

Intertextuality as semiotic mediation for youth's enactment of agency and identity in everyday digital literacy practices

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the practice of intertextuality of Farah (pseudonym) a 20-year-old female university student who engaged in a variety of culturally shaped digital literacy practices. In particular, it seeks to elucidate how Farah's practice of intertextuality serves as a semiotic mediation for her exercise and enactment of agency and identity during her everyday literacy practice on Instagram. This research was framed as a case study design with a connective ethnography approach specifically suited to the online environment and digital communication where the researcher's physical presence as an observer is no longer required. Data were collected by means of digital media and technology such as WhatsApp Message Service, informal phone interviews, and online observation. The collected data comprised online snapshots of quote bots, pictures, drawings and comments that Farah produced and shared as part of her everyday digital literacy practice. The data analysis entailed examination of Farah's practice of intertextuality through the lens of sociocultural perspective on text production and interpretation. The findings revealed that Farah's use of quote bots and doodles posted on Instagram involved the act of borrowing texts from other sources as well as mixing English with Indonesian language. Farah's practice of intertextuality was pre-mediated, calculated and purposeful, allowing her to engage in digital authorship involving creativity, improvisation and consciousness as ingredients of agency. In the same vein, Farah's practice of intertextuality allowed her to author the self as a contemplative religious individual. The research concluded with an appeal to policy makers and educational practitioners to respond to the learners' changing learning landscape by re-defining the way we view learners/students, from merely a recipient of knowledge to an individual who has agency, identity and funds of knowledge that have to be acknowledged and appreciated in any process of curriculum design and its implementation on a daily basis.



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1. Introduction

This study investigates a particular discursive practice on social media known as intertextuality. It explores how such type of text production as part of digital literacy practice serves as semiotic mediation for agency and L2 identity construction of a 20-year-old female university student learning to practice and develop English skills. The idea for this research originates in the fact that digital communication mediated through a variety of social media has become a commonplace practice among young people. It allows them to engage in a variety of culturally shaped everyday digital literacy practices such as posting a comment on Twitter, writing a status on Instagram, and

participating in an online discussion. These are few examples of digital literacy practices that have figured into everyday life of young people today (Buckingham & Willet, 2006). This new reality has raised some questions as to what it means for young people to engage in literacy practice in digital era, how digital communication disrupts the traditional view of literacy, from merely technical to socio cultural, and what implications digital space brings to learning as traditionally conceptualized.

While digital technology and media has benefited youth in many respects, it has also been argued that the 'fast come and go' nature of digital media deprives youth of the necessity to develop literacy skills normally required to engage in academic discourse, resulting in what is termed as 'low literacy' (Bauerline, 2008). The public debate around the impact of digital media on youth literacy development signifies the need to re-conceptualize literacy in ways that capture the changing landscape of learning context. The traditional view of literacy can no longer suffice to elucidate the different ways literacy takes place in digital space. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a similar question might be asked as to what constitutes communication in English, and what is deemed legitimate or illegitimate in regard to the use of English on digital platforms involving the production and dissemination of text (Jewitt, 2020).

By the same token, digital literacy practices allow young people to gain knowledge and skills in ways that differ considerably from traditional classroom-based instruction. Literacy practice taking place beyond classroom has been well documented in many ethnographic studies focusing on youth everyday literacy practice. A substantial number of research studies have revealed how youth takes advantage of out-of-school learning affordances as a spin-off from everyday social interaction in a much more natural and liberating ambience (Kress, 1997; Ito et al., 2010; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Gee, 2003, 2008). A case study conducted by Lam (2009) of a teenager engaging in writing on the Internet revealed some interesting facts about digital literacy practice. The teenager, a Chinese immigrant named Almond who emigrated from HK to USA at the age of 12, had gone through hard times in his early years as he had to cope with difficulties in learning English in ESL classroom. He reveals a sense of his marginalized position in society and a perception that his inability to speak English like a native speaker will hinder his prospects in life. English both signifies and constitutes his feeling of not belonging. However, after attending an introductory class on email and browsing for information, he continued to look up different websites for tutorial on how to make personal homepages and engage in online chats. Since then, his digital literacy practice had expanded to include making personal homepages where he made use of multimodalities, compiling on-line chat mates from around the world as well as starting to write regularly to a few email pen pals.

The aforementioned studies speak volumes of the different nature of out of school literacy as compared to traditional classroom instruction. In most cases, such literacy allows for meaningful interaction and participation in a community of practice that grows naturally in the absence of authoritative figures and formal instruction. The goal of literacy shifts from attaining knowledge through instruction as commonly conceived in school to 'sustained participation in the social and cultural practice' (New London Group, 1996). Consequently, literacy as social practice encompasses a range of social purposes, social identities and power relations. In the context of Second Language Acquisition, it is worth investigating how language learners' participation in digital literacy practices are built around both social purposes and learning. As English has become the most prevalent language of online platforms, L2 learners may take advantage by participating in an online community which allows them to establish social interaction while learning to develop their English skills.

Indonesia ranks fifth globally in terms of the number of internet users (Internet World Stats, 2018) and third after Saudi Arabia and India in annual growth of socialmedia users (Smart Insights, 2018). This emerging digital landscape has compelled us to raise a question as to how young people, especially in Indonesia, incorporate digital media technology into their everyday lives to mediate their social interaction. Similarly, against the long binary categorization of L2 learners as 'good' and 'bad', 'proficient' and 'deficient', that has caused frenzy among students in many educational contexts in Indonesia, it stands to reason that students in Indonesia might be able to make use of affordances outside of academic context in ways that strengthen their identity as L2 learners and contribute to their literacy development. Hence, this research study seeks to investigate L2 learner's practice of intertextuality during participation in digital literacy practices in ways that serve as a semiotic mediation for the enactment of agency and construction of L2 identity. More specifically, this research aimed to achieve the following objectives: 1) To identify the participant's everyday literacy practices on Instagram, 2) To describe the participant' practice of manifest intertextuality and

interdiscursivity, and 3) To examine the link between the practice of intertextuality, agency and L2 identity

1.1. Intertextuality and literacy practice

Intertextuality is one of the many forms of literacy practice that has been known to characterize young people's engagement in digitally mediated literacy practice. The term refers to the interconnectedness between a text and other texts as a foundation for the production and interpretation of texts (Bazerman, 2010; Emerson & Holquist, 1986; Kristeva, 1986). Intertextuality holds significance in helping us understand the purpose and meaning of any given literacy practice. As echoed by Bakhtin (1981), any given utterance is always populated with intention and emotional-volitional tone of the speaker; it always has dialogic orientation. There are two different types of intertextualities: 'manifest intertextuality' and 'interdiscursivity'. As pointed out by Fairclough (1992), 'manifest intertextuality' refers to parts of text which can be traced to an actual source in another text. This type of intertextuality is marked by direct quotation or hypertexts. 'Interdiscursivity', on the other hand, involves patterns of language use, genres, discourses, and styles in the production and interpretation of text that do not explicitly reveals the interconnectedness between different texts. In this research, both forms of intertextuality were understood as representing youth's creativity in using language while allowing them to project a sense of the self in an online community.

1.2. Semiotic mediation

Vygotsky (1978) was primarily interested in the process of "semiotic mediation" and the development of voluntary control over human behavior, through higher mental functioning mediated by social and cultural devices. Culturally and socially constructed signs and tools—according to Vygotsky—provide people with the means to alter their behavior, their social environment, and their cognitive, emotional, and psychological development. These cultural devices are part of systems of meaning that are collectively formed and sociohistorical in nature. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Chain (1998) propose that these devices can be seen as tools for agency:

Vygotsky's exposition of semiotic mediation as a means to agency gives us a good vantage on the social and historical creation of identities as means to self-activity. 'Heuristic development' clearly directs attention away from the extremes of cultural determination on the one hand and situational totalitarianism on the other (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky suggested that individuals use socially-created symbols and symbol systems as cultural tools to mediate our interactions with others and our social surroundings (Souza-Lima & Emihovich, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1991). Cultural tools, such as words, forms of speech, forms of literacy, art, and scientific concepts, are socially specific in their making an meaning; they are social in origin and carry with them a historical legacy of meaning. Cultural tools are external "objects" gained through social interaction and structured by their history of previous use. Semiotic mediation via cultural tools is generative. From our social interactions with others within a particular socio-historical environment, we take up tools and then use them to assign meaning to stimuli. We use tools to make meaning and to communicate meaning to others and ourselves as we negotiate our way through our social worlds.

2. Method

To allow for a close investigation of the participants' particular aspects of everyday life and cultural practices, this research project adopted a case study design with ethnographic perspective. Traditionally, ethnographic research is an interpretive process that typically involves a combination of methods, most commonly participant observation and interviews, with the purpose of understanding how people make sense of particular practices, behaviors and activities in everyday settings (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). It may also involve staying in a physical location for a substantial period of time to engage in and understand the culture under study (Leander, 2008). However, as the notion of culture has shifted, from a bounded structure in a physical location to culture as a process (Cazden, 2000), ethnographic studies of culture need not be confined to a singular location. Rather, ethnography can be expanded to the investigation of cultural practices across multiple spaces or places. Hence, the ethnographic approach adopted for this research can be best described as *connective ethnography*. This method assumes that people routinely build connections between online practices

and offline practices (Leander, 2008), thus blurring the boundaries between online/offline, virtual/real, and cyberspace/physical space.

2.1. Research participants

The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling. This technique was chosen as it was considered useful for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). I purposefully selected second-semester university students of non-English major from the Faculty of Pharmacy. All of the participants had previously learned English in Secondary and High schools for a total of 6 years. During their first semester, they were also enrolled in a compulsory general English course (a 2-credit point unit). As many as twenty students expressed interest by signing a letter of consent to participate with a shared understanding that they would be required to report their everyday literacy practices on digital platforms. However, as the data collection unfolded, the number of participants was narrowed down to six who were selected as focal participants. Out of these six participants, there was one particular case of Farah (pseudonym) that was further investigated as she proactively shared her digital literacy practices which contain most instances of intertextuality.

2.2. Data collection tools

This research employs a number of data collection tools such as informal semi-structured interview, WhatsApp message service, and online observation.

1) Informal semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was conducted to gain in-depth understanding of how the participants perceive, think and feel about their engagement in everyday literacy practices mediated by and through English language. The semi-structured interview format enabled me to ask open-ended questions with little control over the participants' responses (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The questions I asked centered around the purposes underlying each literacy event that the participants engaged in

2) WhatsApp message service

The use of WhatsApp message service proved to be extremely useful in my research both during and post data collection process. It was through WhatsApp message service that the participants shared snapshots of their online activities on Instagram. Out of the six focal participants, Farah was selected to be a case study as she was the one who consistently responded to my questions and requests over a period of one month and a half. Also, she was most willing to share snapshots of her digital literacy practices that represent the practice of intertextuality. As a result, she shared the most number of digital snapshots showing her practice of intertextuality, providing me with sufficient data from which the need to focus on intertextuality emerged.

3) Online observation

The online observation was aimed at further corroborating the data collected through WhatsApp message service and interviews. It was particularly useful to capture the entirety of the situated nature of Farah's practice of intertextuality. During the data collection process, I asked for Farah's permission to accept my request to follow her Instagram since she made it private. She voluntarily provided access to her Instagram which allowed me to observe her activities both in the past and at the time I was doing this research. I was able to have a better picture of a variety of contents that Farah had shared. This helped me in my understanding of Farah's interests, passion, dreams and life goals, which I consider essential in looking at her literacy practice at more depth.

2.3. Data analysis

In this research project, literacy events were used as a unit of analysis. Literacy events are typically observable moments shaped by literacy practices (Barton et al., 2000). Barton (1998, 2007) defines literacy events as moments when a person or people try "to comprehend or produce graphic signs" (p. 36). Heath (1982, 1983, 2008) has provided a definition of a literacy event to include "talk" around a piece of writing and/or situations in which literacy plays a central role. Literacy events are viewed as a communicative exchange that regards acts of literacy (reading, writing, and/or speaking) as the primary focus (Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983).

The data were analyzed in two phases. First, the collected data in the form of quote bots, drawings and words were analyzed using Fairclough's (1992) theory of intertextuality to identify instances of

intertextuality. Second, they were subsequently re-contextualized into the lens of Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) notion of utterances and Vygotsky's semiotic mediation to make sense of Farah's practice of intertextuality at more depth to establish the link between intertextuality, agency and identity.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Introducing Farah

Farah was born in Padang, West Sumatra. Unlike Sari and Hanafi, she just turned 18 when I first met her as a research participant. Her parents are both highly educated, the father being a university lecturer and the mother working as a HRD manager in a company dealing with heavy equipment. Farah has one younger brother who was studying in his final year of high school. As written in the student background sheet, Farah's interests include art (dancing, drawing, theater) journalism, scouting, and "I like joining some organization such as OSIS, BEM" as she put it. Farah was in essence also multilingual. At home she speaks mostly in Padang dialect, while outside she keeps switching from Indonesian to Padang and vice versa depending on whom she interacts with. In addition to these two languages, Farah can read Arabic as required to recite the Holy Scripture Al Quran

Interestingly, when asked if she could understand the meanings, she said that sometimes she was at a loss. But, fortunately, she likes to go online to search for information about each surah or verses through Google. She said "Yes I like reading on the internet sir. Because it is fast and practical. All information about Al Quran is there the meaning and background also available" (Second interview, September, 2019). She also explained that having lived in Yogya for almost 2 years, she has acquired some Javanese language vocabulary.

What is most striking about Farah is that she grew up loving English. She was first introduced to English when she was in the third grade of Elementary School. She fondly reminisced those moments when she was for the first time taught how to say numbers and to name objects in English. She thought it was 'keren' (cool) as she put it. Even at the age of 9, she had already imagined it would be 'cool' to use English in everyday conversation. Her early years of schooling were also characterized by her love for English, such as taking private English lessons, going to an English village in Kediri on school holidays, and participating in different English competitions.

Based on data analysis, I discovered that Farah's digital literacy practices encompass different literacy events that serve as a space for her to mark her authorship on Instagram. Some of the literacy events she engaged in include the practice of intertextuality in which she borrowed others' words to be infused with her own intentions, styles, and accents. As Bakhtin (1984) argues, linguistic forms have already been used in a variety of settings. The user of language has to make them his/her own, to populate them with his/her own intentions and accent. The findings show that Farah's practice of intertextuality serves as a semiotic mediation to enact her agency during her participation in everyday digital literacy practice. They are presented in two different sections below.

3.2. Farah's practice of manifest intertextuality

The findings showed that during participation in everyday literacy practices mediated through different online social media, Farah engaged in intertextuality in which she produced a particular text that can be traced back to a particular source via online tracing. In one of the posts on her Instagram, Farah was seen to post several captions that feature quote bots or wise sayings as can be seen in Figure 1. Interestingly, she combined several captions into one frame featuring texts of contemplative nature.



Fig. 1. Farah's contemplative captions on Instagram

Farah's use of captions serve as a medium to project the self in a particular way that establishes her identity as a contemplative religious individual among her online friends on Instagram. In the first instance, she posted the text which read "Never explain yourself to anyone because the one who likes you would not need it and the one who dislikes you wouldn't believe it." This text is contemplative in the sense that it shows her character to reflect upon such seemingly mundane life experience and turn it into something transcendental. In the rest of the captions, Farah's inclination to contemplate is anchored in her affiliation with Islam as her faith and her understanding of Islamic teachings. For example, in the caption which reads "Sujood a love story no one will understand except those who pray," she is drawing upon the notion of 'Sujood' in which Muslim prostrate to God by bringing down the knee, forehead, and both hands and all toes to the ground in the direction of the Kaaba at Mecca to praise and glorify Allah. She apparently appeals to her Instagram followers to ponder upon the meaning of 'sujood' while simultaneously suggesting that only those who pray would ultimately be able to develop intimate relationship with God through the act of 'sujood'. The invitation to engage in transcendental thinking is also apparent in the caption which read "The beauty of Islam is that it's never too late to ask Allah for forgiveness but we also have to remember you never know when you will die." Here, she displays her contemplative nature by inviting her Instagram followers to refrain from the feeling of despondency and to seek forgiveness from God in the soonest manner possible before it is too late

In another snapshot of her literacy practice that she shared with me on WhatsApp message service, Farah produced doodles that she drew and posted on her personal blog which was also linked to her Instagram story as seen in [Figure 2](#).



Fig. 2. Farah's creation of doodles

As can be seen from [Figure 2](#), a common thread running through Farah's everyday literacy practices is the utilization of captions and doodles as mediational tools for her participation in different literacy events on social media such as Instagram and Twitter. As evidenced through the above snapshots, Farah's caption and doodles consist of different elements such as words, drawings, handwritings, and photos. However, upon further investigation through WhatsApp chats, Farah acknowledged that most of the wise words/motivational messages and religious quotes were not fully her own but were taken from other sources like Pinterest, a virtual bulletin or cork board that allows users to find and curate images and videos. Farah wrote: "and those are my writings when I was in Mr. bob kampung Inggris pare and my insta 80% of my posts r English quotes." (WhatsApp Chat, September 2019). Hence, it is understandable that her Instagram and Twitter were charged with the expression or ideas that she might have encountered before. In this sense, Farah has demonstrated the practice of intertextuality that serves as a semiotic mediation for her enactment of agency and identity.

3.3. Farah's practice of interdiscursivity

As described in the previous section, the practice of interdiscursivity entails the production and interpretation of text that came or originated from another text, which were not explicitly signaled in

the forms of quotation, paraphrase or copying but was related in a more abstract way to social conventions (i.e. patterns or template of language use), genres, discourses, and styles (Fairclough, 1992). This can also include a mixing of elements, visuals and languages that have become commonly known. The snapshot in Figure 3 shows how Farah felt about relinquishing her role as a member of Student Executive Body



Fig. 3. Farah's goodbye post on Instagram

The post was addressed to her fellow friends who also had to part with the organization as their terms of office came to an end. Farah appears to feel so overwhelmed by such occasion that she wrote "I am not really sure how much I really love it. I love dara juang family until it hurts me to be demisioner (s) with them." This remark echoes her feeling of sadness, and strong emotional attachment to the community of friends with whom she had worked together through the ebbs and flows so as to develop a strong bond as a family, which she dubbed 'dara juang family.'

As seen in Figure 3, it is apparent that Farah mixes English and Bahasa Indonesia to bring a particular effect to what she is trying to express. Within such a relatively short writing, Farah deliberately oscillates between English and Bahasa Indonesia to produce a coherent text in ways that establishes her authorial presence among her Instagram followers. Through such a mixing, Farah demonstrates the practice of interdiscursivity involving cross border, simultaneous use of two languages. In this sense, Farah demonstrates improvisation and creativity in her ability to orchestrate others' voices and turn them toward her own discourse. In Bakhtinian perspective of language, the quote bots, caption and doodles represent others' voices which have been appropriated into internally persuasive discourses. They have become half her own and half others (Bakhtin, 1986).

3.4. Looking at intertextuality as semiotic mediation for agency and identity

From Vygotskian's (1974) theory of human consciousness development, Farah's agency can be analyzed in terms of semiotic mediation involving the use of cultural tools. Cultural tools are external objects gained through social interaction and structured by their history of previous use. Words, forms of speech, forms of literacy, art, and scientific concepts, are cultural tools which are socially specific in their meaning making; they are social in origin and carry with them a historical legacy of meaning. As Farah acknowledged, her captions and religious quotes were taken from Pinterest, a social media where users could share images associated with their particular experience, projects, goods and services and discover new interests by browsing images others have posted. As a social network, users can interact with each other through liking, commenting, and re-saving each other's stuff. We could see here that Farah's quotes and captions had been subjectively experienced and assigned different meanings as they were circulating in social media over time. This shows that the quote bots and captions used by Farah are part of systems of meaning that are collectively formed and socio-historical

in nature. Farah's agency manifested in the way she used these cultural tools to improvise during interactions with people and to gain control over her inner and expressive behavior. Farah's creation of doodles, for example, could be understood as her expression of agency to navigate through her boredom and engage in authorship involving appropriation of the words of others. As Vygotsky (1974) notes, just as humans altered the physical environment with tools, we can also modify the social environment and our mental states with symbols.

In a similar vein, Farah's development of consciousness was socio-culturally constructed; it is as a product of social interaction involving religious quotes as a form of cultural tools. However, caution must be taken so as not to reduce or attribute such development solely to sociocultural interactions. Rather, the sociocultural interactions contribute to the formation of an individual consciousness but do not supplant it. For example, in the literacy act of posting religious captions on her Instagram, Farah essentially demonstrated agency when she consciously used such cultural tools to provoke the engagement of thought, emotion, and imagination on the part of her Instagram community. Hence, Farah's agency is both subjectively enacted and socio-culturally and historically shaped through doodles and quote bots as semiotic mediational tools. And this is precisely what agency holds in Vygotskian sociocultural perspectives.

Farah's identity as the contemplative/religious was mediated through her posting of captions on Instagram (self as author) featuring religious quotes from the Holy Book. Her identity as the inquisitive/knowledge seeker was mediated through the choice of reading texts featuring unique information and knowledge. Her identity could be understood as emerging out of the way she described her experience to me as a researcher (self as author) and the impression that I had of her (the impression that she gave off) as a researcher. One distinctive feature of Farah identity entails the use of doodles as a semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1974) to help her navigate through her boredom. In Bakhtinian terms, Farah's identity was heavily permeated with language, highlighting the role of language in one's development of consciousness.

The different examples above illustrate Farah's practice of borrowing texts from other sources both as a direct quotation and implicit use of borrowed words. Although it is obvious that the quotes are not their own, they most often were able to use them in an appropriate manner to suit the context of the interaction and to the rest of the text. Such practice of intertextuality reflects the participants' creativity and improvisation in coping with their situation and constraints as English learners.

4. Conclusion

This research has shown how a 20-year-old university student, Farah, engaged in the production and interpretation of text known as intertextuality in digital space and how such practice serves as a semiotic mediation for her enactment of agency and identity as L2 learner. Intertextuality has been shown to play a major role in enabling Farah to mark her authorship in a digital community of friends and strangers in ways that satisfy her need for self-expression and social relations and cohesion. Through Instagram posts, Farah was able to show creativity in authoring the self by borrowing texts, mixing languages and synthesizing symbols, drawings, and captions, highlighting her agency in everyday digital literacy practices. On a similar note, her practice of intertextuality also allows her to enact her multiple identities during her participations in culturally shaped digital literacy practices. Farah's acknowledgment of feeling liberated in writing and using English and Bahasa Indonesia echoes the nature of out-of-class literacy practice that is more empowering, engaging and liberating to a great extent.

The findings from this research have provided some insights into the changing landscape of literacy practice in the wake of digital communication and media proliferation. Literacy can no longer be conceived as merely acquisition of discrete technical skills but also include sociocultural aspects embedded in learning. Teachers and educational practitioners need to develop awareness of learners' changing learning landscape where technology and digital media have become an indispensable part of learners' everyday life. To respond to this changing landscape would partly mean to change the way we view learners/students, from merely a recipient of knowledge to an individual who has agency, identity and 'funds of knowledge' that has to be acknowledged and appreciated in any process of curriculum design and its implementation on a daily basis.

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