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# Keys to Recognizing the Levels of Critical Audiovisual Reading in Children

Claves para reconocer los niveles de lectura crítica audiovisual en el niño

## ABSTRACT

Based on the results of several projects carried out with children and adolescents, we can state that knowledge of production and broadcasting aids the acquisition of critical media skills. This article combines three media education experiences in Venezuela, Colombia and Spain driven by a critical reception approach. It presents leading indicators for determining the level of critical audiovisual reading in children aged 8-12 extracted from intervention processes through workshops on media literacy. The groups had been instructed on the audiovisual universe, which allowed them to analyze, deconstruct and recreate audiovisual content. Firstly, this article refers to the evolving concept of media education. Secondly, the common experiences in the three countries are described, with special attention to the influence of indicators that gauge the level of critical reading. Finally, we reflect on the need for media education in the era of multi-literacy. It is unusual to find studies that reveal the keys to assessing the levels of critical consumption of digital media content in children, and this is essential for determining the level of children's understanding before and after training processes in media education.

## ABSTRACT (Spanish)

Diversos estudios con niños y adolescentes han demostrado que a mayor conocimiento del mundo de la producción y transmisión de mensajes audiovisuales, mayor capacidad adquieren para formarse un criterio propio ante la pantalla. En este artículo se reúnen tres experiencias de educación mediática realizadas en Venezuela, Colombia y Spain, desde el enfoque de la recepción crítica. Se proporcionan los indicadores que llevan a determinar los niveles de lectura crítica audiovisual en niños de entre 8 y 12 años, contruidos a partir de procesos de intervención mediante talleres de alfabetización mediática. Los grupos han sido instruidos acerca del universo audiovisual, dándoles a conocer cómo se gestan los contenidos audiovisuales y el modo de analizarlos, desestructurarlos y recrearlos. Primero, se hace referencia al concepto en evolución de educación mediática. Después, se describen las experiencias comunes en los tres países para luego incidir en los indicadores que permiten medir el nivel de lectura crítica. Por último, se reflexiona sobre la necesidad de la educación mediática en la era de la multialfabetización. No es muy frecuente encontrar estudios que revelen las claves para reconocer qué grado de criticidad tiene un niño cuando visiona los contenidos de los distintos medios digitales. Es un tema fundamental pues permite saber con qué nivel de comprensión cuenta y cuál adquiere después de un proceso de formación en educación mediática.

## KEYWORDS

Childhood, critical reading, television workshops, teaching experiences, media literacy.  
Niñez, lectura crítica, talleres de televisión, experiencias de enseñanza, educación mediática.

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### 1. Media education as an evolving concept. Main study aims

Recent history shows that media education started to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. However, there already existed educational programs that had been produced in response to the effect that TV and films were having on children. At the beginning of the 1930s, some experts in USA began to draw attention to the need to integrate press and audiovisual resources into school curricula. In the following decades, these initiatives took root especially in the USA and Canada. Mario Kaplun introduced a new method of critical reading in the 1970s in South America, with the aim of highlighting ideological content in media messages. Other similar programs were implemented at that time in Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay, and the 1980s saw the emergence of educommunication in Argentina. In Mexico, Guillermo Orozco emphasized the role of the child as receptor.

In the 1990s in Spain, Jose Manuel Perez Tornero proposed a method for discovering the operations and processes of critical reading in TV. The definition of critical reading and analytical reading was introduced, with the difference being that critical reading refers to the capacity to «recognise the pragmatic purpose of the program, distinguishing the different thematic and narrative levels (...) and discovering co-textual and contextual connections, including alternative proposals, and giving a new meaning to the program». Analytical reading presents a deeper dimension, and requires a «global reading of the space [or audiovisual document], breaking this up into parts, capturing the different dimensions of the program, noticing the structure and making a global interpretation of the space» (Pérez Tornero, 1994: 150-152).

From the mid-1970s, some critical reception practices took place in TV and films in Venezuela. By the end of the 20th century, in an attempt to foster critical civic action, the Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents (LOPNA) was passed, in which art. 69, entitled 'Critical education for the Media', states that «the State must guarantee education for children and adolescents with the aim of preparing and training them to receive, search for, use and choose the most appropriate information for their development». The urgency to include media education in educational programs and compulsory school subjects is outlined below. It also states that families must receive special training to critically analyze media content<sup>1</sup>. According to Martín-Barbero & Téllez (2008), new insights into old problems only properly emerged in Colombia in 1997 when children became the main focus for rese-

arch activities into audience and the media (López De la Roche, 2000; Fernández, 1998; Rincón, 2002). After 2000, interest increased due to research funded by Colombia's National TV Commission. By that time, in Spain numerous publications and projects had already appeared that highlighted the importance of critical reading, and in 2008 the European Parliament defined media education as the «ability to understand and bring critical assessment to bear on the various aspects of media, being able to separate out information from the new media's flood of data and images»<sup>2</sup>.

As media education researchers, we have organized various workshops with children and adolescents in different locations. The main aim has been to develop in them an understanding of production and audiovisual narrative from a critical viewpoint. We have carried out experimental investigations in several locations: in Venezuela in 1997, through the Telekids project in 1997, with the support of the Council for Scientific, Human and Technological Development of the Universidad de los Andes, which ran until 2000. This project also operated in Spain from 2005, where it was known as Taller Telekids<sup>3</sup> but it received no external funding. In Colombia, the same project started in 2006 with the support of a training program for critical reception (Mirando cómo miramos). In 2010, the third phase of this project was implemented at national level, supported by the Santiago de Cali University and the National TV Commission as part of the TV Development Plan<sup>4</sup>.

### 2. Methodology

The sampling process in Colombia was conducted in public institutions and included 93 children and 58 adults, among them parents and teachers. In 2007, this model was expanded to 54 educational institutions in Cali, with 1,053 adults and 1,355. In 2010, the model was implemented with peer universities in six areas across the country, involving 2,400 children and 2,400 adults. In Venezuela and Spain the workshops began in 1997 with small group sessions, and the main goal of all these practices was to develop the critical awareness of children, parents and teachers in line with the aims of media education today.

The methodology applied in the three countries consisted of a pre- and post-test, so that the total sample (1,500 children aged 8-12) could be analysed before and after training. As a result, it is evident that a greater knowledge of audiovisual production enables a better development of skills to extract content structures and critically analyse them. In Venezuela and Spain, the assessment was performed according to the

following indicators: 'sufficiently critical', 'moderately critical' and 'uncritical'. A subject able to identify, describe and recognize characters, history, intention and the factors appearing in the first column in Table 2 would be categorized as 'sufficiently critical', which also includes the capacity to suggest changes in content. A subject who is not always able to identify the form or content in audiovisual documents and whose content changes are close to the original version would be considered 'moderately critical'. 'Uncritical' reflects the inability to critically examine programs. In Venezuela and Spain a teaching guide was published with the support of the Department of Innovation, Science and Business of the Regional Government of Andalusia, entitled 'Los secretos de la tele: Manual de alfabetización audiovisual para niños y maestros' (The secrets of TV: a literacy guide for teachers and children) (Sánchez-Carrero & Martínez, 2009), including an interactive CD for children. This guide is divided in six thematic areas: production, screenplay, camera, sound and lighting, digital editing and critical reading. Along with the production workshop, there were practical critical reading sessions consisting of viewing cartoons, TV series, films and adverts for critical analysis. The three indicators and their definitions appear in Table 1.

The intervention model in Colombia is pedagogically based on UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: learning to

know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. Participants develop skills to approach content critically by learning-by-discovery, creating positive environments that improve their quality of life. The workshop is divided in three parts: first, a dialogue with participants, identification of their readings and relation to TV; second, the theory and practice of the concepts of audiovisual language and media production logic are presented; third, a reflection on elements and intention is proposed to draw attention to viewer

Sufficiently critical	Moderately critical	Uncritical
Identifies characters and their main characteristics	Identifies characters without detailing any characteristic	Inability to identify the characters
The story is retold in general terms told by the student omitting insignificant details	The story is retold including insignificant details.	Inability to retell the story, the student is confused.
Describes characters' behaviour	Gives vague description of characters' behaviour	Inability to describe characters' behaviour
Identifies solutions provided by the characters to overcome difficulties	Makes mistakes in the identification of solutions	Inability to identify solutions
Gives reasons that justify choice of favourite characters	Gives vague justification of choice of favourite characters	Gives no reasons to justify choice of favourite characters
Recognizes author's intention	Has a general idea of author's intention	Unable to identify author's intention
Suggests changes in the content	The changes suggested are close to the original	No changes in content suggested
Differentiates reality from fantasy	Hardly differentiates reality from fantasy	Unable to differentiate reality from fantasy

Table 1. Critical reading of cartoons.

Sufficiently critical	Moderately critical	Uncritical
The student retells the story in general terms, omitting insignificant details	The story is retold along with insignificant details.	Inability to retell the story, the student is confused.
Recognizes the final message in an episode	Has a faint notion of the final message in the episode	Inability to identify messages in any of the episodes
Identifies some of the shots, camera movements and their uses	Identifies some shots but not their intention	No shots or camera movements identified
Remembers the musical backdrop, sound effects and their uses	Remembers music or sound effects but does not indicate their intention	No recollection of music or sound effects
Recognizes scenography and indoor or outdoor settings	Recognizes scenography but cannot differentiate between indoor or outdoor settings	Inability to recognise scenography in the episode
Describes characters' behaviour	Gives vague description of characters' behaviour	Inability to describe characters' behaviour
Describes characters' wardrobe: fashion, colours	Broadly describes characters' wardrobe	No description of characters' wardrobe
Identifies titles in credits	Identifies some of the titles in credits	Inability to identify titles in credits
Differentiates reality from fantasy	Hardly differentiates reality from fantasy	Unable to differentiate reality from fantasy
Reconstructs the story changing the end creatively	Reconstructs the story with lack of creativity	Inability to reconstruct the story

Table 2. Critical reading of TV series.

Sufficiently enough	Moderately critical	Uncritical
Identifies the central theme of the story	Identifies some issues, but not the central theme	Inability to identify the central theme
Identifies the main character and his / her characteristics	Identifies the main character but not his / her characteristics	Inability to identify the main character
Identifies the storyline used to develop the theme	Identifies some plotlines but not the main storyline	Inability to identify the storyline
Identifies the main character's purpose and the difficulties in achieving it	Identifies the main character's purpose but not the difficulties in achieving it.	Inability to identify the character's purpose
Distinguishes supporting characters and their relations to the main character	Distinguishes supporting characters but not their relation to the main character	Inability to distinguish supporting characters
Identifies time and location in the story	Identifies location but not time	No time and location identified
Identifies the hero, the villain, the conspirator, the authority figure and their behaviour in the film	Identifies the hero, the villain, the conspirator and the authority figure but not their behaviour	No hero, villain, conspirator or authority figures identified
Distinguishes fantasy from reality	Hardly distinguishes fantasy from reality	No difference between fantasy and reality
Identifies director's intention	Vague idea of director's intention	Inability to identify director's intention
Recognizes the film's message and highlights the values included.	No values identified in the film	No message or values identified
Reconstructs the story with the same characters and settings in a creative way	Reconstructs the story with the same characters and settings but close to the original	Inability to reconstruct the story

Table 3. Critical reading of films.

Sufficiently enough	Moderately critical	Uncritical
Identifies the product and the brand	Sometimes cannot identify product nor brand	Inability to identify product and brand
Identifies characteristics of the product and their use	Identifies characteristics but not use	No characteristics or use identified
Identifies target audience and users	Target audience and users get mixed up	No target audience or users identified
Describes the advert characters in detail	Gives a description without detail of the characters	Inability to describe the characters
Identifies sound effects and their purpose	Identifies sound effects but not their purpose	No sound effects identified
Describes the signs and labels in detail	Gives broad description of signs and labels	Inability to identify signs and labels
Determines the product efficiency through the advert and gives reasons to justify it	Determines the product efficiency but does not give any reason	Inability to determine product efficiency
Identifies shots, camera movements and their use	Identifies shots and camera movements but not their uses	Inability to identify shots and camera movements
Remembers most important phrases and the slogan in the advert	Remembers some phases but not necessarily the slogan	Does not remember any phase from the advert

Table 4. Critical reading of adverts.

responsibility. Participants integrate these aspects and take part in the training process to become critical viewers, adopting new stances, reconsidering their perceptions and proposing reading and reception alternatives for TV content. Table 5. shows the workshop structure and its different sections as a synthesis of the critical reception model 'Mirando como miramos' (Sandoval Romero, 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

This model is closely linked to its implementation

process. The in-depth dialogue with the participants regarding their knowledge of the TV environment and its influence on their lives is the most important part of Module 1. Some explanations about the origin of TV and relevant data are provided at the end of this module, prior to launching a discussion on the behavior and benefits of being a critical viewer. Information about pre-production, production and postproduction processes is provided in Module 2. Practical sessions with the camera are aimed at stimulating discussion on the meaning of viewing, being viewed by oneself and by others. The role of those who work behind the camera is analysed, along with different TV genres such as the soap opera, which is hugely popular in Colombia. A literary resource is used in Module 3 to foster critical analysis. Through Plato's Myth of the Cave, as told in Book VII of *The Republic*, the participants are encouraged to analyse the text and identify the importance of light and shadows in the perception process, linking what is real (the universe of light) and reality (universe of shadows). This metaphor applied to TV content is useful for understanding the importance of the work that goes on behind the camera. Following this, the proposal presented in Venezuela analyzed the level of critical reception in participants.

The blueprint for this training model was to recognize the active role of children in the reception process

Module 1. Dialogue with the audience with the aim of knowing children's, parents' and teachers' relation to TV	Section 1. Wandering. Integration dynamics for participants
	Section 2. The media and me. Identifying TV functions.
	Section 3. Presentation of the project on Critical Reception
	Section 4. Analyzing how we view. Viewing and critical analysis of a TV program, identifying feelings, anti-values...
Module 2. Media and language. Introducing basic elements of audiovisual language. Participants take part in recording practices.	Section 1. Viewing, self-viewing and to be viewed. Knowledge and language practice. Roles to be played: camera operator, journalist and interviewee. Section 2. Viewing ourselves to learn. Analysing material recorded by participants. Section 3. Creating adverts.
Module 3. Critical reception. Introducing elements of analysis to promote the role of active and critical subjects.	Section 1. From the real to reality. Reflection on these two dimensions through the analysis of TV messages. Section 2. TV Programming. Magazine clipping to create an ideal TV programming

Table 5. Model of the critical reception program «Mirando cómo miramos».

through their reading practices and the media uses. In this case, reception is considered to be a process involving family and school, and for this reason the school was to be the meeting place for parents, caregivers, teachers and children.

### 3. Outcomes and debate: children begin to be critical viewers

The implementation of the aforementioned indicators in Venezuela and Spain made it possible to assess critical reading levels in children in all the workshops programmed. To this end, children's attitudes are classified as sufficiently critical, moderately critical or uncritical, according to their responses. As an example, the pre-test scores in one of the workshops held in Venezuela were 25% sufficiently critical, 41% moderately critical and 33% uncritical. Immediately after this experiment, a post-test yielded a score of 50% for sufficiently critical and, more importantly, a decrease in the uncritical category from 33% to 14%.

In the 55 workshops carried out in Colombia, 75% of children, 30% of parents and 26% of teachers acknowledged the educational role of TV while 90% of teachers, 70% of parents, and only 19% of children recognized TV's role as information provider. TV as a source of entertainment was acknowledged by 75% of children, 84% of teachers and 56% of parents. According to the results obtained in the pre-test, activities that indicated the lowest critical level corresponded to the identification of previous work by the directors and scriptwriters, and the recognition of audiovisual language and its intention (difficulties in identifying the significance of certain shots or the soundtrack). Other aspects that pointed to low levels of critical reception were the failure to identify intention in

audiovisual documents in general (even when given a guided analysis of the story and structure) and to discriminate between fiction and reality in TV series. In the initial analysis, no more than 20% of participants referred to the audiovisual language, music and shots –without using technical terms–, whereas in the post-test, participants

were able to develop the following activities without difficulty:

- Identify and give a general outline of the story.
- Describe the characters: personality traits and physical appearance.
- Identify similarities in settings, story and characters with their day-to-day lives.
- Participate in decisions that are part of the plot.
- Identify the message of the episode.
- Use audiovisual language (shots, sequences, sound effects)
- Identify fiction and intention.
- Distinguish roles in audiovisual production (director, scriptwriter)
- Distinguish fictional/non-fictional audiovisual products and classify their favorite programs.
- Analyse the story structure: beginning, middle and end.



Teaching guide. 'Mirando cómo miramos. Proyecto de formación de recepción crítica'.

Source: <http://multiplicandomiradas.blogspot.com>.

- Create an audiovisual proposal regarding content and processing.

#### 4. Conclusions

The keys to assessing critical reception levels in children can be a valuable tool for those who advocate the need to train new generations in the critical use of audiovisual media. Some organizations already use the Internet to publicize easily applicable strategies for promoting critical reading in children and adolescents, two of

which include 'Music, Film, TV and the Internet. A guide for Parents and Teachers', edited by Childnet International (2010), and 'Using Film in Schools, a Practical Guide', edited by Film: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy. These training publications enable young people to discriminate when viewing audiovisual content and help prepare them to become independent and critical citizens. There are also a number of useful resources to facilitate critical reception training processes, such as the model presented by Hobbs\* (2001), in which teachers are shown how to adapt reading and critical analysis processes through questions that prompt further discussion (table 6).

The ideas put forward by De Abreu (2011:15) have clarified Hobbs' contribution and have proved useful in workshops. According to De Abreu, most media literacy programs are based on these five questions developed, among others, by the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles (USA). In table 7, these questions are linked to five key concepts.

It seems that a new projection of the media education concept in relation to people is emerging in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Technology, human rights and democracy are increasingly linked to media education, and media education is acquiring a wider dimension and incorporating human values: the defence of individual autonomy based on critical thinking, the freedom to query and the right to information, the constructive value of openness and participative dialogue, the promotion of creativity and innovation as



Children in a Telekids workshop in Venezuela (2010).

basic resource in troubleshooting, a communication democracy that should promote political democracy and the values of understanding and respect for cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue (Pérez Tornero & Varis, 2010). «Teaching for communication means teaching for critical thinking and for self-discovery (...). It is positive to train citizens to be independent and capable of expressing their ideas» (García Matilla, 2009: 40).

Although the media education debate has raged for over 30 years, the role of audiovisual literacy in the curriculum is still disputed; meanwhile urgent changes are needed. We are living a multi-literacy age, defined as «the acquisition and command of skills for a personal, social and cultural use of multiple tools and languages in society. Multi-literacy does not exclusively refer to the skills needed to operate new technologies» (Area, Gros & Marzal, 2008: 74). This underlines the importance of the role to be played by teachers, parents and media experts. Media education should be promoted and implemented at school, and families should be involved in the process. We are aware that people attribute values to messages but ignore the media dynamics, audiovisual language and intention behind the content. Audiovisual literacy should be an important part of any citizen's education and the media themselves should be the driving force behind this education.

According to Aguaded (2009: 8), «the new European framework, with the support of the European Parliament and the advance towards international assessment processes in terms of digital and audiovisual competences, are two landmark achievements».

Who is the author? What is the purpose of the message?
Which values and points of view are shown?
Which strategies are used to arouse audience interest?
How could different people interpret the same message in different ways?
What does this message omit?

Table 6. Questions for critical reading in media education (Hobbs, 2011:150).

Nº	Keywords	Deconstruction: 5 key questions (consumer)	5 basic concepts	Construction: 5 key questions (producer)
1	Author	Who created this message?	All media messages are created	What did I produce?
2	Format	Which creative technique is used to call my attention?	Media messages are constructions in creative language with its own rules	Is my message understandable in terms of format, creativity and technology?
3	Audience	How could different people understand this message in different ways?	Different people interpret the same message in different ways	Is my message attractive and credible for my public objective?
4	Content	Which values, lifestyles and points of view are represented or omitted in the message?	The media have incorporated values and points of view	Did I clearly show values, lifestyles and points of view in the content?
5	Purpose	Why has this message been published?	Most messages are produced to obtain benefits	Did I effectively convey my purpose?

Table 7. Five basic concepts and key questions for consumers and producers regarding construction and deconstruction of media messages<sup>6</sup>.

The involvement of the European Parliament is a considerable boost to the implementation of media education, and many studies now evaluate skills levels before undertaking specific programs on audiovisual literacy, such as 'Competencia Mediática. Investigación sobre el grado de competencia de la ciudadanía en España'<sup>7</sup> (Media competence. An investigation into citizens' media skills in Spain). This study was carried out at 17 Spanish universities and has drawn attention to deficiencies in the knowledge and skills necessary for viewers to become critical consumers of media.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This law was enacted in 2000 and reformed in 2007. (<http://fevensor1.ve.tripod.com/lopna.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> See the European Parliament Press Note on media literacy in the digital environment, media literacy for parents and grandparents, copyright and access to ICTs. ([www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=es&type=IM-PRESS&reference=2008-1216IPR44614](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=es&type=IM-PRESS&reference=2008-1216IPR44614)) (28-10-11).

<sup>3</sup> For further information about the teaching material, see Telekids, a fun teaching strategy for audiovisual literacy. ([http://www.cntv.cl/prontus\\_cntv/site/artic/20110420/asocfile/20110420144405/estrategia\\_1\\_dico\\_educativa\\_jacqueline\\_s\\_nchez.pdf](http://www.cntv.cl/prontus_cntv/site/artic/20110420/asocfile/20110420144405/estrategia_1_dico_educativa_jacqueline_s_nchez.pdf)) (28-10-11).

<sup>4</sup> This phase is part of the work developed by the co-author of this article for her PhD thesis on Psychology in the Universidad del Norte, Colombia.

<sup>5</sup> See the Program Model on Critical Reception 'Mirando cómo miramos' (Sandoval Romero, 2007) in «Comunicación y educación para la recepción crítica: resultados de una propuesta integradora». Palabra Clave, 10, 2; 156-154.

<sup>6</sup> See the Center for Media Literacy ([www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)) for more information on media education issues and implementation in primary education. (28-10-11).

<sup>7</sup> Go to [www.ite.educacion.es/es/inicio/noticias-de-interes/414-competencia-mediatica](http://www.ite.educacion.es/es/inicio/noticias-de-interes/414-competencia-mediatica) for more

information on the six dimensions in the analysis: language, technology, reception and interaction processes, production and dissemination, ideology, values, and aesthetics. (28-10-11).

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