

**Web-based new literacies: Revisiting literacy in TESOL
and EFL teacher education**

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By

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Abstract: English language learning in general, and TESOL in particular, has been recently associated with some new literacy practices imposed by the Internet and other new ICTs which, according to Coiro et al. (2008), have been defining the concept of literacy in the 21st century. The changing social practices should be accompanied by a process of revolutionizing the concept of literacy itself so that it can encompass those new dimensions brought up by the Web. Hence, this paper reviews approaches to literacy as far as language learning and the Web, as a new technology of literacy, are concerned, as well as the relevant new literacy practices in this context as indicated by some empirical studies. Here I present the term Web-based new literacies in the Egyptian context of EFL teacher education to express the new knowledge, skills, strategies, and social practices that prospective teachers of English require to cope with the rapid developments in the Web and the new literacy practices that students have recently been involved in within informal contexts. It is suggested that introducing this new term along with a review of the new literacy practices associated with the Internet and other ICTs in a language

learning context may help us as EFL teacher educators to reconsider our teaching practices and refine EFL curriculum in the pre-service EFL teacher education programmes accordingly.

1. Introduction

"Every morning, and as soon as I get up and open my eyes to realise that I'm still alive, I thank God that I was born to witness the age of the Internet, and then go to my beloved laptop to continue a dialogue that never ceases!"-Mahmoud Abdallah 2010

This paper is based on my current PhD study that deals with integrating some Web-based new literacies into the Egyptian context of EFL pre-service teacher education, with specific reference to Assiut University College of Education to which I am affiliated. My objectives are represented in:

1. Exploring a range of approaches to literacy to position myself within existing literature (i.e. theoretical grounding);
2. Demonstrating my theoretical framework and approach towards Web-based new literacies;
3. Presenting taxonomy of those Web-based new literacies that Egyptian EFL student teachers need in the 21st century based on empirical data;
4. Presenting some guidelines on integrating Web-based new literacies into TEFL/TESOL within Egyptian teacher education programmes with specific reference to the one provided by Assiut University College of Education.

2. Approaches to Literacy

Traditionally, literacy was conceptualised from a static, cognitive/psycho-linguistic approach that admits the existence of a specific set of skills and competencies that should be mastered by learners regardless of the context. This vision resulted in unified structures of knowledge that constitute literacy in everywhere in the world (Street 2008). After all, it is easy for educators to teach the same set of skills to many generations of learners. This approach, which is still dominant nowadays, has been constructed upon the stable nature of books or print-based materials as tools for learning.

As a result of the unprecedented rapid developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on one hand (see also Coiro et al. 2008), and the growing recognition of the vital role played by the context and the social environment in the teaching/learning process on the other, a socio-cultural approach to literacy and language learning has come to the fore. From this socio-cultural perspective, literacy is viewed in terms of the dominant social practices and the new technologies used by people in everyday life, and thus schools or classrooms are perceived as interactive units in society. Based on this new approach, some scholars have started to create dichotomies between ‘in-school’ literacies, and ‘out-of-school’ literacies, arguing that academic literacies within schools should encompass the new forms of literacy that have become dominant in daily interactions among people (Barton & Hamilton 1998; Gee 1996; Street 2009).

Based on this modern approach that recognises the role that new technologies have been playing nowadays, the concept of ‘literacy’ has been pluralised (i.e. literacies) to encompass the many forms and variations that emerged with these new technologies (Abdallah 2008). Thus, a plethora of terms associated with literacy have emerged, such as new literacies, multiple literacies, visual literacies, electronic literacies, computer literacy, and media literacies.

Moreover, some new approaches have emerged as a reaction to the rapid developments. As a result of the dominance of ICTs in the educational and language learning contexts, some new literacy approaches have come to the fore all of which take into consideration the new literacy practices attached to emerging new technologies and the resulting new social practices:

1-*New Literacy Studies*: This is a generation of scholars (e.g., Barton & Hamilton 1998; Street 1984) with an orientation towards studying literacy from a new dynamic perspective that takes into consideration many socio-political, ethnographic, and technological dimensions. According to this approach, literacy practices are so socially embedded that they cannot be understood in isolation. Literacy is not static, and hence, language learners, in particular, should expand their literacy practices.

2-Multiliteracies: This term was devised by The New London Group (1996). In the light of this approach, reading, writing, and communication on the Internet may be viewed as including a set of ‘multiliteracies’ which emerge as individuals from different cultural contexts encounter one another within different communication technologies (Leau & Kinzer 2003). Pioneers in this group assert that curricula should be updated to incorporate the new digital input and address these changing multiliteracies. Consequently, learning in schools need to be organised around a much wider concept of communicative practice and representation than this currently presented to learners around the world (Cope & Kalantzis 2000).

With its main focus on multi-modal communication and multi-sensory means necessary for mastering a foreign language, this approach involves direct implications for language learning. In this sense, for English language learning purposes, students need to integrate multimodal ways of communication and meaning representation (e.g. linguistic/textual, audio, and visual) drawing on their own experiences and semiotic literacy practices to get their message across (The New London Group 1996). Since communication is the main goal of learning a foreign language, this is closely relevant as learners should employ multiple channels and modes to convey their message in the target language to a wide audience.

3-Multi-modal Literacy: This approach is quite similar to the above one as it encompasses all the different ways in which meaning can be created and communicated in the world today (Jewitt & Kress 2003). In language learning, literacy is no longer conceived as a mono-modal phenomenon.

4-‘Electronic literacy approach’ to network-based language teaching (Shetzer & Warschauer 2000) is a quite recent approach that conceives language learning from a socio-cultural perspective based on the Web as a new technology of literacy. It implies an interdependent/transactional relationship between the Web and language assuming that becoming literate is more than learning how to decode and write letters and words. Besides, it argues that in the same way as new skills and competencies are needed to employ the Web for language learning purposes, also

similar skills and competencies are needed for employing language to master and integrate the Web and other ICTs.

5-‘New Literacies’ Perspective: The New Literacies Research Team at the University of Connecticut, US is the founder of this approach whose main focus is on the new literacies of reading comprehension that are based on the Web. The team defines new literacies based on the Internet as “the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully exploit the rapidly changing ICTs continuously emerging in our world” (Leu et al. 2004).

3. ‘Web-based new literacies’ defined

Based on the brief discussion above, we can identify how literacy has changed recently; it has changed in different ways that current EFL curricula in the 21st century (especially in pre-service teacher education) should consider:

- From *paper-based* to *electronic/digital-based*.
- From *one-dimensional* to *multi-dimensional*.
- From *offline* practices to *online* practices.
- From *isolated/individual* practices to *collaborative/connective* practices.
- From *independent, unified* practices to *situated, contextual ones*

Based on the ‘new literacies’ perspective and with specific reference to the Egyptian context and Assiut University College of Education Pre-service EFL Teacher Education, I define ‘Web-based new literacies’ in the context of TESOL and EFL teacher education as:

“The up-to-date, Web-associated knowledge, insights, skills, strategies, and competencies that EFL student teachers need for an effective employment of the Web in language learning which might lead to improving/expanding their literacy practices within learning contexts, and making them succeed as both lifelong learners and prospective teachers of

English". (Also available online on Wikipedia at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web-based_new_literacies).

Though it is a contextual definition that draws on an Egyptian context, yet the definition can be valid for many contexts of EFL pre-service teacher education all over the world. After all, the Web is still an innovation in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, and hence, we are still envisioning the ways and possibilities through which it can be used as both a means for language learning/acquisition on which modern language teaching methods should draw on, and as a means of communication which can foster a variety of effective communicative activities that can open new spaces for language practice (see also Warschauer et al. 2000).

4. Taxonomy of ‘Web-based new literacies’

Based on empirical data obtained through two data collection methods: documentary analysis, and online questionnaire, I came out with a long list of those Web-based new literacies needed by student teachers at the Egyptian context of pre-service EFL teacher education with specific reference to Assiut University College of Education. However, because of the length of the obtained list, I present it in the form of a taxonomy that can be used in the future by EFL teacher educators at the Egyptian universities or world-wide:

1-Online Communication and Collaboration

- 1.1 Membership of online communities and the knowledge society;
- 1.2 Composing and writing online;
- 1.3 Meaning negotiation and idea sharing;
- 1.4 Online language practice.

2-Online Information Management and Knowledge Construction

- 2.1 Surfing the Web and locating information;
- 2.2 Online reading comprehension;
- 2.3 Critical Literacy Skills;
- 2.4 Synthesising information and constructing knowledge.

3-Accessing Web-based English Resources/Materials

3.1 Making use of the Internet as an online library for English learning;

3.2 Accessing authentic English material.

5. Conclusion and Guidelines

Based on the thematic analysis, some guidelines for integrating Web-based new literacies into the Egyptian pre-service EFL teacher education programmes in general, and that one provided by Assiut University College of Education in particular, were suggested. Though these guidelines were based on the Egyptian context, they can be used by EFL teacher educators all over the world to inform their practices once they wish to integrate the Internet into their teaching:

A) *Developing studied courses*: Two main courses studied by EFL student teachers need to be updated enough to address ICTs in general and the Web-related new literacy forms in particular: Educational Technology and TEFL/TESOL Methodology. Moreover, a link should be created between those two courses in such a way that new ICTs, especially new Internet-related skills and strategies, are used practically in TEFL workshops and real-learning practices in the context of English language learning. The educational technology course should provide the basic technical training that student teachers need on how to use the Internet. The TEFL methodology course should focus on the literacy and competency aspects that student teachers need to develop. The input that student teachers get in the educational technology course should be effectively employed in the TEFL methodology course which is divided into two main parts: a theoretical part and a practical part. It is the practical part that should address these new aspects because it involves real interactions with student teachers within workshops.

B) *Developing the main language skills for EFL student teachers*: The main language skills (i.e. listening, reading, writing, speaking and communication skills) addressed in the TEFL Methodology course should be studied in the light of a new perspective based on ICTs, especially the Internet, and the associated new literacy forms that have been influencing the English language in such a way that language skills, competencies, and practices are taking new forms and shapes that need to be considered in the process of preparing future teachers of English. Therefore, focus

should be on online reading, and how to skim and scan in the Web-based environment that includes hyperlinks and hypertext.

C) *A blended solution is the best fit*: In the context of the EFL teacher education programmes, blended learning (i.e. Web-based learning reinforcing and complementing traditional instruction) is the most appropriate mode and/or approach of using and employing the Web at this stage. The Internet or the Web, as many teacher educators emphasise, should never replace traditional face-to-face instruction. Hence, blended learning should combine the best elements of both modes to help student teachers to achieve the most efficient results.

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