

# *Digital literacies and language learning*

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## DIGITAL LITERACIES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The term *digital literacies* refers to the practices of reading, writing and communication made possible by digital media. The articles in this special issue explore the impact of such digital practices on language learning, examining a) new needs of language learners in the digital age, and b) new globalized, online contexts for language learning. The topics covered include language learners' digital translanguaging in social networking sites, evidence of language learning in out-of-class YouTube comments, language socialization in Wikipedia writing projects, and the digital practices of language teachers both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Keywords:** Digital Literacies, Second Language Learning, Multimodality, Translanguaging, Online Spaces

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### INTRODUCTION

This special issue explores the need for language teachers and learners to understand and take into account digital literacies: the modes of reading, writing and communication made possible by digital media. The issue is premised upon the observation that, in recent times, communication tools and associated literacy practices and patterns of social interaction have changed in significant ways. These changes can be attributed to two inter-related sets of factors. The first relates to rapid advances in information and communication technologies, which have facilitated: a) new forms of multimodal representation based on interactive hypermedia and computer-mediated communication; b) new kinds of joint text-making practices where remix and collaboration are common; c) the formation of globalized, online affinity spaces where linguistically and culturally diverse participants interact with one another about their shared passions, engaging in the amateur creation of knowledge and culture in online gaming communities, in fan fiction sites or in the encyclopedia “that anyone can edit”. These advances have been accompanied by a second set of social changes related to economic globalization, with increasing migration leading to greater linguistic and cultural diversity in local communities.

As a result of these changes, we argue that what it means to learn a language—the kinds of skills and social practices that one must develop in order to be a productive member of civic society—has also shifted. Let's consider the example of reading. One way of looking at the development of reading would be to focus on the comprehension of text: the way that language learners can employ top-down and bottom-up processing strategies in order to make meaning. Reading also used to mean interacting with one printed text at a time. However, in today's world, where a great deal of what we read (though by no means everything) comes from the Internet, such an approach is no longer sufficient. Because barriers to publication have all but vanished, a vast amount of information is now available in written form and this writing varies tremendously in terms of quality and trustworthiness. When learning to read, language learners need to develop a host of information management strategies: how to find texts online, evaluate those texts, distinguish genuine from fake websites, and so on. To this we could add that learning to *read* a webpage means developing the skills to understand not only the text on the page, but the whole multimodal ensemble of writing, images, layout, graphics, sound, and hypertext links.

Work on digital literacies has begun to address the issue of what it means to be a literate member of society in the digital age. The term *digital literacies* is one of many that have been used to engage with the changing landscape of digital media. Others include: new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), and electronic literacies (Warschauer, 1999). The term has so far resisted precise definition. As Meyers, Erickson and Small (2013) note, “a unified definition of digital literacy, or literacies, is yet to emerge” (p. 360). These authors go on to point out that digital literacies can be seen as either: a) the acquisition of information age skills; b) the cultivation of habits of mind; or c) the engagement in digital cultures and practices. It is this third approach that is most evident in the contributions to this special issue, which focus on a range of digital contexts, including Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia. They consider how language learners’ participation in these spaces both mediates and transforms their language learning. Furthermore, the contributors share a perspective on language learning as a sociocultural process, which sees reading, writing, and communicating as situated, goal-oriented activities, intimately tied to their contexts.

According to Lankshear and Knobel (2008), the term digital literacies can be thought of as “a shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification” (p. 5). They point out that these practices go beyond mere technical competencies to include the development of a particular way of thinking or “mindset” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Similarly, Jones and Hafner (2012) provide a model for digital literacies that shows how the affordances of digital tools facilitate not only ways of meaning, but also ways of doing, relating, thinking, and being. Based on a theory of mediated discourse analysis, this model can serve as a useful starting point for teachers who are interested in understanding digital literacies and embedding them in the language curriculum. The main dimensions of the model are summarized in Table 1, below, along with examples of digital practices and the kinds of questions that they potentially raise for language educators.

**Table 1.** *Dimensions of Digital Literacies and the Affordances of Digital Tools*

| Dimension | Focus                                   | Example practices                                                                                                                     | Questions for pedagogy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Doing     | Actions in the physical world           | Sharing pictures with friends<br>Searching for a place to eat online                                                                  | How can we effectively manage information with digital tools?                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Meaning   | Forms of representation                 | Reading a web page<br>Posting to a social network site                                                                                | How can we effectively communicate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using hypertext?</li> <li>• using combinations of word, image, graphics and sound?</li> </ul>                                                                                 |
| Relating  | Patterns of interaction                 | Writing fan fiction for a massive online audience<br>Commenting on a blog post<br>Collaboratively writing an online article in a wiki | How can we use digital tools to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• manage relationships?</li> <li>• attract the attention of an online audience?</li> <li>• collaborate with peers?</li> </ul>                                                      |
| Thinking  | Experiencing and thinking about reality | Communicating through CMC<br>Participating in online affinity spaces                                                                  | How should we think about our online communications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• as ephemeral conversations?</li> <li>• as durable written products?</li> </ul> What are the mindsets that lead to the most productive uses of digital media? |

|       |                 |                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Being | Social identity | Presenting oneself in a social network site<br>Adopting an expert role in an online (e.g. fan, gaming) community | How can we use digital tools to manage impressions?<br>What identities are possible in digital spaces?<br>How do these identities relate to those that are possible in classroom spaces? |
|-------|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Within the field of language education, especially in the literature on language learning and technology, we can identify two main research interests that address aspects of digital literacies, as it is conceived in this special issue:

1. New needs of language learners: the idea that new modes of reading, writing, and communication create new learning needs that can be addressed in second and foreign language education;
2. New contexts of language learning: the idea that globalized, online spaces create new, multilingual contexts, within which second and foreign language learners can autonomously capitalize on learning opportunities.

The contributions to this issue also address these themes. We take the second theme first, considering the out-of-class, digital practices of language learners before discussing the possible role of such digital practices in the language curriculum.

## **DIGITAL PRACTICES AND LANGUAGE LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM**

In the work on language learning and technology, there has been considerable interest in the way that globalized, online affinity spaces can act as contexts for language learning. Ethnographic investigations have focused on the practices of young language learners in various kinds of fan communities, drawing attention to the positive and empowering experiences they can have in such spaces. For example, Lam (2000) provides a case study of Almon, a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant to the United States, who set up and maintained a Japanese pop (J-pop) website, using English to communicate via ICQ chat software with other J-pop fans from around the world. Interviews with Almon show how his experience of English changed as a result of the interactions he had with his online peers, “from a sense of alienation from the English language in his adopted country to a newfound sense of expressivity and solidarity when communicating in English with his Internet peers” (p. 468).

Such observations highlight a possible disconnect between the in-class experiences of language learners and their out-of-class experiences, particularly in such online spaces. It is especially important to note the very different approaches to language use in the two contexts. School-based language use tends to focus on standardized forms (e.g. standard English) and use so-called “native-speaker” norms as its taken-for-granted benchmarks. In contrast, language use in online spaces is more fluid, often drawing on a form of global English, which may be mixed with other codes. Unlike in school, multilingualism is often highly valued in such contexts, allowing learners to adopt identities as expert multilinguals (see Black, 2006) and engage in translanguaging practices (Canagarajah, 2013) that allow them to creatively express themselves by drawing on resources from a range of languages.

In view of this contrast, it is increasingly important to understand the translanguaging practices of language learners in online spaces beyond the classroom. In this issue, Brooke Ricker Schreiber’s article on multilingual identity and digital translanguaging engages with this question. Schreiber describes the digital practices of Aleksandar, a Serbian university student and hip-hop artist, who makes use of Facebook to construct a public, hip-hop identity for a linguistically diverse audience. In his interactions, Aleksandar mixes his own local dialect of Serbian, standard Serbian and English, heavily influenced by slang. The analysis shows how he is able to draw upon multimodal resources—linked images, video and

music—in order to participate in an international hip-hop community, gaining uptake from members, regardless of their own language proficiencies. For Aleksandar, the code-meshed use of English functions as part of a coherent translingual identity, rather than as part of a separate second language identity or as a tool to reach particular audiences. Schreiber's work thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of translingual practices in digital spaces. She further points out that the creative, hybrid practices observed diverge from literacy practices in the Serbian university context, which tend to focus on learning essay structures, improving vocabulary and practising timed writing. The article ends with a renewed call for classroom practices that take into account the reality of digital literacy practices outside the classroom.

Phil Benson's article on YouTube commenting and learning practices also focuses on a translingual context. Benson addresses the question, "what evidence of language and intercultural learning can be found in comments on YouTube videos?" Previous research in the field of language education suggests that interactions in such globalized, online spaces can provide opportunities for informal language learning. For example, Thorne (2008) provides a case study of interaction within the massively multi-player online role-playing game, *World of Warcraft*. Thorne analyzed the in-game chat between two players, an American and a Ukrainian, and showed how some turns were overtly pedagogical, as the American player 'tried out' some Russian phrases and received feedback from his conversation partner. More recently, Chik (2014) has shown how game-external blogs and discussion forums also provide a site where informal language advising between members of gaming communities can take place. Drawing on nine different Chinese-language discussion forums and blogs identified by gamers, Chik described two kinds of interaction particularly relevant to language learning. In the first, a discussant asked the community for advice about using role-playing games for language learning and received detailed suggestions, including a list of titles evaluated for their language learning potential. In the second, forum participants collaborated in translating phrases from an English sports simulation game, leading to a lively discussion of the term *roaming* in a football context.

Extending earlier work, Benson's contribution to this issue focuses on comments on YouTube videos that involve Chinese-English translinguaging. These include videos that mix Chinese and English, as well as videos where use of language by second language learners becomes an issue: for example, a Chinese singer performs a song in English or gives an interview in English and the use of language is picked up as noteworthy by commenters. In the article, Benson develops a discourse analytical framework designed to more systematically evaluate online discourse for evidence of language and intercultural learning. This framework draws on analysis of exchange structure, interactional acts, and stance marking in order to perform both quantitative and qualitative analysis of interaction. The findings show that the Chinese-English translinguaging videos in question provide an interactionally rich environment, where learners of those languages engage in the co-construction of knowledge on topics of language and culture. The article contributes to our understanding of patterns of interactional learning in informal online spaces as well as how these can be analysed—an approach which complements the case-based learning narratives frequently found in digital literacies research. As Benson points out, more work that evaluates online discourse in terms of constructs of learning is needed in order to advance inquiry into language learning in informal, online contexts.

## DIGITAL PRACTICES AND THE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

As suggested above, there are now abundant calls for language educators to rethink the language curriculum and develop pedagogies that cater to language learners' digital literacies needs. One possible approach, suggested by Thorne and Reinhardt (2008), involves the use of what they call "bridging activities". Learners are asked to find examples of new media communication that they themselves have participated in such as instant messaging, blogs and wikis, remixing, and multiplayer online gaming. By applying discourse analytical techniques, learners explicitly analyse these examples, with the aim of developing metalinguistic knowledge relevant to their online interactions. Similarly, Hafner (2014)

suggests that digital literacies can be strategically embedded within the existing language curriculum. In this approach, the traditional range of genres and practices taught is extended to include practices that draw upon the affordances of digital tools. For example, in addition to reporting projects in traditional forms, learners are tasked with creating digital, multimodal compositions that they share with an authentic YouTube audience (Hafner, 2013).

In this issue, Brian King's article on Wikipedia writing provides an excellent example of the inclusion of authentic digital practices in the curriculum. Hong Kong university students taking an introductory English studies course were tasked with writing and publishing an English Wikipedia entry on an aspect of Hong Kong. King examines the ways that writing for an authentic audience on Wikipedia contribute to language learners' socialization into identities as competent writers. The analysis shows how learners, in preparing their entries, invest in writing for an imagined community of Wikipedians, whether or not they have direct interaction with this community. After publishing their entries, learners progress to legitimate peripheral participation in the Wikipedia community. In some cases they engage in deletion debates with community members, positioning themselves as experts on Hong Kong society as they attempt to defend the value of their writing. Finally, writing for Wikipedia is usually constructed as writing for a *public* and therefore perceived in terms of a contribution to knowledge and to the wider world. In this way, learners construct identities as valid writers of English.

Naturally, effective classroom uses of digital practices depend heavily on the approach taken by individual teachers, often based on their own digital experiences. As Chik (2011) points out, even when teachers have rich out-of-class experiences with digital technologies, they do not necessarily draw on these experiences in the language classroom. Ekaterina Tour's contribution to this special issue further investigates the inter-relationship between teachers' personal and professional uses of digital technologies. Tour provides a multiple case study of three language teachers, drawing on participant-generated photography and open-ended interviews in order to understand teachers' practices both inside and outside the classroom. The analysis draws on Lankshear and Knobel's (2007) concept of mindsets—essentially the assumptions about the affordances of digital tools that people bring to digital practices. Tour's findings demonstrate a continuum of perceptions, with teachers perceiving a variable range of affordances. At one end of this continuum is the perception that digital tools offer support and improvement of existing practices; in other words, they are seen as useful teaching tools. As one progresses along the continuum, teachers recognize digital media in more transformative terms, perceiving affordances of connectedness, experimentation, sharing, collective intelligence, empowerment, and multimodality. One implication of this study is that there is a need to address the issue of digital mindsets in teacher education, providing trainees with opportunities to reflect on the affordances of digital tools, and how they transform literacy practices.

## **FUTURE ISSUES**

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this issue address important aspects of digital literacies in language education. They advance our understanding of the nature of digital practices, the way that learning is implicated in such practices, and suggest steps that must be taken in order to incorporate digital literacies into language learning. Although the benefits of rethinking the curriculum to take digital literacies into account are becoming increasingly clear, there are nevertheless obstacles that must be overcome. When it comes to classroom practices, so far little has been said about assessment. One problem here is that it remains unclear how students' participation in innovative digital practices, such as the Wikipedia writing project described by King, can best be assessed. A related problem is that relevant national language and literacy standards reflected in public examinations remain largely unchanged. Until such high-stakes examinations are altered, many teachers are likely to continue to perceive digital literacies as more of an add-on than an integral part of the curriculum. When it comes to out-of-class practices, on the other hand, unlocking the myriad learning opportunities that are observed in globalized online spaces requires active

participation in such spaces. While research has showcased how enthusiastic language learners take advantage of a variety of affinity spaces, it is equally clear that participation can be constrained by a lack of access. However, the factors that promote access are currently poorly understood. What is the role of social class? What is the role of informal mentoring? How can we ensure that all learners are empowered to take advantage of the language learning opportunities that active participation brings? These and other questions lie ahead of us as we move towards a deeper understanding of digital literacies and language learning.

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