

Teaching Critical Literacy through Print Advertisements: An Intervention with 6th Grade Students (Ages 11-12) ¹

Introduction

The current era is characterized by abrupt changes in economy, society and technology (Kress, 2003), by instability and mobility (Fairclough, 2000) as well as by the advent and domination of the “new capitalism” (Gee, 2000), which has brought about an unprecedented fluidity and insecurity in the workplace as well as the private and public life of the citizens (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The economic and ideological hegemony of “globalization” and “marketization” (Fairclough, 2000) imposes the market economy as the dominant organizing framework of the society, which leads to an uncritical adoption of globalized ideological patterns and behaviors. The role of the Media and advertising, in this process is determinant, due to the fact that they reshape the real world and construct a “virtual” one, and therefore they socialize the children and create attitudes, values and lifestyle (Pailliotet, 2001; Dyson, 1997 cited in Pailliotet, 2001; Dyer, 1993).

In fact, in many countries children spend about 3 hours a day watching television. At this pace, by the time they are 75 years of age they will have watched 9 years of television. In the USA alone, but no longer only there, 2 out of those 9 years will be spent watching ads (Kubey, 2004). Advertising is innately deceptive or “unfair” (Moore, 2004), misleading children under 8, as they are not capable of realizing its purpose and thus, take whatever said as real. Older children from 8-12 are more sceptical about advertising, but they tend not to use this knowledge, unless explicitly urged to do so. The possession of “cognitive and attitudinal defences” does not necessarily imply that they are being used at all (Moore, 2004). Therefore, advertisers today address children, who lack the affective and cognitive tools to make judgements (Moore, 2004).

Instilling critical reasoning and the ability to resist globalized consumer models is not an easy task. The educational system does not largely contribute to this effect, producing, in this sense, citizens who are illiterate in critical and visual comprehension (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) and passive in their behavior (Semali,

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2003; Semali, 2001). The new era has outpaced our pedagogy, curricula and teaching methods, whereas the sense of being literate today has altered (Semali, 2003; Pailliotet, 2001; Hobbs, 1998).

The necessity to review the role of education in this broader frame of socio-economic changes and the need to adopt a different role from the one prescribed by the Media and the economic interests supporting them (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), for a critical pedagogy and a critical visual literacy, appears compelling (Duncum, 2004; Bearne, 2003; Hagood, 2003; Kellner, 1998; Hobbs, 1998), in order for children to be capable of surviving in a global consumer society and to resist the influence of advertising (Chung, 2005).

Freire and Macedo argue that reading is interwoven with the knowledge of the world; it involves critical perception, interpretation and rewriting of what is read (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Furthermore, as language and reality are dynamically interconnected, critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context (1987). Critical literacy, as a tool of critical thinking and awareness, implies an active approach to reading and text practises, to analysing and criticizing the relations among texts, language, power, social groups and social practises, aiming at the investigation of attitudes, values and beliefs hidden below the surface (Baynham, 2002; Baynham, 2000; Hall, 1998). Thus, it includes the investigation of the meaning of a text in accordance with the purpose and the motive of its creator, the realization that texts aim at influencing peoples' ideas and that they represent particular aspects of the world, the questioning of the ways they have been constructed, the emphasis on the multiple readings of texts, the urging of pupils to adopt viewpoints on topics, to think and clarify their own values and attitudes and to take social action for a more democratic and just society (Department of Education Tasmania, 2004; Giroux, 1987; Hall, 1998; McLaren, 1988; Kellner, 1998).

As far as advertising is concerned, Kroeber-Riel claims that a person's -including a child's - critical position towards advertising constitutes an important factor determining to a large degree the magnitude of their exposure to advertising, as well as the way they will perceive and process it. An advertisement critically confronted will more probably cause annoyance and rejection rather than another one perceived in restricted critique (1998), for, having recognized and comprehended the smart methods of the professional advertisers, a more efficient critical comprehension may be developed, especially in the field of deduction formation (Langrehr, 2003).

Therefore, a critical education on visual literacy will help students to develop resistances, to discern and to question the world around them, to possess the

necessary skills for accessing the new forms of labour, to be able to express their opinion, to negotiate and critically understand the conditions of their job and thus not to be easily manipulated (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Umberto Eco, referring to critical visual literacy, states that: “A *democratic civilization will save itself only if it turns the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection, instead of an invitation to hypnosis*” (1979).

Methodology

The aim of this work was the development of skills for a critical approach to print advertisements by 6th grade primary school pupils [aged 11-12]. The emphasis was mainly on the visual mode of the advertising message. The project aimed at providing the students with the necessary methodological tools and critical reasoning, so that they would be capable of confronting texts relying on reason and critical thinking and not be carried away by the visual characteristics which cause subconscious, sentimental and irrational reactions.

The pedagogical framework of the project was based on the approach of the Multiliteracies, which proposes, parallel with the analysis of language, pragmatic, sociological and semiotic analyses, that together build the capacity to understand and manage pictures, icons, plans, diagrams, tables etc. (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000). Given the short time available, the intervention included only the three first stages of the Multiliteracies framework proposed (Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing); the Transformed Practice was not undertaken.

The model of the instruction followed the teaching principle of *fading scaffolding*, stemming from the Zone of Proximal Development theory (Vygotsky, 1993).

Methodologically, the project comprised a Pre & Post test questionnaire and a small scale (4 two-hour sessions) teaching intervention. The experimental group consisted of 16 students of the 6th grade of the 33rd Public Primary School of Larissa, a city of about 200,000 people in central Greece. The school is located in a suburb that is inhabited by working and middle class people, Roma and economic immigrants from the Balkan countries (mainly from Albania).

The research material consisted of wide scale consumer product advertisements, whose targets are younger audiences and advertisements of Non-Governmental Organizations as well. The ads used in the project were chosen from a much wider body on the basis of representation and diversity of the structuring mode of the visual message. The body of the ads was categorized into three main categories: *Interactive & Conceptual, Non-interactive & Narrative, Conceptual & Compositional Ads*, based on Visual Social Semiotics (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), according to which the message structure reflects the hidden messages of the ad, the ideology

that penetrates it and the attitudes that are being promoted by the ad on the target-audience and the wider social whole as well (see Appendix A). Of these ads five were finally chosen (Coca-Cola light, Cheetos twisted (food), Tagheuer watches, Playstation portable, Greenpeace for genetically modified products) (see Appendix B), and were used for the Pre & Post Test. Similar ads, which could serve the analysis of the visual message, were chosen for the teaching intervention.

The advertisements were analyzed on the basis of a general framework based on 18 descriptive criteria, including the Form of Representation, the Setting, the Props and the actors, the composition of each image and the relationship between the depicted actors and the viewer, as it is coded through Point of View, Distance and Contact (Jewitt & Oyama, 2002; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Additionally, a critical message analysis framework was used (Considine & Haley, 1999, as cited in Pailiotet, 2001) including questions about the Message Sender, the Target-Audience, the Purpose and the Structure of the ad both from the aspect of form and content synthesis and the values and ideology which it bears.

The intervention aimed at familiarizing the students with analysing ads, to learn to “read” – to deconstruct – ads, to understand the purpose of the ads, to uncover the relationship between the different modes that are used in an ad (color, typography etc), to correlate its structure with its purpose, to find out the variety of persuasion strategies relative to the target-audience, to adopt a critical stance towards ads, to develop critical thinking and to learn to “read behind the lines”. The teaching intervention was focused on critical analysis and interpretation of the advertising message. Therefore, it aimed at revealing how an ad is made, whom it addresses, which attitudes, values and ideology it tries to transmit to people. The main interest was concentrated on the message structure, without omitting the “who”, “to whom” and “why” of it.

The pre & post test, which comprised exactly the same questions regarding the Message Sender, the Target-Audience, the Purpose and the Structure of the five ads (Appendix B), consisted of a questionnaire with 12 questions adjusted for each ad, exploring in how and to what extent the students are involved in the “reading” of an advertising multimodal text.

All the questions used in the test were open-ended, so that the students were able to freely express themselves under almost real conditions, namely low involvement, transient way of contact, information overloading and distractions.

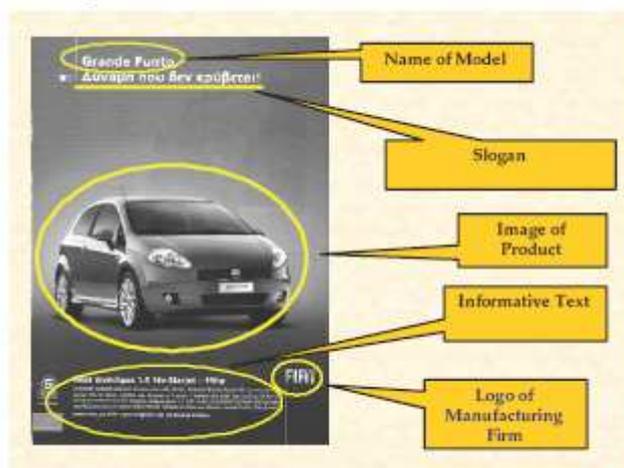
a. Teaching Intervention: 1st Session

The determination of the students’ knowledge about ads, the presentation of the basic characteristics of print ads, the introduction of a terminology regarding

structural components of an ad (slogan, logo, image, informative text, and symbols) and the visual message analysis were the goals of this intervention.

In the beginning, a short discussion with all the students about advertising in our life took place. The children were asked what they know about ads, what the purpose of ads is etc. Subsequently, a PPT presentation of the terminology of the basic components of ads (slogan, logo, etc) was made.

Example:



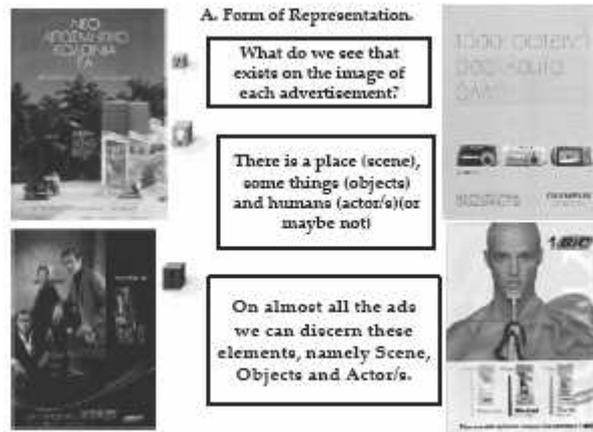
Icon 1: Basic components of a print advertisement.

The terms were further explained by use of e-hyper links. Following that, the students were given a worksheet in which each group filled in the basic components of three ads. This activity was easily completed by all the children.

This first two-hour intervention was completed with the presentation of several ads which were deconstructed on the basis of Visual Social Semiotics. This was considered necessary in order to introduce the students to a method of structural analysis based on images and advertisements as well.

The methodology followed in the presentation included an initial question, the answer and a generalization or explanation. Afterwards, the teacher attempted to elicit an explanation or a generalization from the children. This explanation then appeared on the screen.

Example: On the initial screen the ads appeared first followed by a question. The students were requested to observe the picture and to surmise or give an answer. A discussion was held and the teacher, through proper questions, attempted to elicit the right answer; failing that, the answer would appear on the screen and the teacher would explain it to them.



Icon 2: Example of the teaching approach.

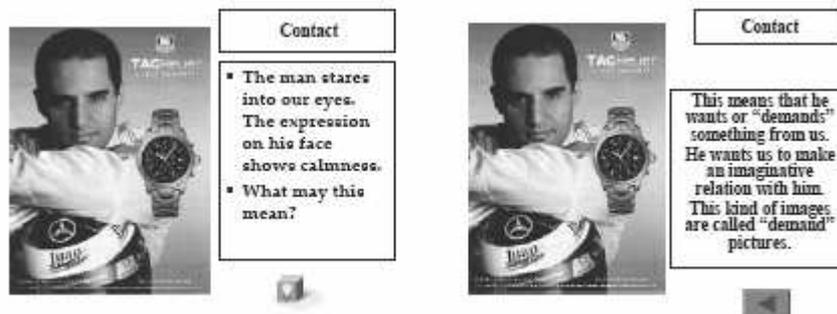
b. Teaching Intervention: 2nd Session

The goal of the second intervention was the guided deconstruction of “Interactive & Conceptual” and “Non-interactive & Narrative” kinds of ads.

An Interactive & Conceptual ad was presented in the way described above and the children tried to apply in practice the notions presented in the previous session. They were prompted to say what they thought and the way they felt it. It was pointed out that there are no wrong answers, only a common effort to reach an explanation on the basis of Visual Social Semiotics (a term which was not explained to them). They showed a great deal of alertness and the lesson was very interesting to them, judging from the attention ascertained.

Consequently, a similar ad was deconstructed with the students being provided with a worksheet in which there were all the questions projected on the screen. They could collaborate with each other and the teacher if necessary. The correct answers were projected on the screen after the completion of the activity.

Example:



Icon 3: Example of guided activity.

Finally, this second session was completed with a presentation, in the pre-described way, of the way of analysing a “Non-interactive & Narrative’ kind of ad.

c. Teaching Intervention: 3rd Session

This section included two guided activities: The first one was the deconstruction of a “Non-interactive & Narrative” ad in a similar way as before. The second one was a presentation of several ads in which the focus was on some elements from the Compositional Meaning and additionally ads from NGO. The activity focused on establishing the differentiation between these ads and the consumer ads.

d. Teaching Intervention: 4th Session

Two activities with as little guidance as possible by the teacher were included in this final section. This intervention aimed at enabling the students to analyze an ad by themselves, to answer the questions and finally to form appropriate questions for analyzing ads of all kinds. For this last part, the children were given only the basic outline and ads of all different kinds previously analyzed.

Results

The Post-Test was carried out one week after the completion of the teaching intervention, in order to evaluate to what extent the objectives of the project had been accomplished and whether the students’ ability to “read” ads critically using visual semiotic criteria had improved. Consequently, a qualitative content analysis was conducted and a comparison of students’ answers before and after the teaching intervention was carried out. The results are presented below as far as the Message-Sender, the Target-Audience, the Purpose and the Structure of the five ads are concerned.

a. Source- Sender of the Message

The children easily recognized the message sender on the ads because in one way or another he himself seeks to be as distinctive and recognizable in the market as possible [see “brand names” (Dyer, 1993) and “visual symbols of presence” (Kroeber-Riel, 1998; Oswald, 2007)]; usually, it is the most salient element. As the children live in a social environment, which is daily bombarded with advertisements, they have developed powerful preconceptions and knowledge, becoming more and more competent at processing ads, but at the same time, more disinterested in advertising in general (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002). This was ascertained in the Pre-Test mainly. In the “Playstation” advertisement there was difficulty in recognizing the manufacturing company (38%), because its name differed from the product’s name. In the Post-Test this difficulty disappeared (100%).

b. Aim of the Message

The aim of the message was also easily recognized by the students. Their high and long lasting exposure and saturation as well has created internal counterarguments (Kroeber-Riel, 1998). In the "Greenpeace" advertisement the students had a major difficulty (13%) in recognizing its aim, because it differs from most of the consumer ads. This can be attributed to the fact that ads of this kind are not particularly widespread and, furthermore, they deviate from the well-known consuming pattern. Still, in this advertisement too, after the intervention, the children showed significant progress in recognizing its aim and half of them (50%) explained it with elements appearing in the multimodal advertising text. (*"To say no to genetically modified products/ not to buy unhealthy products / for the environment / to save the planet"*)

c. Target-Audience

In this part of the questionnaire the children were asked to recognize the target-audience of the ad and to document their answer with elements from its "text", in the Hallidayan sense of the word (Halliday, 1989).

The students showed significant progress, after the intervention, at connecting visual elements with the advertisement's target-audience. They developed judging ability and critical competence. They realized that the visual as well as the verbal mode of an advertisement reflects the advertiser's intention to target a concrete audience, excluding others (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). It was also ascertained that the children's replies were reasoned and grounded and not instinctive. For example, in the Pre-Test only 5 children (31%) were able to explain the target-audience in the Cheetos ad with elements from its text, whereas in the Post-Test 12 children (75%) replied that the advertiser *"used a cartoon, because children are fond of cartoons"*. This indicates that their critical engagement with the advertising text had developed.

d. Message Structure

In this part we sought documented answers from the students based on an ads' multimodal "text" [in the Hallidayan sense of the word (Halliday, 1989)] regarding information given or not, where this information can be found, whether they suspect that there are other pieces of information omitted, whether the ad tells the truth or deceives them, whether they had bought the specific product or they would, whether they realized the relationship between the structure elements and the advertiser's intention to create inferences and to drive the consumer to a positive view about the product.

The results demonstrated increase in all partial elements of analysis and interpretation. Increased critique and disbelief towards advertising was ascertained, which shows that the students realized the purpose of the advertising message and had adopted a more critical attitude towards it. This is proved by the quality of their answers to the main components of the analysis.

For example, to the question: *“Is there more information about the product (Cheetos food), not mentioned in the advertisement”*, in the pre-test 69% of the children answered positively –the girls seemingly more wary than the boys– whereas in the Post-Test the percentage reached 100%.

The students recognized that advertising messages are constructed to conceal or at least not to reveal the whole truth about the advertised product. For example, to the question: *“For what reason doesn’t the advertisement mention all the information about the product”*, in the Pre-Test 3 out of 16 children (19%) stated as a reason *“the intention of the company to conceal something from them”*, whereas in the Post-Test 13 out of 16 children (81%) recognized the effort of the company to *“make them buy without thinking and without all the information about the product”*.

A paradox also appeared in the question: *“Have you ever tasted the product? (Cheetos)”* 13 of the 16 children (81%) in the Pre-Test stated that they had already tasted it, whereas in the Post-Test only 6 of the 16 (38%) made the same statement. A potential interpretation of this inconsistency is that the children may have realized that the product is not healthy and may change their attitude towards it in the future. The very same inconsistency was observed in the Coca-Cola ad with a smaller variation in the percentages (94% in the Pre-Test, 88% in the Post-Test).

The students also seemed able to recognize elements of Social Semiotics, as, for example, contact. To the question: *“Why does the advertiser present the girl making eye contact with the viewer?”*(Coca-Cola), in the Pre-Test no correct answers were given, whereas in the Post-Test 11 of the 16 children (69%) answered: *“Because she wants a friendly relationship with us”*. In the “Tagheuer” advertisement 14 out of the 16 children (88%) answered in the same way.

The children's involvement with the text of the advertisement also increased. For example, in the “Greenpeace” advertisement, to the question: *“What do you believe that this advertisement seeks to say to you, both visually and verbally?”*, in the Pre-Test 3 of the 16 children (19%) answered: *“to be careful / not to buy whatever / not to buy genetically modified products”*, whereas in the Post-Test 11 of 16 children (69%) answered: *“not to buy products which we don’t know, because they may contain genetically modified organisms / to say no to genetically modified / to chase the genetically modified out / not to believe / not to buy whatever”*.

Discussion

The project was oriented to the deconstruction and interpretation of the message structure. The focus of the analysis was on the visual mode of the advertising message, although the verbal mode was analyzed as well, mainly in cases where this held an explanatory role to the visual.

Throughout the teaching intervention the students were taught a method of analyzing a visual message, an ad in this case, and to interpret its structure. From this aspect they were trained in both Visual and Critical Literacy.

The students recognized that advertising's aim is profit. Certainly, at Pre-Test they also had recognized it, but they were unable to associate it with elements from the general structure of the message. At Post-Test this connection was more obvious. They also recognized the advertiser's effort to lead them to a positive decision based on sentiment and not on reason.

The children's answers were documented with elements from the advertising text. They recognized the most salient elements of it as well as the reason of their salience. They realized that they are not given all the information about a product and they learnt where and how they could find it.

The children comprehended elements of Visual Social Semiotics such as: contact, distance, viewpoint, gaze, salience, framing as well as the meaning they carry. They increased the level of their involvement with the advertising text and this means that they no longer perceive these kinds of messages passively but actively and critically.

The teaching intervention aimed at developing critical visual literacy based on Visual Social Semiotics. In accordance with the aims posed, the results seem to be encouraging. Although the sample was small (a class of 16 children) and the intervention time span restricted (4 two-hour sessions), its range was large including a variety of Visual Social Semiotics analytical criteria.

Still, the theme of the work, taken from children's real life, helped to increase the interest during the whole intervention, because critical literacy can connect the literacy of the school with the literacy of "the real life" (Pailliotet, 2001). Certainly, the results cannot be generalized, given the small number of the students who participated in it. However, they constitute evidence that a longer lasting project may produce even better results.

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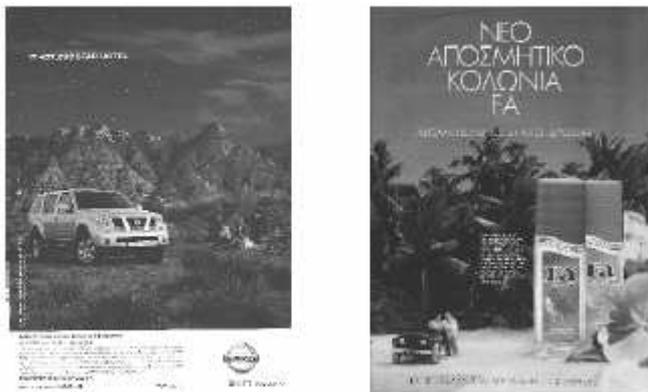
Appendix A

Examples of the print advertisements used in the project categorization

a - Interactive & Conceptual Ads



b - Non-Interactive & Narrative Ads.



c - Conceptual & Compositional Ads.



Appendix B

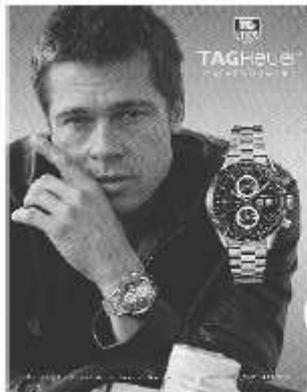
Print Advertisements used at the Pre & Post-test



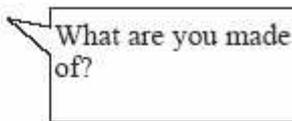
1. Playstation Portable.



2. Cheetos twisted



3. TagHeuer.





4. Coca-Cola

A clap for her who has a style of her own



5. Greenpeace

Where the genetically modified could be hidden?