

Digital Literacy and Language

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Abstract

Take a quick tour around the education systems of the world and you'll increasingly hear talk of '21st century skills' so called in the USA and the UK, 'new media literacies' called in the USA), 'digital literacy skills' in Australia and, perhaps more commonly, discussions to ensure that learners acquire the 'digital competences' in Norway and Spain, these are to name but a couple, they will need in an ever-more connected world, and workplace. Digital literacy is an umbrella term for the media literacy skills and digital competences which appear in national curricula, digital literacies refer to our ability to effectively make use of the technologies at our disposal. We are not just talking about a checklist of technical skills, but also about the social practices that surround the use of new media.

So not just knowing how to create a blog entry, but knowing how to use this to connect with a wider community of readers and writers, and what sort of online persona one projects through one's post. Not just knowing how to upload photos to Flickr (a photo sharing site), but knowing whether to publish them under a Creative Commons license and what this implies in terms of digital rights and usage. In short, digital literacies are being recognized as fundamental skills for today and tomorrow's citizens. When we grew up and went to school in the seventies and eighties, discussions of literacy and numeracy were limited to what we used to call the 'three Rs' (reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic), but times have changed, and the notion of 'literacy' in the wired world of 2014 is a completely different beast.

Key words: Digital, Literacy, Language, Skills, School, Classes.

Introduction

Digital literacies: What are they and why should we care

So, what exactly is digital literacy? Are there a series of sub-skills or digital 'literacies' that we can define? We can break digital literacies down into four main areas: those with a focus on language, on connections, on information, and on (re)design. Focus on language: print and texting literacies

Whilst print literacy is a familiar typology, texting literacy remains the domain of regular mobile phone users and is much maligned in educational circles for the supposedly negative effect it is having on literacy. In fact, as David Crystal points out, "typically less than 10 percent of the words in text messages are actually abbreviated in any way".

1. Focus on connections: personal, participatory and intercultural literacies

These literacies come to the forefront in social networking spaces and other online media. They may include blogs and wikis, as well as social networks such as Facebook. In such spaces users not only write about themselves and their lives, but also participate in wide social groupings which transcend geographical, religious and ethnic boundaries.

2. Focus on information: search and information literacies

In many ways, these are two of the most important literacies for any learner to acquire - the ability not only to find information amongst the mass of sites and sources afforded by technologies, but also to evaluate that information.

3. Focus on (re)design: remix literacy

This form of literacy refers to the trend of 'remixing' pictures, videos and other media, to create something new, often to striking effect. This may refer, for example, to the trend for making 'literal versions' of music videos or the doctoring of digital images to create memes such as lolcats. Understanding 'remix' is crucial to an understanding of media.

Clearly, then, this is a complicated mix of skills to master, and teachers can play a part in helping learners acquire some of the necessary skills by integrating them into their classroom practice alongside the regular 'content' they deal with. In this way we can make a difference in our learners' comfort level, helping them beyond the 'tech comfy' to the 'tech savvy' which will contribute to their life beyond the classroom, in the professional workplace and in our knowledge-based economies.

Digital literacies in the language classroom?

What has this got to do with language teaching, you may be asking yourself. Well, everything. Quite apart from the emphasis put on lifelong learning and the acquisition of ICT skills in all areas of education in many countries in Europe, we are teachers of the language of global communication. And that communication is increasingly digitally mediated.

If our learners are to be fully functional citizens in the 21st century, they need digital skills. We can promote these skills in parallel with teaching English. Digital skills and English can help many of our adult learners get ahead in the workplace, or prepare our younger learners for better future job opportunities. And equally important, they can make our classes a lot more relevant and interesting in the here and now.

According to Henry Jenkins (2009):

“What students do in their online lives has nothing to do with what they are learning in school, and what they are learning in school has little or no value to contribute to who they are once the bell rings.”

By integrating digital literacy work into our English classes, we can make them a little more relevant to who are learners are once they are outside the school environment.

Digital literacy and second language instruction should be integrated, and not taught separately.

The three main reasons to integrate digital literacy and second language instruction:

1. Digital literacy is now an essential skill for participation in today's digital world. Not teaching digital literacy along with language or other literacy instruction does our students a disservice. Nowadays, applying for a job or even filling in an online form to reserve a picnic table at a local park requires digital literacy skills.
2. Teaching digital literacy involves teaching vocabulary. Learners do not quickly grasp and transfer the meaning of key vocabulary and its functional use from one digital program to another. For example, if they learn what bold and its symbol means in Microsoft word, learners don't automatically then know how to use bold in another program such as G-mail. The implication is that vocabulary and their functions must be taught and practiced across multiple programs.
3. And most importantly: Students learn by practicing. Computers and the Internet are natural contexts to practice language skills for real life tasks. Learners can practice English when finding information on their child's school website, researching the going rate for apartments in their

area, writing a resume, or using online learning programs. It's important to use instructional activities that provide both an opportunity to practice digital skills and strengthen the problem solving process implicit in knowing what skill to use and when.

Conclusion

This focus on applied practice is critical as the biggest long-term learning gains for lower-levels learners are shown not by students who spend the most hours in any classroom, but in students who practice skills outside of class. Steve Reder's work in Practice Engagement Theory for the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning suggests that instruction should focus on giving students the competencies and confidence they need to successfully go out and practice skills in their real lives.

Computers and the Internet offer endless opportunity for language learners to practice, whether through online programs or completing real digital tasks. Meanwhile, higher language competencies open up more opportunities for students to practice their digital literacy skills. Language and digital literacy instruction are mutually reinforcing.

Digital technology is still underused when it comes to language teaching and learning. This situation often arises from a lack of training. The project aims to address this teacher training need by providing the basis for a teaching methodology which integrates new technologies. Language teachers can assist learners in building personal learning environments using relevant resources, software and apps to move towards an autonomous practice of languages.

References

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