Roles of the Teacher in Media Literacy Education

Toshinori Saito and Hajime Ohiwa
Department of Environmental Information
Keio University

1 Introduction

To develop critical thinking is one of the most important missions for educational facilities to complete. This is because of the recent proliferation of information technologies realized by computer networks and various kinds of multi media tools. These technologies enable individuals to access information in large quantities regardless of its quality. Ability to make critical and rational judgements toward information is of great importance in such social conditions.

This paper proposes an idea of educational practice that aims to encourage student's critical attitude toward information. Roles of the teachers in this practice are also to be discussed.

2 Media Literacy Education in General

Media literacy education is an educational practice originally with social background of the huge power of the mass media against individuals. This practice aims to grow ability to watch and understand critically the symbols that come from the mass media. Therefore, it should essentially be an example of critical thinking education.

In Japan, we can classify most of the practices done as media literacy education into two types. One is the "sociological" approach that emphasizes negative aspects of the mass media that is relevant to various social problems. The other is the "technical" approach that is mainly interested in teaching techniques to handle the electronic equipments or to use the necessary software.

From our viewpoint, two types mentioned above are not sufficient as a critical thinking education. In both cases, there is a tendency to lack opportunities for the students to think critically by themselves. In the "sociological" approach, what is explained in the classroom about the social problems relevant to the mass media is often just the results of the critiques by some sociologists. The way of critique, or how to find such problems, is not generally explained. On the other hand, the "technical"

approach often lacks the critical attitude from the beginning. In this approach, technical achievement is regarded as the most important educational effect.

3   Media Literacy Education Based on Semiotics

The idea of media literacy education based on semiotics [1] is supposed to be an alternative of two approaches explained above. Semiotics is known as a study on symbols and meanings, which comprise the basis of human communication. Semiotics has widely been applied to analysis and critique of various objects that is relevant to the problems of symbols and meanings, for example, language, media texts of various kinds, works of art, customs or behaviors which represent specific cultural phenomena, and so on.

This fact shows that semiotics provides essential knowledge and framework to understand the functions of symbols and meanings in the human society. Therefore, it is surely believed that semiotics should also provide a basis of media literacy education as a practice of critical thinking towards a variety of media representations or texts.

Main activity for the students in this approach is very simple; to analyze media texts according to basic knowledge of semiotics and to discuss what they have found through the analysis with each other. Basic concepts of semiotics should be explained by the teachers beforehand. However, the most important part in this approach is the students' practices; analysis and discussion about media texts. Through these practices using basic knowledge of semiotics, the students are believed to develop deep understanding about the functions of symbols in media texts and to acquire critical attitude toward information they get from various kinds of media.

4   Roles of the Teacher in Media Literacy Education

In the media literacy education we discuss, the teachers are mainly expected to take the following roles.

1. To show basic knowledge of semiotics as simply as possible
2. To encourage the students to think themselves
3. To guide the students to rational conclusions by suggesting the possible alternatives

Generally, students are able to create advanced knowledge by themselves if they have a good minimum essential basis and enough opportunities for their practices. In our media literacy education, the basis that the teachers should give is the basic knowledge of semiotics (see Figure 1). This kind of essential knowledge will construct a cognitive framework in the students' minds and to create more advanced

knowledge, will to work as a booter of "boot strapping" process known in computer technology.

Therefore, the teachers should keep in mind that too much explanation is likely to result in spoiling the students by taking away their opportunities to think and practice themselves.
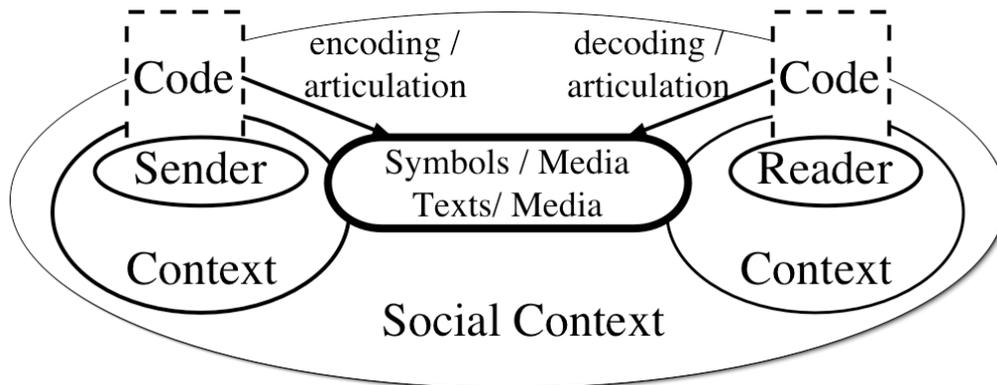

Figure 1.　　An example of the basic knowledge of semiotics (which is described in a communication model).　　Knowledge expressed in this figure is believed to work as a booter in our media literacy education.

5　Conclusion

This paper discussed an idea of media literacy education based on semiotics that aims to encourage and develop the students' critical attitude toward information.　　Roles of the teachers in this practice are also discussed. These discussion shows our belief that a minimum essential basis and enough opportunities to practice are the most important conditions for the students to grow themselves.

Reference

[1] Toshinori Saito, "Media Literacy"(in Japanese), 181pp., Tokyo, Kyoritsu Shuppan, 2002.