The Place of Digital Texts and Digital Literacy in Chinese EFL Classroom

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Abstract: The rapid technological development of the past two decades has brought about myriad worldwide discussions on how digital literacy can influence English language learners' learning experience to a large extent. China hosts the world's largest English learner population, and the way in which its English language education can connect with digital texts and digital literacy is worth studying. In what follows, the conceptual and theoretical understandings of digital literacy will be explored, along with the current barriers in integrating digital technologies into English language education faced by China, and then the implications of digital literacy on teaching English as an additional language in China will be examined.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Internet and portable digital devices have largely reshaped the way people read. The Internet, which is often conceived of as a tool to transmit images, video, and music, is also a "text-saturated world", and the popular use of it is a symbol of a highly literate society (Cull, 2011). Reading and interacting with digital texts online requires a set of competences, awareness, and attitude, which are termed together as 'digital literacy'. Literacy is widely valued in the field of language and culture teaching as it is "intimately tied to the sociocultural practices of language use in a given society" (Kern, 2000, p.25). The rapid technological development of the past two decades has brought about myriad worldwide discussions on how digital literacy can influence English language learners' learning experience to a large extent (Godwin-Jones, 2015). China hosts the world's largest English learner population, and the way in which its English language education can connect with digital texts and digital literacy is worth studying.

Since the 1980s, English has shared an equal importance with Chinese and Maths in the Chinese education system (Peng, Tan & Xie, 2014). After receiving broad ranging criticism of its examination-orientated education, in the 1990s China introduced a curriculum reform under the banner of '*quality* education' (*Suzhi Jiaoyu*) to develop well-rounded individuals, instead of rote learning examination machines. Following education reform steps taken by leading Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Singapore) and being enlightened by contemporary Western teaching approaches (Dello-lacovo, 2009), the focus of China's curriculum reform has been to develop learners' critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and creativity just as in other countries (Salberg, 2006). In response to the call for '*quality education'*, English was made a compulsory subject in 2001, and Chinese English classroom practice is shifting from "traditional teacher-centred, and grammar-based transmissive pedagogies to more holistic inquiry-oriented approaches" to address "meaningful and contextualised collaborative and autonomous language learning" (Yan, 2012, p.432). More recently, after the release of the guideline *National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-20* (The State Council, 2010), a lot of effort has been put in by the government to develop the online teaching and learning capacities of educational institutions (CERNET, 2014). Considering the goal of China's curriculum reform and the importance of digital literacy in language education, it is therefore timely to discuss the usefulness of digital literacy in China's English language education. In what follows, the conceptual and theoretical understandings of digital literacy will be explored, along with the current barriers in integrating digital technologies

into English language education faced by China, and then the implications of digital literacy on teaching English as an additional language in China will be examined.

2. A review of the literature

2.1. Understanding digital literacy

The introduction of the notion of digital literacy into the field of education by researchers was due to the dramatic change in people's communication and literacy practices, brought about by the Internet and countless other types of digital technologies. The earliest framework for understanding the concept of digital literacy was raised by Paul Gilster (1997); however, Gilster's concept of digital literacy has been criticised for is lack of clarity. Since 1997, the concept of digital literacy continues to evolve, and multiple scholars have contributed to the discussion of various dimensions of digital literacy and the various skills one should master to be considered as a digitally literate citizen (Son, Park, & Park, 2017). For example, Martin's progress report (2005) has summarised, from a skill viewpoint, that one needs to master five skills to be considered as digitally literate: photo-visual skill, reproduction skill, branching skill, informational skill, and socio-emotional skill. Tornero's work (2004) focused on the dimension perspective and summarised that digital literacy was composed of four dimensions, namely the operation dimension, the semiotic dimension, the *cultural* dimension, and the *civic* dimension. By jointly looking at digital literacy from the dimension and skill perspectives, we can see how digital literacy is a combination of technology literacy, information literacy, and sociocultural literacy. The following discussion of digital literacy in the field of second language education is based on Martin's (2005) definition of digital literacy: "digital literacy is the awareness, attitude and ability to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse, and synthesise digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect on this process" (p.135).

2.2. Understanding digital literacy in second language education

In this part, different theoretical perspectives of digital literacy in second language education will be discussed to address the importance of digital literacy and to shape the implications for further action.

3. Two approaches are widely used to understand the role of digital literacy in the field of second language education: the functional/skill approach and the sociocultural approach (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2011).

3.1. The functional/skill approach

The functional/skill approach to digital literacy in second language education is mainly focused on the usefulness of digital technologies as a medium to help students navigate and make use of available information and ultimately to assist the development of students' competence in the text-based skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Dzekoe, 2021). This approach only emphasises the technology aspect of digital literacy, as it only values the acquisition of technological skills to search and to effectively use the Internet as a source. This approach to digital literacy in language education is at odds with the interest in introducing digital texts into Chinese English classrooms as the role of digital literacy is only considered as an add-on to the existing curriculum. This idea is further confirmed by Tour's study (2015) on teachers' teaching practices when using technology in language classroom. Tour's study (2015) indicated that, with a functional/skill approach to integrate digital literacy in English classrooms, EFL/ESL teachers tended to stick to the original language teaching goals and used digital technologies only as a tool to accomplish such goals. This is an undesirable outcome since it not only undervalues the significance of digital literacy, but also ignores students' experience. Teachers adopting this approach often consider students informal

literacy and language learning practices as of less value or irrelevant (Godwin-Jones, 2015). In this case they are ignoring students' sociocultural perspective of language learning, which has been characterised as crucial by Vygotsky (1978).

3.2. The sociocultural approach

The sociocultural view of digital literacy in language education is a more comprehensive approach because it values language and language learning as a social event and cultural practice (Gee, 2000; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995). Proponents of this view advocate that "language teaching must foster literacy, not only in terms of basic reading and writing skills but also in terms of a broader discourse competence" (Kern, 2000, p.2). In this case, to appropriately integrate digital literacy into language classrooms, teachers' focus should not be limited to helping students develop technological and informational skills, but their focus should be extended to the establishment of students' deeper awareness of how to use these skills in different cultural contexts to enable them to become creative and responsible citizens (Dzekoe, 2021).

The sociocultural approach also addresses the multi-faceted nature of digital literacy and is often referred to as 'digital literacies' (Nascimento & Knobel, 2017). Underlying this plural form of digital literacy is the belief that digital literacy is a combination of technology literacy which emphasises the ability to use technology; information literacy which emphasises the ability to search, evaluate, organise, and make use of information; new media literacy which addresses the ability to navigate representation, authorship, role of audience, and critical use of language in digital media; and sociocultural literacy which requires learners to be aware of and apply appropriate social and cultural norms in online environments (Godwin-Jones, 2015; Hafner, Chik & Jones, 2015; Tour, 2015).

Another significant component of the sociocultural approach to digital literacy is the critical perspective which highlights the importance of making language and literacy education relevant to students lives, to address "the things in their lives that are problematic", which can be improved by using "the tool of literacy or an additional language" (Crookes, 2012, p.2). This critical perspective of digital literacy should be connected to issues under the theme of social equality. Some examples of the issues are the digital divide, cyber-bullying, and social isolations (Mills, 2016).

More importantly, the critical perspective of digital literacy in second language education also addresses the importance of equipping students with the ability to read digital text critically by evaluating its intended consumer group, and its underlying assumptions about gender, social class, belief, ethnicity etc. (Mills & Levido, 2011). In this case, by designing English language classroom practices from this critical perspective of a sociocultural approach, teachers can prepare the learners for evaluating and making critical judgements about the authenticity and reliability of online sources, and this is especially crucial for students' safe and valuable usage of digital texts.

One last important perspective of the integration of digital literacy into second language education is multimodality, which emphasises the integration of several semiotic modes, including written, visual, gestures, and sounds to make meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Multimodality offers a way to consider digital literacy in second language education that language teachers should foster students understanding of the design of different digital tools and what these tools can enable them to do (the affordance of digital tools) in their target language communication and multimodal text production. As stated by Kress (2000), in an era in which almost all on-screen texts are multimodal, to fully understand the meaning of a text one needs to have a clear idea of all features (not the linguistic part alone) contributing to the meaning of the text.

The theoretical perspectives discussed above contribute to construct the full picture of digital literacy in second language education. Theses theoretical perspectives have also articulated necessary skills, competences, understandings, and awareness one needs to master, to use digital resources effectively and to succeed in various aspects of their lives in the 21st century's digital world. All of these skills, competences, understandings and awareness been addressed above will inform implications for how to successfully integrate digital literacy into English Education.

4. Barriers in China

As suggested by Carr (2010), an author in the field of popular technology, the modern literate society is at a turning point in history and traditional print books and print book readings are in a "cultural twilight". Innovations in technology such as the Internet and networked computers have reshaped human learning and communications in a revolutionary way. However, there is stubborn resistance to change in education systems and curricula, despite the everchanging nature of reading as a cultural activity and the evolving demands on leaners and education systems brought about by such changes in human cultural activity (Lowe, 2019).

4.1. Lack of access to online language learning venues

Unlike most countries in EFL education, Chinese students do not have equal access to the commonly used English-medium digital spaces such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. when compared with their counterparts from all over the world. These technologies have been broadly recognised in the field of language learning, outside of China, for their usefulness in fostering new ways of English language teaching and learning (Farr & Murray, 2016). Unfortunately, the Great Firewall (Li, 2009) prevents our language learners from accessing a rich set of English-medium resources which can contribute to their language learning. In response to the Great Firewall issue in China, an alternative option has been adopted in some Chinese EFL classrooms, which addresses the use of Chinese indigenous Web 2.0 technologies to assist students' foreign language learning. A number of positive effects were found from using different indigenous technologies to enhance language learning; for example, frequently posting in the target language on Weibo (Chinese Twitter/Facebook) (Tian, 2015) and subscribing to official foreign language accounts on WeChat (Ling, Qin, & Guo, 2016) were all found conducive to students' motivation and communication. Although the positive impacts of using indigenous Chinese technologies to assist in language learning have been articulated in a number of studies, the beneficial effects of this practice are still not comparable to the practice of using English-medium technologies, as this practice does not provide an authentic language environment for students to interact with native speakers of the target language and theses Chinese Web 2.0 platforms do not provide as many spontaneous authentic target language texts as do Twitter/Facebook posts. Therefore, compared with other countries, the limited access to English-medium Web 2.0 technologies in China has restricted the integration of digital texts and digital literacy into students' foreign language learning due to the inability to become immersed into the target language culture.

4.2. Teachers' acceptance of computer-assisted language learning

While various literatures have discussed the promising future of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and some teaching practices integrating the use of voice blogs (Huang, 2015), podcasts (Lee, 2009), social networking sites (Alvarez Valencia, 2015), and mobile devices (Hsu, 2015) into the field of language education, the successful implementation of digital literacy, digital texts and CALL in China is also largely dependent on the effort and engagement of language teachers. However, teachers' attitude towards adopting CALL is not as promising as the approach itself. According to Toffoli and Sockett (2015), research evidence suggests that language teachers are often reluctant, or they even refuse to use CALL in their language teaching practices. In the context of China, EFL teachers are not making sufficient use of the available technologies as expected by the Ministry of Education. In He, Puakpong and Lian's study (2015), the authors found that many EFL teachers in China are reluctant either to use available technologies or to include technologies in their classroom practice. Such reluctance to incorporate digital technologies into classroom practice can be explained by the conflict between the goal of curriculum reform to embrace digital-mediated language learning and the national standardised testing, which only values print-based literacy (Jiang, 2017). In China, where the rating and promotion opportunity of a teacher depends on his/her students' performance in standardised testing, it is extremely difficult for teachers to sacrifice the time and effort that could have been used to further improve students' print-literacy knowledge for the purpose

of embracing multimodal composing in the classroom. Mei, Brown and Teo's study (2017) provides a valuable insight into factors affecting Chinese preservice EFL teachers' intention to use digital technologies. Their study articulated several beneficial factors, namely the perceived usefulness, the facilitating conditions, and the technological pedagogical and content knowledge (Mei et al., 2017). These beneficial factors can be used to inform the discussion of the recommendations in the next part.

5. Recommendations for practice

Since Paul Gilster raised the earliest framework of digital literacy in 1997, the importance of engaging students with digital texts and digital literacy to enable them to become engaged digital citizens in the 21st century has been broadly recognised. Research in this field has agreed on the idea that various skills, awareness, and attitudes are crucial to the successful development of digital technology in ESL/EFL. Considering the current barriers faced by China to successfully implement digital literacy into the English curriculum, and my own working context, the following paragraphs will provide recommendations for both the changes that need to take place at a national level and an action plan for myself and other EFL teachers at an individual level.

The target for action is a Year 10-12 EFL classroom in a private school in the southwest sector of China. Students' EFL learning in this schools are largely focused on the goal to succeed in the forthcoming *National Higher Education Entrance Exam* (*Gaokao*). The importance and potential of digital literacy are undervalued in this school.

5.1. Recommendation 1: Revising the national standardised assessment

The first area that requires action is the assessment practice. It is important for the standardised assessment to move beyond the predominant focus on print-based literacy, as standardised testing content is the most straightforward indicator of what is, and what is not, valued in literacy education (Morgan, Comber, Freebody & Nixon, 2014). To include measure of "students' ability to self-monitor comprehension in online reading, collaborate in online writing, produce digital media, or critically evaluate media" can lead to an increase in teachers' perceived usefulness of digital literacy (Dzekoe, 2021, p.149). Teachers' perceived usefulness of digital texts and digital literacy has been characterised as a beneficial factor in their intentions to use digital technology by Mei et al. (2017). In this case, revising the assessment practice will empower EFL teachers and school authorities with confidence to include digital literacy focused projects and activities in the English language curriculum.

5.2. Recommendation 2: Enabling facilitating conditions.

Facilitating conditions were found to be a significant and substantial factor affecting teachers' intention to include digital texts and digital literacy by a number of studies (Lin, Zimmer, & Lee, 2013; Mei et al., 2017; Teo, 2010). Considering the context of China, some relevant facilitating conditions of focus are:Granting Internet access to EFL students and teachers to enable them to access major Web 2.0 English social media websites such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Make the use of personal digital devices permissible in those schools that cannot provide sufficient hardware for students to engage with digital texts and digital literacy in the classroom. Allowing the use of personal devices also enables the connection between students' out-of-school life experiences and their school practice.

5.3. Moving towards a broader definition of literacy and multimodality.

The classroom activities that have been most frequently used to integrate digital literacy into language education (e.g., blog posts, forum discussions) are mainly focused on written communication (Godwin-Jones, 2015); and most of these activities are largely focused on using digital tools in a formal language classroom setting. In response to this status quo, which ignores an extended understanding of literacy, one piece of practical advice is to introduce informal and

multimodal language learning such as using Instagram, TikTok, and Facevolume for out-of-school assignments (Hafner et al., 2015).

5.4. Enhancing students technology and information literacy.

Technology skills and critical use of digital texts are crucial for the successful implementation of digital literacy in English education. Teachers should scaffold technology use for students and guide students to navigate through the complex nature of reading digital multimodal texts (Dzekoe, 2021). Based on the idea that no text is of a higher quality than others and all texts can be used for different social purposes (Buckingham, 2006; Fabos, 2004), EFL teachers should also foster students' new understanding of searching, evaluating, and critically using digital texts.

6. Conclusion

With today's fast-growing digital culture, the importance and usefulness of digital literacy are broadly recognised; and helping language learners to develop digital literacy is no longer optional, it is necessary. However, in China, there still exists a huge gap between the visualisation and realisation of integrating digital literacy into English language education. A successful integration requires effort from the government to revise standardised testing and to enable facilitating factors, and from teachers to embrace the broader meaning, and multimodal nature, of literacy and also to help students develop technology, information, and other sociocultural competencies. In this way, we will enable our students to function as responsible, engaged, critical and creative digital citizens in the 21st century.

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