

# Social Media & English Learners' Academic Literacy Development

*Dong-shin Shin*

## Introduction

Social media are becoming a critical part of communication in everyday lives and are a common form of communication for many students in and outside of school. Accordingly, English learner (EL) students are using social media-based communication to gather information, maintain friendships, and express multiple identities. Considering that social media have been a driving factor in students' literacy practices, it is critical that teachers incorporate this type of social writing into their curriculum and instruction to engage students and to better support their language and literacy learning and development.

Research has shown that social media involve changes in modes, authorship, styles, genres, social relationships, and time and space of literacy practices (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Lam, 2013; Shin, 2014; Toohey et al., 2015). This kind of textual practice has been shown to support second language (L2) development, giving expression to a wider variety of rhetorical goals and expanding audiences (Gee & Hayes, 2011). However, while most of these studies have examined L2 learners' out-of-school literacy practices, there are few studies about multilingual learners'/L2 learners' uses of social media in school settings.

This study explores how a sixth-grade teacher used social media in her English

and Language Arts (ELA) lessons in a U.S. elementary classroom. Specifically, it examines the kinds of affordances available in social media-based writing, and how students process those affordances in writing genre texts.

What kinds of affordances are available when students write through social media? How do those affordances shape students' learning of academic writing?

## Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework that I draw on for this study is a sociocultural perspective on language and literacy learning. Within this theoretical perspective, I argue that language learning is a social practice of meaning-making processes that draw on the semiotic/meaning-making resources available in the context of communication (Bakhtin, 1981; Halliday, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). These semiotic resources are cultural artifacts that are sociohistorically created by members of a social group.

Learning how to use cultural semiotic artifacts comes about by participating in socialization practices that involve cultural artifacts as the tools that mediate social interactions. Developing expertise in uses of cultural meaning-making resources is based on socialization processes of learning the cultural and social norms of a discourse community (Kress, 2003). Thus, in computer-mediated language learning, learners engage in expressing themselves and understanding others within the cultural, social, and historical contexts of the discourse community.

Within this view of context-dependent language learning, digital literacy practices are shaped by the dynamics between social materials (e.g., Web 2.0 tools, institutional curricular conditions, and logistics) and human behaviors. Learners appropriate digital literacy activities for their linguistic and social purposes, which allows researchers and teachers to avoid static, essentialized views of learning and its contexts.

Exploring how learners jointly construct learning activities, one can see their identities/subjectivities in relation to co-constructed norms, rules, and goals. Moreover, this approach to studying computer-mediated language learning and teaching can also address the kinds of experiences language learners will face in a linguistically, culturally, and socially new environment, and how they will carry their life interests and stories over to online language learning spaces.

As such, language learning is not the acquisition of discrete linguistic features, but rather of the norms, values, beliefs, and hierarchies of a social group in order to become competent members of that social group. Learners dialogically engage with discourses surrounding the learning practice—social voices that are both synchronic and diachronic (Bakhtin, 1981).

In sum, when language learning is viewed as situated social practices that entail the use of sociocultural semiotic resources in context-dependent ways (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998), it is acknowledged that learners have “social agency” in those practices. It becomes critical to examine the goals

---

*Dong-shin Shin is an assistant professor in the Literacy and Second Language Program of the School of Education at the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio.*

and roles that learners have in computer-mediated language practice as much as computer technologies, pedagogical purposes, and contexts to understand the dynamics of computer-mediated language and literacy education.

This approach enables one to see how learners are engaged in language and literacy practices involving meaning-making practices through the new modalities afforded by computer technologies (Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Furthermore, such an examination that focuses on learners' semiotic experiences shows the social, cultural, and historical complexities of computer-mediated language and literacy development.

## Methods

### School and Classroom

The school in which I conducted this study was Centerville Elementary School, located in an economically challenged rural area in the northeast of the United States. About 27% of students received free and reduced price lunch during the school year when the current study was conducted.

The Centerville school provided English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum following the state-mandated curriculum framework that directly aligns with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In its ELA instruction, teachers maintained writing workshops that employed a writing workshop model (Calkins, 2010).

The Centerville school encouraged teachers to incorporate computer technologies in their instruction across content areas, and offered a computer lab with 35 computers for their instructional activities throughout the academic year in addition to computers in their individual classrooms.

The sixth grade classroom in which I conducted this study was an inclusive class that educated ELL, special needs, and mainstream students together. The class had 18 students and was composed of nine girls and nine boys; four of the students were classified as ELs, students with disabilities, or students requiring Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

This classroom was well equipped with a SmartBoard and an Elmo, a document camera that the teacher used to display papers and student work, in addition to six computers and six iPads. The class used these computer technologies and

other Internet related resources for many learning activities across content areas throughout the day. The classroom had a large library that had books about multicultural topics, in addition to books organized by subject areas.

### Participants

The classroom teacher, Laura Smith, was interested in using instructional technologies and Web 2.0 technologies for her instruction. Ms. Smith took a graduate course, Supporting Emergent Literacy of Diverse Students, which I taught as part of a teacher education program in which she was enrolled. In the course, she designed a curricular project that incorporated Web 2.0 technologies into the ELA curriculum. She invited me to her classroom so that I could provide support for the research project that she was conducting on the curricular project.

This study was based on a focal child, Jonny, an eleven-year old bilingual boy whose home language was Laotian. He learned and used English as a school language since his family immigrated to the States when he was a toddler. Jonny was a social and active student who enjoyed soccer and Internet-related activities (e.g., typing his grandfather's stories, playing computer games).

Jonny enjoyed any school projects in which he could work on a computer and use Internet resources. His reading proficiency was at grade level, although his writing proficiency needed improvement. He loved engaging in digital literacy practices, having access to up-to-date computer devices and Internet access in and out of school. In addition to being bilingual, his interest in digital literacies led me to select Jonny as a focal student for the study.

### Curriculum Unit

The study was based on a curricular unit of argumentative writing within the ELA curriculum. The ELA block was organized around centers, including word work, guided reading, independent reading, and writing lessons. The center activities were aligned with the CCSS. To teach the genre, Ms. Smith designed a curricular unit on writing an argument in which students selected their own topics about changing America into a better country. They then studied related information, and wrote their argument with supporting claims and evidence.

Ms. Smith turned the argumentative curricular unit into a multimedia writing

project by incorporating digital technologies (e.g., Glogster, Edmodo). Edmodo, is a web-based platform that supports students in connecting ideas, sharing ideas, and collaborative learning. Glogster is an online platform that provides multimedia resources for digital composition and interactive learning to enable students to both write and publish texts and the class. Her class had been using Edmodo for different kinds of content areas frequently, and students were using the tool in and out school without any problems.

To help students' use of Glogster, she provided workshops in which students could learn about the program, in addition to providing handouts for later use. The class had been using various technologies, including Web 2.0 technologies, in reading and writing activities across content areas (e.g., creating brochures about Greece in social studies classes using Microsoft Publisher, PowerPoint slides on Planets in science classes).

Drawing on an SFL-informed genre pedagogy (Gebhard & Harman, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2004), Ms. Smith identified language features needed in argumentative writing and taught students how to write an argumentative multimedia text through a teaching-learning cycle involving multiple stages (Feez, 1998; Rothery, 1996).

First, the stages of *orientation* and *modeling* oriented the students to the purpose and function of the argument by discussing with them the features of mentor argumentative texts from books and the Internet. The classroom teacher focused on building a shared context for learning, while simultaneously familiarizing students with new technologies for multimodal text production.

Next, in the stages of *deconstruction* and *joint construction*, Ms. Smith supported students' argument writing through a class activity in which the class analyzed language features of argumentative essays and jointly created an argumentative text for or against year-round schooling in Glogster. In the joint construction stage, the teacher provided the students with scaffolding on how linguistic and non-linguistic meaning making resources co-constructed meanings of the argument.

Lastly, the students were engaged in *independent writing* of their argumentative essays on their selected topics for changing America. Throughout the writing processes, the students exchanged feedback on each other's texts in Edmodo for critical reflection on their own textual practices. After the independent writing, students

published their completed texts in Edmodo and on the school district website.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Over the course of a semester, I collected multiple domains of data, adopting principles of ethnography for the participant's learning experiences in this social media-based writing curricular unit (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). Data collection included student's written texts, Glogster postings, field notes about classroom interactions, interview data, and instructional materials.

I used the focal student's written texts and Glogster postings as primary sources for examining student writing process, and field notes, interview data, and instructional materials as supplementary data for contextual information about learning experiences. Grounded in sociocultural theories of language and literacy learning (Halliday, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978), I employed analytical codes such as affordances, constraints, student roles, and changes in student learning.

### Affordances of Writing Through Social Media and Impact on Learning to Write an Argument

The focal student wrote an argument for establishing a commemoration day for the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy and for allowing more funding for protection at school, drawing on a class discussion about gun violence and school safety. With meaning making resources available in Glogster, Jonny selected images, words, and sounds as primary semiotic resources for his multimodal argumentative text, as seen in Figure 1.

Data analysis shows that Jonny was able to produce a multimedia text that employed various meaning-making resources such as word, image, color, and sound appropriately to the purpose and audience. In doing so, he distributed meanings of the argument across linguistic and visual resources with a growing understanding of multimedia text production. As such, Jonny developed a growing understanding of how to employ various meaning making resources/modes and intermodal relations through composing with Glogster.

This kind of learning experience with new communication media would foster the development of multilingual students' metalanguage for meaning-making process, and composition with various semiotic/meaning-making systems. Such semiotic competence allows students to develop critical language awareness in an increasingly multilingual and multimedia-based communications environment.

Another affordance that is worth noting is increased interactions and collaboration among students. Along with increasing use of Internet in everyday communications, Jonny and many of his classmates were engaged with online games, blogging, social media (i.e., Facebook), and exploring websites. According to the interviews with Jonny, he spent about two hours a day on online activities out of school.

Ms. Smith's use of Web 2.0 technologies and social media (e.g., Edmodo, Glogster) led him to become more engaged with school in ways that resembled Jonny's typical social media activities. When he had homework posted in Edmodo, he was the first one who completed the work. This social media project through Edmodo and

Glogster was a motivational hook for school reading and writing activities, as seen in an excerpt from an interview with Jonny about his learning experience with this argumentative writing:

This is really cool and I feel like I know how to use parts of the computer better. I have always wondered how you can send information over the Internet and if we could connect with students outside of school. I am really excited to try this at home and show my parents.

As such, the social media-based school writing validated students' out-of-school literacy practices. It was able to support parental participation for school writing and building social relationships with friends and with other parents if students are connected out of school as Jonny noted.

Jonny's increased interactions with classmates changed ways in which he learned school writing. That is, he interacted with his classmates in and out of classroom throughout the writing processes, from brainstorming topics for the argumentative writing to selecting appropriate images (e.g., including school picture instead of white horse) for the purpose and audience of the text. Jonny's writing process became more social, and his writing was a synthesis of feedback from classmates as well as his own ideas.

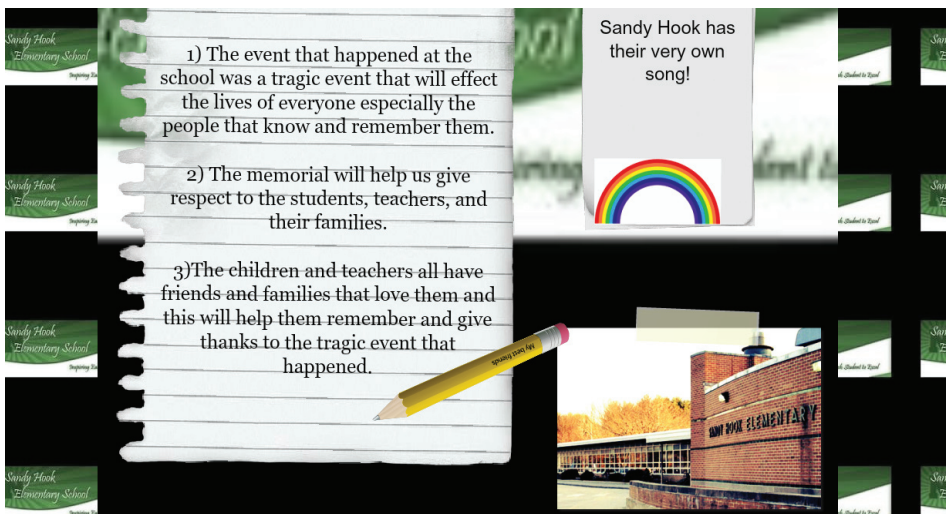
This collaborative writing practice led him to have heightened awareness of audience responses to his writing and to have intensified interest in achieving social interactions with and recognitions from peers while learning school writing. For that goal, he attempted to make his text conspicuous by drawing on meaning resources such as funny images and strong colors (e.g., black background color). Thus, social media helped him to expand meaning-making repertoire for writing and to expand the interpersonal functions of language use.

### Conclusion

This study explored how use of social media in ELA writing curriculum shaped a bilingual student's learning experience in an inclusive sixth grade classroom. Findings show that use of social media in an ELA writing curriculum validated students' out-of-school literacy practices as they learned academic writing, along with a potential for parent involvement in children's schooling.

This endorsement had a significant impact on the student's motivation to complete assignments and his ability to

**Figure 1**  
Jonny's Multimodal Argumentative Text





process various meaning-making resources in writing. However, simply giving students new Web 2.0 tools is not sufficient to secure these gains in multilingual learners' literacy skills. Students need to have scaffolding and explicit instruction on how to use new technologies and their meaning-making resources appropriately in various literacy contexts.

Given that quality learning is dependent on quality instruction, teachers also need proper training and professional development on how to incorporate social media into their classroom for multilingual learners' language and literacy education.

When it comes to teaching through Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., social media), it is necessary for teachers to be aware of possible digital divides across communities, and provide not only computers but also the cultural practices associated with the technologies (Attewell, 2001; Reich, Murnane, & Willett, 2012; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

Particularly, it is important to keep in mind that many ELs and their families are from low SES backgrounds and do not have access to Internet-related technologies or communication practices based on Web 2.0 tools in ways that many mainstream students do. In addition, their digital practices often do not fully utilize the potential of Web 2.0 tools. This kind of inequality involving Internet technologies is a critical issue for teachers to address at the beginning of the instructional designing stage to assure successful instruction.

## References

- Attewell, P. (2001). Comment: The first and second digital divides. *Sociology of Education*, 74(3), 252-259.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Excerpts from discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Calkins, L. (2010). *Launch intermediate writing workshop getting started with units of study for teaching writing grades 3-5*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2003). *The landscape of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Elola, I., & Oskoz, A. (2017). Writing with 21st century social tools in the L2 classroom: New literacies, genres, and writing practices. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 36, 52-60.
- Feez, S. (1998). *Text-based syllabus design*. Sydney, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR).
- Gebhard, M., & Harman, R. (2011). Reconsidering genre theory in K-12 schools: A response to school reform in the United States. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 20(1), 45-55.
- Gee, J., & Hayes, E. (2011). *Language and learning in the digital age*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London, UK: Edward Arnold.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Lam, W. S. E. (2013). Multilingual practices in transnational digital contexts. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), 820-825.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: Author.
- New London Group. 1996. A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social features. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1): 60-92.
- Reich, J., Murnane, R., & Willett, J. (2012). The state of wiki usage in U.S. K-12 schools: Leveraging Web 2.0 data warehouses to assess quality and equality in online learning environments. *Educational Researcher*, 41(1), 7-15.
- Rothery, J. (1996). Making changes: Developing an educational linguistics. In R. Hassan & G. Williams (Eds.), *Literacy in society* (pp. 86-123). London, UK: Longman.
- Schleppegrell, M. (2004). *The language of schooling: A functional linguistic perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Shin, D. (2014). Web 2.0 tools and academic literacy development in a US urban school: A case study of a second grade English language learner. *Language and Education*, 28(1), 68-85.
- Toohy, K., Dagenais, D., Fodor, A., Hof, L., Nuñez, O., Singh, A., & Schulze, E. (2015). That sounds so coool: Entanglements of children, digital tools and literacy practices. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49, 461-485.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Warschauer, M., & Matuchniak, T. (2010). New technology and digital worlds: Analyzing evidence of equity in access, use, and outcomes. *Review of Research in Education*, 34(1), 179-225.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as action*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.