A Study on the Perceived Media Literacy Level of Preparatory Year Students in a University Setting[1]

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Abstract

Media literacy is defined as the ability to encode and decode the symbols transmitted via media and to synthesize, analyze and produce mediated messages. Media literacy raises questions about the impact of media and technology, which has the potential to increase individuals' awareness about the effects of media on daily life. The aim of media literacy is to help students become competent, critical and literate in media forms because they need to interpret what they see or hear and prevent the interpretation from controlling them. Therefore, perceptions of students about their media literacy is a topic that requires attention at various education levels. The present study aimed to identify preparatory year program students' self-perceptions about media literacy and to explore whether they benefited from mass media in learning a foreign language, English in this context. Data were collected using Media Literacy Level Determination Scale developed by Karatas (2008). Open-ended questions that aimed to reveal students' perceptions of media literacy were asked with a view to supporting the data obtained from the scale. Both data collection tools also aimed to find out the factors associated with media literacy. The findings of the study are believed to open a perspective for the stakeholders in language teaching process by providing insight into the university students' stance towards media literacy.

Keywords: *Media literacy; EFL students; Higher education; Preparatory school*

Introduction

Mass media include all forms of information communicated to large groups of people through technologies such as television, radio, newspapers, bill boards, posters, leaflets, booklets, and the like (Johnson, 2016). People from all segments of the society are exposed to massive amounts of media messages every day.

The role of internet in conveying those messages as well as accessing and sharing information have made reaching large groups of people very fast and easy. The time spent for consuming data has never been this much in the history of humanity, which makes people rely on the

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internet and computing tools more and more every day. This excessive exposure to the media brings the issue of literacy about media to the fore.

Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a wide variety of media modes and formats and encompasses recognizing the role and influence of media in society (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Hobbs, 1998). Hence, a media-literate person, according to Aufderheide (1992), is able to decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. Exposure to different kinds of media every day puts media literacy in a place as important as literacy. As suggested by Koltay (2011), media literacy is more likely to find its role as part of some kind of multiple or multimodal literacy. As stated by Meyers, Erickson, and Small (2013), the way that individuals, groups and societies communicate, learn, work and govern have changed with the changes and developments in media; this new form requires possessing not only skills and abilities related to the use of technological tools, but also having knowledge about the norms and practices of appropriate usage. Users of digital technologies often engage in a big range of literacy activities; digital literacy is about effectively participating in our new digital world (Meyers, Erickson & Small, 2013).

Receivers of the media messages are not totally passive when they are exposed to media. Here, the power of media in negotiating meaning is of great importance. The audience should be provided with critical thinking inquiry so that they can challenge the power of media to create preferred readings (Kellner & Share, 2005). As stated by Hobbs (1998), individuals should be helped to become aware of the constructed nature of messages and taught to be more aware of the motives, purposes, and points of view rooted in messages. Learners of this age, who are exposed to media more than the any other generations in the history of humanity, need such awareness. European Commission (2007) also reports that media literacy is having a critical approach to media in terms of both quality and accuracy of content; yet, further awareness is reported to be the nature and impact of mass media and the techniques used by them (Duncan, 2006). Given this critical role of media, it is quite important to raise awareness in academic settings, as well. Media literacy empowers people to actively participate in society, and despite families' obvious role in this matter, media are not confined within the walls of the parental home; hence, educational institutions have an important responsibility to prepare learners to use media in a suitable manner (Simons, Meeus, & T'Sas, 2017).

The issue of media literacy has been considered in educational settings in that media literacy is seen as a tool for empowerment. This approach emphasizes that young people should be capable, resilient and active in their choices as both media consumers and as creative producers; it values the joy of experiencing to be not only media consumers but also media makers (Jenkins et al., 2009). Media literacy education according to empowerment researchers focuses on preparing students rather than protecting them (Schilder, 2013); the goal is thus to expand students' literacy.

The relationship between language and media is interesting in terms of many aspects including the psychological, social, behavioral, and even financial effects. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules (Kellner & Share, 2005), which could place the use of media at the core for language learning. Things read and heard in media have the potential to provide authentic materials for learning foreign languages as well. Studies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Thorne, 2008a) report that today emerging information and communication media mediate globally disseminated processes of language development and literate engagement. This engagement brings language learners together in the technology-mediated arenas of language use. Some examples include instant messaging and synchronous chat, blogs

and wikis, multiplayer online gaming (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), social media, language learning platforms, video channels, etc. Such great increase in the involvement in mediated communication environments indicates that structured identities in second and foreign languages include as much as, even more than, non-digital forms of communication for a great majority of learners (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

Three key issues related to media literacy include accessing and sharing information, analyzing, and seeing the implied messages (Karatas, 2008). The role of media in accessing and sharing information has a dominating role in people's lives. However, the information accessed and shared requires consideration; media literacy in terms of information also refers to individuals' abilities to seek, locate, and select information to suit their needs because despite the participation, plurality, and diversity of opinions brought by the new technologies, there is also a stream of new challenges, such as unfiltered information, misinformation, and copyright issues (Martinsson, 2009). It is not always possible for learners to analyze the information they accessed critically or to decide whether the information is suitable, reliable, or valuable for them to use (Wood, 2004). People's acceptance of new forms of gathering information is high especially in developing countries, yet the important issue is beyond physical access to information through new technologies, which is access to quality content and ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply it (Martinsson, 2009). As media encompasses being a critical receiver of media messages, the audience should see and interpret the "implied messages that may be inherent in the media message" (Mraz & Heron, 2003).

As suggested by Castells (2004), the Internet is now one of the most important arenas for all manner of communicative activity, which requires the awareness of foreign language educators. How much of media consumption is used for foreign language learning and what kinds of opportunities are benefitted could help both teachers of foreign languages and students learning those languages. Although media literacy is not a new concept, it has taken more attention with the introduction of new and different types of media through the advances in technology. Such variety in different kinds of media could cause students to get confused about how to analyze and interpret the endless stream of media messages they are exposed to every day. Awareness about the real definition of media literacy and to use media in an effective way are of great importance; it is not a notion that concerns only adults, nor is it a skill that is gained at university. Therefore, this study puts prep class students, who are in the transition period between high school and university life at the department, into the focus. Considering that university education plays a role in shaping individuals' mind-sets, this study aims to uncover these students' self-perceptions about the use of media before they begin their undergraduate education. In addition, since the participating students are enrolled in the English preparatory program where they are exposed to intensive English language education, the present study also sets out to identify the probable ways that EFL students benefit from the mass media in learning a foreign language. Given the importance of media literacy and the large amount of time spent for consuming media, this study aimed to identify preparatory year program students' self-perceptions about media literacy and to explore whether they benefited from mass media in learning a foreign language, English in this context.

Methodology

Study Design

This study was descriptive in nature, and it utilized a mixed method approach. Data were collected through both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. Burke Johnson,

Onwueegbuzie, and Turner (2007) define mixed methods research as the type of research where the researcher integrate elements of qualitative and quantitative research for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. Mixed method research design combines the elements of quantitative and qualitative research and integrate the findings in a single systematic way (Heyvaert, Maes, & Onghena, 2013). The present study utilized concurrent mixed method strategy in order to validate one form of data with the other form, transform the data for comparison, and address different types of questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; p.118). In this strategy, generally qualitative and quantitative data are provided by the same people in order to compare the data more easily.

Participants

The present study was carried out in Adana Alparslan Turkes Science and Technology University in Turkey, with the participation of 189 students who were enrolled in the preparatory year program at School of Foreign Languages. All the participating students attended the preparatory year program in the fall semester of 2018-2019 academic year.

Data Collection Tools

Quantitative data were collected using the Media Literacy Level Determination Scale developed by Karatas (2008). The scale was administered in Turkish as it was originally developed. The scale had 17 questions about the level of media literacy. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert Scale (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Frequently, and 5=Always). The original scale was composed of three main parts as socio-demographic questions, statements about the use of mass media, and questions about students' media literacy level. The first two parts were adapted according to the purpose of the present study. Two questions about socio-demographic characteristics included "age" and "gender". Six questions were about using mass media such as "Do you have a computer that you can use whenever you wish", "Do you have internet access that you can use whenever you wish", "Is there a newspaper you follow regularly?, Is it hard copy or online?", "How often do you watch TV", "How often do you use internet?", and "For what purposes do you use internet?". The part related to media literacy level had three sub-scales as getting information, analyzing/ showing reaction, judging/seeing the implied messages. Cronbach's Alpha reliability co-efficiency of the scale was found $\alpha = 0.84$.

Qualitative data were collected through the open-ended questions prepared by the researchers in order to support the data collected from the quantitative scale. The open-ended questions were administered to all participants. Four open-ended questions were utilized with a view to exploring students' experiences using mass media for learning a foreign language. The questions used in this part of the data collection included the following:

1. "What is media literacy? Have you ever heard the concept of Media Literacy?"

2. "Do you benefit from mass media (TV, internet, radio, newspaper, cinema) in learning a foreign language?, If yes, how?"

3. "Are mass media (TV, internet, radio, newspaper, cinema) useful for learning a foreign language? If yes, how? If no, why?"

4. "What do you recommend to other people in learning a foreign language through media"?.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the Media Literacy Level Determination Scale were analyzed using SPSS 17.0. Descriptive statistics were displayed using means, frequencies and percentages. The data collected from the open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis. The purpose of the content analysis is to achieve a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon; concepts and the categories of the phenomenon emerge as a result of the analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The stages of content analysis include decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization and compilation (Bengtsson, 2016). Decontextualization stage starts with researcher's familiarizing with the data through reading to get the sense of whole. In the recontextualization stage, the researcher analyses the identified meaning units and clears off the unimportant information that does not address the aim of the study. Categorization stage is a condensation phase, and the categories and themes are identified. In the compilation stage, analysis and writing up process begins (Bengtsson, 2016).

Findings

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative data were presented together; and means, frequencies and percentages were used in order to demonstrate the findings. Presentation of the results obtained from the analysis of the quantitative data was done in two parts. While the first part demonstrated the demographic data descriptively, the second part included the mean scores of the students' responses presented with percentages.

Table 1. Descriptive Findings Regarding Age and Gender

Variables	Number	Percentage
Age		
17-22	177	93.7
23-28	6	3.2
29-34	4	2.1
35 and over	2	1.1
Gender		
Female	84	44.4
Male	105	55.6

The demographical features of the participants showed that a great majority of them (94%) were aged between 17 and 22, and only 1% were over age 35. This is very typical of on-campus student population in a university in Turkey. Male students formed the majority of the participants; out of 189 students, 84 (44%) were female and 105 (56%) were male.

As for the access to personal computer and internet, approximately three out of four students (74%) responded that they had computers in their environment; more than one out of ten students (91%) indicated that they could access to internet; however, six out of ten students (60%) did not follow a certain newspaper. The frequencies of using internet and watching TV are displayed in Table 4.

Table 2. Frequency of Using Internet and Watching TV

	Less than 1 hour		1 to 5 hours		6 to 10 hours		10 to 20 hours		More than 20 hours	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Frequency of watching TV	84	44.4	61	32.3	27	14.3	17	9.0	0	0.0
Frequency of using internet	0	0.0	7	3.7	22	11.6	50	26.5	110	58.2

Watching TV and using computer indicated opposite findings among the participants. While majority of the participants reportedly watched TV less frequently, they used internet up to more than 20 hours weekly. When the participants were asked about the purpose of using internet in general, a great majority (f=81) was found to use internet for "social media". Other responses regarding the purpose of using mass media in general included communicating (f=44), accessing information or searching (f=41), watching movies or soup operas (f=40), having fun/ killing time (f=33), watching the news (f=30), playing online games (f=28), and studying (f=17).

The first open-ended question in the qualitative data collection form aimed to find out whether the participants had heard about the term media literacy before. A great majority of the participants responded to this question as no (n=77); the number of participants who reportedly heard about this term was close to this amount (n=61). On the other hand, a number of participants (n=20) stated that they heard about this term before but could not remember it.

The second open-ended question required the participants to define media literacy. Responses to this question included "keeping up-to-date through internet" (f=10), which indicated that media literacy was considered to be related to following people and things in internet. Some of the participants provided the real definition of media literacy with the words "accessing, using and interpreting the media" (f=10). However, the other frequently mentioned items included "understanding the implicit message" (f=8), "thinking critically about the messages" (f=5), "using media accurately" (f=5), and "being objective while consuming media" (f=2). An interesting finding regarding the definition of media literacy was that a substantial number of students thought that media literacy was posting something on media (f=8) or using social media actively (f=5). Some examples of other less frequently cited responses also support this finding: media literacy is "posting comments in social media" (f=3), "literacy in social media" (f=3), "commenting on the news in social media" (f=3), "wisdom gained from the internet" (f=2) and "being a columnist" (f=2).

The Media Literacy Level Determination Scale administered to the participants to explore their perceived level of media literacy had three sub-scales as getting information, analyzing/showing reaction, and judging/seeing the implied messages. Descriptive statistics for the sub-scales were demonstrated in Table 3-5.

Table 3. Findings about the Getting Information Sub-scale

	Items	M	SD
5	Identifying with what purposes the messages were formed (social responsibility, information, consumption, etc.)	4.37	0.76
3	Recognizing the topics such as violence and consumption culture in mass media	4.32	0.78

2	Deciding whether the messages in mass media are correct or wrong on my own	4.25	0.86
6	Identifying the positive and negative sides of broadcasts in mass media	4.20	0.90
4	Recognizing the political, economic, cultural and social priorities of mass media	4.16	0.84
1	Recognizing the implied messages transmitted in mass media	3.59	0.93
7	Following whether broadcasts comply with the legal and ethical rules	3.49	1.15

The "Getting Information" sub-scale revealed above-average scores, indicating that the participants thought they used mass media consciously. Majority of the participants believed that they could always identify the purposes behind the messages in mass media. Likewise, nearly half of the participants thought that they could always decide whether the messages in mass media are correct or wrong. Beside the messages, most of the participants (81%) were of the opinion that they could realize the political, economic, cultural and social priorities in mass media. However, 38% of them thought that they could sometimes recognize the implied messages in mass media.

Table 4. Findings about the Analyzing/Showing reaction Sub-scale

	Items	M	SD
8	Recognizing quickly whether mass media perform biased reporting	4.35	0.88
11	Having competence in how mass media influence individuals	4.16	0.89
9	Having a critical look on the messages given in mass media	4.06	0.91
10	Having competence in analyzing the meanings of messages in mass media	4.05	0.82
13	Reacting to the messages in mass media positively and negatively	3.75	1.15
12	Suggesting ways of protecting against the negative broadcasts in mass media	3.32	1.18

The second sub-scale indicated that more than half of the participants could always recognize the partial reporting in mass media, and they could see how mass media affect individuals. Having a critical look on the messages of mass media (40%), the participants thought they could often react to the messages in mass media positively and negatively (33%).

Table 5. Findings about the Judging/Seeing the implied Messages Sub-scale

	Items	M	SD
17	Observing the effect of sponsors on the broadcast	3.96	0.93
14	Knowing that messages are developed differently in different mass media	3.89	0.96
16	Recognizing the hidden advertisement in mass media	3.88	1.00
15	Knowing how I, as an individual, can affect the production process in mass media	3.49	1.15

When it comes to the Judging/Seeing the implied messages sub-scale, the participants claimed that they could often observe the influence of the sponsors on the broadcast (38%). Similarly, they seemed to recognize the hidden advertisement in mass media (37%). They were also often aware that they could influence the production process in mass media (35%).

As for the participants' use of mass media in language learning, one of the open-ended questions aimed to find out how much of this media consumption was used for foreign language learning purposes. The participants were found to spend a great deal of time for watching movies or soup operas (f=75) and benefitting from the internet (f=27), which was also found to be used as a gate for videos in the target language (f=9). The participants' other less frequently cited responses regarding the use of mass media in language learning included translation and dictionaries (f=19), music in the target language (f=12), speaking applications (f=10), and language exercises (f=6).

When the participants were asked whether they found mass media beneficial for learning, except for three students who thought that it was not their style, all the participants reportedly found mass media beneficial for learning a foreign language. Those who found media beneficial were asked to indicate the benefits more specifically. Their answers included media enabled to watch movies and videos in English (f=29), to read books (f=19), to receive language input (f=19), to access information (f=23), to practice in the target language (f=20), to improve pronunciation (f=12), to learn vocabulary (f=10), to communicate (f=4), to play video games (f=5), and to listen to English music (f=6).

Finally, the participants were asked to give some recommendations about using media for the purpose of learning a foreign language. Majority of the participants recommended watching movies in the target language (f=65). Other responses included finding native friends to practice speaking (f=11), using language learning applications effectively (f=14), and being persistent while learning from mass media (f=12).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify preparatory year program students' self-perceptions about media literacy and to explore whether they benefited from mass media in learning a foreign language.

The participating students' perceived media literacy level did not differ by age or gender. Both female and male students seemed to have relatively high media literacy level. In their longitudinal study on the use of mobile tablet devices and changes in digital media literacy of young adults, Park and Burford (2013) found that females tended to have lower digital media literacy. On the other hand, in their study that investigated Spanish teachers' perception of their own and their students' digital competencies, Bravo , Jiménez, and Ramírez (2016) reported that gender had no effects on teachers' perceived level of digital competency. A number of studies in literature report no digital difference for gender in postsecondary settings (Ghatty, 2014; Morris & Chikwa, 2014).

More than half of the participants had computers in their environment, and the majority of them could access internet. While majority of the participants reportedly watched TV less frequently, they used internet up to more than 20 hours weekly. The participants were found to spend more time in internet in comparison to other forms of media including television, indicating that they have many different alternatives online which they may not find on TV. As Ayyad (2011) reported, all university students involved in his study could access internet and use it to meet their personal, social and education needs; moreover, internet was found to be viewed as one of the most important tools and as a threat to traditional mass media such TV and radio. Hossain and Rahman (2017) also suggested that internet was used frequently among students as a

popular tool to collect information and have fun. Parallel to the findings of the present study, Devi and Roy (2012) indicated that most of the university students used internet daily. A great majority of the participants of the present study was found to use internet for "social media". Other responses regarding the purpose of using mass media in included communicating, accessing information or searching, watching movies or soup operas, having fun/ killing time, watching the news, playing online games, and studying, respectively. Almarabeh, Majdalawi, and Mohammad (2016) also found that students utilized internet mainly for social websites, chatting, and gathering information. Similarly, Bashir, Mahmood and Shafique (2016) found that the highest frequencies for the purpose of using internet belonged to class assignments and research projects, updating knowledge, communication, and entertainment.

The first open-ended question in the qualitative data collection form aimed to find out whether the participants had heard about the term media literacy before. A great majority of the participants responded to this question as no. The number of participants who reportedly heard about this term was close to this amount, yet the number of participants providing the accurate definition was little. Schmidt (2012) noted that students were familiar with only certain everyday media technologies, and despite common perceptions, digital native generation was native to very limited technologies. The participants in the present study were found to consider media literacy to be related to following people and things in internet. Deal, Flores-Koulish, and Sears (2010) found that some of the participants misinterpreted the term media literacy, and used it synonymously with technology utilization.

Media literacy involves the ability to analyze media messages and understand and evaluate their hidden and spoken meanings and values. To Frau-Meigs (2007),media literacy education helps individuals to become informed media consumers and producers. Majority of the participants believed that they could always identify the purposes behind the messages in mass media. It was also found that more than half of the participants could always recognize the partial reporting in mass media, and they could see how mass media affect individuals. Loeschner (2016) reported a high level of perceived media literacy; 75% described themselves as having pretty good to extremely good media literacy and 65% and 63% said the same for their colleagues and managers respectively.

The participants were found to spend a great deal of time for watching movies or soup operas and benefitting from the internet, which was also found to be used as a gate for videos in the target language. Various studies in literature refer to the benefits of movies in language learning environments. For instance, watching movies can improve learners' listening skill (Abdullah & Rahman, 2017; Bahrani, 2015), boost their motivation to learn the target language (Kabooha, 2016; Cela, 2017), teach cultural transference (Brown, 2010; Yalcin, 2013), enhance language competence, understand authentic language and culture, affect fluency, improve writing skills and vocabulary (Tuncay, 2014), and promote speaking skill (Aliyev & Albay, 2016; Khan, 2015). As for the benefits of internet in language learning, Chong (2012) proposes that internet provides authentic materials and triggers motivation, and it can also be used for extensive reading (Dao, 2014). Aydin (2007) stated that students were found to view internet as a universal library and a way to socialize and learn. Moreover, learning resources on the internet are reported to be multi-channeled, multi-perspective, multileveled and multi-formed (Islam, 2011).

Almost all the participants reportedly found mass media beneficial for learning a foreign language. The participants' responses regarding various ways of accessing foreign language content either for learning or entertainment purposes support the notion proposed by Marsick and Watkins (2001), who stated that "Informal and incidental learning take place wherever

people have the need, motivation and opportunity for learning" (p.28). The participants' use of foreign language content behaviors seem to reflect their need, motivation, and opportunity for learning. Apart from these benefits, students in a study done by Yanar and Tutunis (2016) were found to believe in the positive effect of mass media tools in their speaking skill. Given the perceived benefits of media about learning, Slavíková (2014) recommended that more initiatives and programs should be designed for the promotion of the implementation of the new media into the English lessons and also for the training of the teachers in utilizing them in an efficient manner. Teachers' awareness is crucial to direct students in using media because, as Tafani (2009) suggests, it is important for teachers to understand the media, the messages they pose and their impact upon us, and to know the way to explore this abundant information. As stated by Malerba (2011), the effects of the Internet on current learners' minds should be understood better, and we need to explore these new forms of learning and the ways to integrate them in formal and traditional education. However, it is also important to note that simply delivering old content in a new medium is not enough (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

Finally, the participants were asked to give some recommendations about using media for the purpose of learning a foreign language. Majority of the participants recommended watching movies in the target language. The participants' recommending movies as a tool for learning a foreign language indicates their focus on authentic materials. Hence, media, especially internet is reported to provide learners with access to authentic materials with particular information (Birman, Kirshstein, Levin, Matheson, & Stephens, 1997).

Conclusion

The present study explored EFL students' self-perceptions of media literacy and their stance towards using mass media in foreign language learning. Because media dominate most of our lives, awareness about using media effectively gains more importance. Therefore, students could be trained to learn how to benefit from media and how to minimize the negative effects of it, which could increase their media literacy level. Social media was found to occupy a big place in students' using mass media; they could thus be encouraged to benefit from social media for educational purposes. However, media literacy does not concern only university students; it is an important topic in all contexts. Studies to be conducted in the future might involve different educational contexts.

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