New Literacies and Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of new literacies into language teaching practices, with a particular focus on project-based learning (PBL) as a pedagogical approach. In today's digital age, language learners are expected to develop a set of new literacy skills to support their language learning with the aid of digital tools. As such, to draw educators' and curriculum designers' attention to incorporating digital literacies into English language teaching (ELT), the paper begins with a brief review of new literacies, which mainly refers to the crucial skills or language for managing information and communication for ELLs in the digital-mediated context. It then reveals the disconnection between students' needs and teachers' practices, shedding light on the inadequacy of digital literacies in language curricula. This is followed by a case study of integrating problem-based learning (PBL) with elements of digital literacies, exemplified by a report on an undergraduate course in English for science in Hong Kong. Finally, this paper examines the pros and cons of the digital literacies approach, in an attempt to call for the inclusion of digital literacies in the language curriculum to bridge the gap between students' digital proficiency and traditional language instruction.

Keywords

New literacies; Digital literacies; Language teaching; Project-based learning; Pedagogical approach.

1. Introduction

Recent developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have made a profound difference in the status and profile of "literacy". Language learners nowadays are increasingly expected to develop a set of new literacy skills to support their study with the aid of digital tools. In light of this growing trend, the scope of language teaching is warranted to be extended beyond the conventional emphasis on academic language skills. As such, a number of scholars and practitioners call for the integration of new literacies into pedagogical practices, aiming at preparing adolescent learners for success in the 21st century. The paper will first introduce the notion of "new literacies" and illustrate their value in the language curriculum, with the purpose of presenting a deeper understanding of the notion of "new literacies". To further illustrate the role they play in language teaching, the project-based learning (PBL) approach will be discussed in detail, concerning its affordances and constraints, by drawing on cases from the established literature.

2. The Definition of New Literacies

In the age of print, "literacy" is normally related to reading and writing. As this fast-changing world of new technologies allows for multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted textual representations, its definition has been redefined. Over the past decades, large variations exist in how scholars look into "new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel,2013). According to Larson &

Marsh (2005), new literacies refer to the ability to decode, encode and generate meaning by the use of various modes of communication, which includes print, moving and still images, gesture, and sound, mediated by digital technologies. In addition, multiple researchers are informed by a sociocultural-New Literacies Studies perspective, conceiving "new literacies" as "new socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses) "(Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p.4). In addition to that, others pay more heed to the epistemic values of new literacies. For example, new literacies can be defined as strategies or skills that enable people to successfully work out problems by accessing, locating, evaluating, and synthesizing information (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004). Despite the various definitions, the field of new literacies is a large umbrella that encompasses a wide range of terms, such as 21st-century literacies, Internet literacies, digital literacies, new media literacies, multiliteracies, information literacy, ICT literacies, computer literacy and the like (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008). Among them, digital literacies refer to the crucial skills or language for managing information and communication in the digital-mediated context (Hafner, 2013). As this definition can be used in a similar context to "new literacies", the following paper intends to narrow down the space of "new literacies" and replace the term with the word "digital literacies".

3.　New Literacies and Language Curriculum

As a result of the rise and proliferation of digital electronics, 21st-century students differ fundamentally in their ways of reading, writing, and communicating from the previous generations. While language was learned mostly through face-to-face communication previously, it is reported that a mounting number of individuals rely on Internet meditation to foster their language proficiency. It is commonplace for adolescent learners to actively engage in interaction on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, wikis, and blogs, as well as in fan fiction sites and online gaming to improve their language proficiency (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2007). Such globalized online affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are believed to constitute a beneficial learning context for language learners, providing them with a constructive platform to improve communicative competence in a foreign or second language (Hafner, Chik, Jones, 2013). Without a doubt, in present-day society, digital literacies will presumably lay a stepping stone in one's language learning success. In this highly digital world, 21st-century learners are increasingly aspiring to leverage a vast array of digital resources, in an effort to succeed in language learning. Nonetheless, thus far, the significance of digital literacies seems to slip into oblivion in mainstream language classrooms where instruction remains predominantly revolved around a long-established curriculum that prioritizes the linguistic skills required to operate in face-to-face settings or print-based environments (Hafner, Chik, Jones, 2013). This potential gap is likely to bring about the disconnection between students' demands and teachers' practices, to the disadvantage of teaching and learning quality. In order to cater to students' needs, it is incumbent upon educators and curriculum designers to modernize the current curriculum by promoting elements of digital literacies in pedagogical practices.

4.　New Literacies and Pedagogical Approach

From what has been ascertained, it is clear that digital literacies are essential competence for a successful language learner in the digital age, and therefore, are supposed to be included in the current language curriculum, which could offer a blueprint for language teaching practices. Given the value digital literacies play in language teaching, considerable work has gone into the

investigation of the pedagogical approaches that could be designed to blend digital literacies with language teaching, including the bridging approach, e-literacy approach, project-based learning (PBL) approach, and among others. To present an in-depth understanding of the role digital literacies play in pedagogical practices, a detailed analysis of this paper would mainly center on a project-based learning approach, in an effort to critically evaluate its success and barriers by drawing on relevant cases from the established literature.

Project-based learning is a language learning approach that is designed to improve student's learning performance "with the course syllabus structured around stages in the completion of a self-directed, experiential project, rather than around the introduction of communicative functions or linguistic forms" (Hafner, 2014). Thomas (2000) has listed 5 criteria in discriminating PBL from other language learning work: whether the projects are central to the curriculum; whether they concentrated on problems or questions that drive learners to deal with the core concepts and principles of a discipline; whether they involve learners in a productive investigation; whether they are student-driven to a certain degree; whether they are realistic tasks. More recently, PBL lends itself to the application of digital technologies, in an effort to aid students in researching, presenting, and sharing their projects more cooperatively and efficiently with the assistance of technological tools (Miller, Hafner, & NG., 2012). Miller et al. (2012), for instance, report on an undergraduate course in English for science at a university in Hong Kong, designed to integrate PBL with elements of digital literacies. In their study, learners were engaged in a project to carry out a multimodal scientific experiment, presenting their results in the form of digital videos shared through YouTube. The research results indicate that the construction and sharing of multimodal documentaries are of tremendous linguistic and technical benefits for most learners. Moreover, Hung, Hwang, and Huang (2012) conducts a similar study, in which participants in a Taiwan primary school were assigned a project of developing digital stories with the assistance of computers and new technologies. The findings also testify to the merits of PBL, demonstrating that digital storytelling might contribute positively to the students' problem-solving competence, learning motivation, and learning achievement.

As is shown by the established literature, the effectiveness of PBL learning is remarkably well-documented. It breaks the traditional teacher-oriented teaching mode by contributing positively to an autonomous, cooperative, and real-world learning environment for students (Miller et al., 2012). By engaging in a project, learners can drive their learning by discovering problems, collecting data, solving problems, and discussing findings with group members in a real-life situation, from which their creativity, collaborative ability, problem-solving skill, and other curricular skills would be significantly enhanced. Moreover, the project they are involved in would afford them rich opportunities to transfer their theoretical knowledge to real-world practice. Pursuing this further, the integration of digital literacy practices makes this pedagogical approach even more rewarding First, ICTs facilitate communication between teachers and learners without place and time limit, to the advantage of their interpersonal skills and communicative competence. In addition, thanks largely to the advancement of new technology, learners are able to access various information and present their results multi-modally. It is also believed that learners' learning interests and motivation would be promoted as technology provides various possibilities for learning styles and project production (Hung et al., 2014). More importantly, students' digital literacies would arguably be enhanced while participating in the digital literacy practices embedded in the project-based learning activities.

While it is true that integrating digital technology into PBL is of great assistance in improving students' language learning outcomes, the implementation of this pedagogical approach remains a challenge in real-class learning. It is worth noticing that technology integrated PBL approach could not practically be carried out without the support of technology that serves several functions, as have been mentioned above. In other words, implementing this

pedagogical approach demands the adequate provision of technological tools. The problem is that not every school, especially those in poor areas, is capable of affording adequate provision of technological tools. Further, the learning achievement of this approach might be hard to ensure. Considering the student-oriented nature of PBL, the learning process would largely depend on students' participation, motivation, and learning ability, and other subjective factors. For the sake of learning efficiency, the PBL approach requires teachers to take a wide range of roles, attracting students' attention to the learning tasks, guiding the students to associate the new content with their prior knowledge, and maintaining or increasing students' learning motivation, managing the cooperative learning activities effectively (Hafner, 2014).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, given the persuasiveness of ICTs in our lives, more and more language learners avail themselves of diverse digital tools or resources to enhance their second/foreign language learning. To cater to students' technological sophistication, it makes sense that digital literacies should be incorporated into the language curriculum and language teaching practices. Although traditional language skills remain the prime focus of current instruction, numerous scholars and practitioners have already paid heed to the importance of digital literacies in language teaching. For example, PBL, as an innovative pedagogical approach that lends itself to elements of digital literacies, has been proven to be a productive way of language learning. Despite its obvious affordances, there are still quite a few obstacles lying behind PBL that are noteworthy for language teachers and educators when they put the approach into practical use.

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