in the shopping mall, is conveyed by the picture.



(1 Million Women 2019)

Concerning the concept of the logic of writing as opposed to the logic of image (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 52-63), it was found that the sequential information in the videos was added by the sequence of the images and not by the captions since the captions without the images could be regarded as quite incoherent and incohesive.

Example 3: *Missing cohesive devices in transcripts of captioned social media news videos*

South Korea has bins that charge you for throwing away food

Source: Ministry of Environment

Footage: Seoul Solutions, YouTube

In Seoul, the scheme has been hugely successful in changing people's habits

With 95% of food waste now recycled rather than dumped

(World Economic Forum, 2019)

On the other hand, the articles used more cohesive devices to establish a coherent and cohesive text with a clear line of argument.

Example 4: *Cohesive devices in online articles*

[...] **During the first six months of 2019**, the company, which also runs night trains between Malmo and Stockholm, **and**, in winter, to the ski town Åre, has seen a 20% increase in ticket sales. **Meanwhile**, flights between Malmo and Stockholm have declined 10% in the past year, and across Sweden, domestic flights on the whole have fallen 4.5% in **the first quarter of 2019** compared to the previous year, according to SJ, the national rail company.

Yet Sweden isn't the only place feeling the effects of *flygskam* (in fact, the Dutch, Germans, and Finns have their own words for it). [...] (Abend, 2019)

Therefore, the captions of the videos without the images and motion pictures are not likely to be perceived as coherent and cohesive and hence, not as a clear and structured source of information. All this leads to the assumption that images, and therefore also multimodality, are much more important in captioned social media news videos than in online articles in terms of creating an understandable and informative source, because as indicated above, the sequence of the images in the video presents not only visual but also textual information (Jones & Hafner, 2012, 63).

6. Conclusion

As reliable, useful sources examining the structure of newly emerging genres published on social media are not available, our insights could only be gained through a thorough analysis of the two genres and the following mediation of the content. Furthermore, when producing the video, we found that a low budget strongly limits the possibilities of video production. We could use a free trial version of the software *Vidnami*, which would otherwise come at a cost schools and many individuals could probably not afford (47\$/month; Noble Samurai Pty Ltd, *Pricing*). In addition, the sources for free stock pictures and videos were very limited and not having the capacities and equipment to produce our own, we were restricted in the choice of adequate images for our content. This made us realise that even if the advent of social media was presented as the chance for democratising news production (e.g. Smith, 2012), the creation of high-quality content that is likely to be shared online requires resources that are not accessible for everyone. The question of who has the power and resources to produce videos and in which interest is therefore vital to have in mind when watching and discussing news on social media. (Future) language teachers should not only seek to keep themselves updated with newly emerging genres, but they should also reflect upon how to teach such novel text types in class.

The overall finding of our project is that a mediation project cannot only help students in improving their second language reading and writing skills, but it can also help teachers as well as students in developing critical digital media literacy. Conducting an in-depth analysis and mediating the content of digital genres can be especially effective in uncovering structures and patterns and in enhancing a proper understanding of how the genres work on multiple levels. Ultimately, a mediation project can raise awareness for the importance to critically question the production and dissemination of news online. It can also help to realise that presenting complex issues in a very condensed format – as it is achieved in captioned social

media news videos – necessarily results in the loss of information. Enabling students to examine which information is omitted and to critically assess the selection of pictures that are used to convey content further adds to learners' media literacy.

Application Box

Reversed in-class mediation project

- B1+ level according to CEFR
- Text-based approach to writing
- Students realise the importance of cohesive devices.
Students can reflect upon the function of multimodality in online media.
Students can apply linking devices and connectors in a written task.
- **STEP 1:** Hand out a transcript of a captioned social media news video.
- **STEP 2:** Ask your students what makes this text an unusual piece of information. (expected answers: short sentences, no connection between the sentences, easy vocabulary, etc.)
- **STEP 3:** Watch the according video with the students.
- **STEP 4:** Analyse the differences between the written text and the video. (Make students aware of the importance of images for establishing coherence and cohesion in the video.)
- **STEP 5:** Discuss with your students how to transform the transcript into a cohesive and coherent written text. (expected answers: adding information taken from the images in the video, make use of linking words)
- **STEP 6:** Ask your students to produce a coherent and cohesive (online) article based on the content of the demonstrated video and the information gained through the activity.
- **STEP 7:** In the plenum, reflect upon the different outcomes and their implications for students' media literacy.

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