Microblogging: Using Digital Literacies to Engage Middle School English Learners

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Abstract

As a result of the changing technologies associated with the 21st century, the definition of literacy has changed and expanded (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2011) to encompass e-books, text messages, blogs, and even videogames and the peripheral literacies associated with gaming. These new literacies have demonstrated promise for engaging students in literate practices (Gee, 2007; Gerber, 2009). One practice in particular, microblogging, provides a way to engage English learners in writing and responding to text. Microblogging is a participant web technology that allows users to interact and share information in succinct online posts (Hricko, 2010). For middle school English learners, microblogging provides an avenue for both consuming and producing information in a second language in a way that is interesting and authentic.

With the advent of Web 2.0 tools and the quickly changing technologies of the 21st century, the definition of literacy has changed and expanded to move beyond printed words on a page to consider multimodal representations of text. Students today are surrounded by technology, with school-aged children spending seven hours or more daily using media such as computers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). The Internet in particular has changed the way that educators view literacy (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008) and has led to a permeation of networked information in the lives of students both at home and at school (Bawden, 2008).

Various definitions of digital literacy exist (e.g., Fieldhouse & Nicholas, 2008; Gilster, 1997; Martin, 2008), but all relate the ability to use and interact with information from multiple formats or media. Whereas literacy may be viewed as the ability to produce and consume written words, digital literacy broadens the required skill set by expanding the notion of literacy to include the ability to produce, consume, and generally "deal with" information presented by or contained within the technologies of the time (Bawden, 2008, p. 18). Digital literacy moves beyond the basic ability to type or use a particular technology and instead necessitates the mastery of ideas (Gilster, 1997). In terms of education, digital literacies may function as a "prerequisite for learning in a student centered educational culture" (Fieldhouse & Nicholas, 2008, p. 50); thus, educators must be aware of digital literacies and must support students in learning with/through digital literacies.

Being digitally literate alone, however, may not be enough to ensure that today's students are successful in digital environments. Instead, students must also evaluate information and determine accuracy and quality of online content; they must think critically and creatively about what they consume online. Within the classroom, teachers can facilitate a "digital learning culture" (Søby, 2008, p. 138) that incorporates technology into instruction and promotes student

exploration of and learning through technology. In this type of culture, both teacher and students can learn from one another. It is important to include digital literacy skills in the classroom in order to teach students how to interact with technology in effective, appropriate ways and to obtain and comprehend information. For example, the Internet has the potential to be a valuable resource but can only adequately support learning within specific contexts; while the Internet can allow students to investigate topics of interest to them, which in turn can positively impact motivation for learning, teachers must provide students support in the learning process (Kuiper & Volman, 2008). In other words, "education about the media should be seen as an indispensable prerequisite for education with or through the media" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 73).

While the definition of literacy has changed and expanded over time, the struggles some students face while reading and/or writing have not vanished. For English learners in particular, reading and writing in a second language poses additional challenges. English learners do not show up to educational settings as blank slates. However, there is some evidence for a significant difference between native English speaking students and English learners in terms of general vocabulary (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). These students enter classrooms armed with various degrees of oral proficiency and literacy development in their native languages. There is clear evidence that tapping into native language literacy can grant access to skills in second language acquisition (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Native language development and cognition are closely associated as children begin at birth to learn from their experiences as they engage with others outside their world (Dickson & Tabors, 2001). Just the way in which parents and caregivers talk to children, ask questions, or tell them stories while involving them in the families' day-to-day activities develops the foundation from which language and cognitive development occurs (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Children must be allowed to explore, discover objects in relationship to other objects, communicate with peers, and problem-solve the nature of things in their environment (Vygotsky, 1986). These activities enable children to develop the neurological connections important for cognitive growth, skill acquisition, and language development of both native and second languages (Bialystok, 2001). Moreover, Trawick-Smith (2013) contend that Vygotsky asserted that language is critical to theoretical progress and learning and that Vygotsky accentuated the significant role of communication and language in learning.

Classroom teachers must not underestimate the importance of becoming familiar with the background profile of each language learner prior to beginning classroom instruction. The unique cultures and languages of these learners will provide a wealth of information that can shed light on behaviors and literacy practices. Two very useful pieces of background information that can inform and help drive classroom instruction are the student's previous educational history and the language learner's current literacy level in his or her first language. Knowing this biographical information will assist the teacher in setting realistic expectations for academic performance and contribute to formulating a program of meaningful differentiation.

Lack of exposure to vocabulary may be particularly detrimental for English learners as they develop Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP; Cummins, 1979). Picture the English language as an iceberg divided into two parts: conversational language or BICS and academic language or CALP. The tip of the iceberg you can see above the water is small and represents the conversations students have with each other. It is a knowledge level with some comprehension and an application of what is heard. The processes of speech include pronunciation, vocabulary for daily living, and

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grammar structure. Many students who have been in school for a little while may seem fluent to their classmates and teachers. They can maneuver through the schools and classes and can answer recall-level questions efficiently. Now imagine the iceberg below the water. If you were to carefully examine what is below the water it would be frightening; the sheer mass of ice could displace the ocean were it to all of a sudden begin melting. Relate the iceberg below the water to the academic language students must learn. The massive amount of information a student must learn to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate materials evolves yearly. Students acquiring academic language must understand semantic and functional meanings of academic terms, which include vocabulary such isosceles and photosynthesis. The components of acquiring academic language may take five to seven years to develop, and students acquiring these skills must use all devices available in pursuit of fluency. For some middle school students who arrive with minimal formal schooling the process can be daunting; they may not reach full fluency prior to completing their twelfth year of schooling.

Warschauer (1995) noted that "technology is developing so rapidly that it can often be difficult or even overwhelming to harness, somewhat like trying to get a drink of water from a gushing fire hydrant" (p. xv). One form of digital literacy that may be especially useful with middle school English learners is microblogging, which is part of Web 2.0 technology (Thorne, 2008). For many years researchers and educators have explored the use of technology, such as Internet-connected computers, with English learners, finding that the use of technology provides opportunities for these students to express themselves and reflect upon their ideas (Kern, 1995) and that technology encourages participation from English learners who may be more hesitant to engage in face-to-face dialogue (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Chun (1994) noted that an extensive range of phonological functions are beneficial for language learning, while Warschauer (1996) noticed that electronic speech leans toward being more etymological and syntactically more complex than oral discourse. As technology has changed and developed over time, the Internet has come to facilitate communication within a "second wave" of instruction for English learners (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004, p. 243). A feature of the new technologies is the ability for youth to engage in "a participatory popular culture" (Williams & Zenger, 2012, p. 1) within which they can easily connect with other youth as part of their literate activity. One aspect of the "Internet-mediated" Web 2.0 technology popular with today's youth is Weblogs, also known as blogs (Thorne, 2008, p. 424). Blogs are similar to online journals where users can write about anything from daily life events to political views to fashion tips and share their writing online. Blogs show "serial entries with date and time stamps" and also allow readers to leave questions and comments for the blog's author (Thorne, 2008, p. 436).

Microblogs are related to blogs in their format and purpose; they are different in their shorter length of information posted. Microblogs are defined as participant web technologies that allow users to produce/consume information and to interact with other users (Hricko, 2010; Mishra & Koehler, 2009). Microblogs are different from other digital tools in that they combine the instantaneity of text messaging with push technologies that provide an ease of posting and locating information. Twitter and Instagram are both examples of microblogs; these digital tools allow users to post typed messages in addition to photographs or videos. The text contained within any given post is limited. Twitter, for instance, has a 140-character maximum (Twitter, 2014). While a traditional blog post can be any length, microblog posts are more succinct due to space constraints such as the Twitter character limit. Popular microblog applications include

Twitter (https://twitter.com), Tumblr (https://www.tumblr.com), and Instagram (instagram.com). Users create an account and can then post text, pictures, and video and can view posts from other users. Each particular microblog application has its own method of allowing users to share information and connect with other users, but the features are similar among the applications.

One way that educators can use digital literacies as a way to engage middle school English learners in authentic reading and writing activities is through the use of microblogging. For English learners, blogging is "an alternative to writing assignments that would normally be presented only to the instructor" (Thorne, 2008, p. 436). Instead, students can receive comments and feedback from classmates or others online. Blogs can be used to help middle school English learners "synthesize and put into narrative form their cultural and linguistic experiences" (p. 436). Microblogs afford similar potential for English learners and may be particularly useful for middle school students as a means to produce and consume text while also engaging in social interaction with classmates and other same-age peers. When using computer-mediated communication (CMC; Chesebro & Bonsall, 1989) of any type, there exist two main advantages for English learners – the ability to view and review the communication prior to posting and the ability to revisit and examine communication after posting online (Thorne, 2008). By being able to view the "immediate rerepresentation" of a typed message (Thorne, 2008, p. 431), English learners have the opportunity to identify areas of need within the communication and to revise accordingly (Thorne, 2000). The online communication posted through a microblog application exists after the initial thought has passed, allowing users to reread, review, and study their own and others' posts (Thorne, 2008).

The use of microblogs in the classroom may provide an avenue for engaging middle school English learners in authentic reading and writing activities in ways that are interesting and that pose an achievable challenge. The use of microblogs such as Twitter in the classroom can capture students' interest and encourage them to explore issues both by reading/consuming online content and by writing/producing their own microblog content (Stufft, 2013). For English learners, microblogging provides the opportunity to engage in authentic literacy practices. Rather than facing a potentially daunting task, such as writing a multi-page research paper, middle school English learners can write by posting brief comments and thoughts using microblogs; these written responses can be composed in English or in the student's native language. Blogging may provide students an alternative avenue for academic identity creation (Kirkup, 2010). For middle school English learners, microblogging may serve as a way to gain experience and confidence in reading and writing in a second language; this may in turn contribute to students' creation of identities as readers and writers.

Within the classroom, one way to get started with microblogs is to use a website such as www.lettercount.com as a scaffold. This particular site is not an actual microblog but instead provides a text box within which a user can type; the website provides a character count for the text typed into the text box. This site can serve as a pre-writing tool for English learners to convey their thoughts within the space-conscious microblog parameters (e.g., Twitter's 140 character limit). For teachers at a 1:1 campus (i.e., a campus where each student has access to a laptop, iPad, or other technology throughout the school day) or for teachers at a campus with a BYOD (bring your own device) policy, there exists the possibility of having middle school English learners access microblog applications, such as Twitter, to post their own thoughts and read others' thoughts. One caveat is that online content posted by other microblog users may not

be appropriate for students in terms of profanity or other content issues. For teachers hoping to use microblogging with English learners, one solution is to use TweetChat (www.tweetchat.com). TweetChat is part of Twitter but involves using a hashtag (#) from its home page to show only posts connected with that particular phrase. Teachers can create a unique hashtag for a class assignment (e.g., #myfavoritebookSmithMiddleSchool) and then have students communicate with one another through TweetChat. This way, the microblog is focused on one particular topic. Additionally, this microblog feature allows students to communicate in real time and respond easily to one another's posts.

Online spaces provide students with an opportunity to share their own views, explore/project their identities, and connect with others who may have similar interests. Digital tools, such as social media, provide a space wherein students can create and share with others identities that serve as representations of themselves (Gee, 2011; Lam, 2008; Martin, 2008). Microblogs, as part of participatory popular culture, "can lead to the creation of virtual, transnational youth communities" (Schreyer, 2012, p. 61). For English learners, microblogs provide a forum within which to type in L2, post individual thoughts, and respond to others in L1 and/or L2. By connecting through digital tools with others from around the world with similar interests or worldviews, students are able to form and/or join affinity groups (Duncan & Hayes, 2012). Within these groups, students are able to engage in authentic literacy practices related to personal interests (Stufft, 2013). By providing an authentic purpose for reading and writing, educators can encourage the development of middle school English learners' literacy abilities through the use of microblogs.

Educators can facilitate English learners' competence in the use of technology and confidence in reading and writing by incorporating microblogging into the classroom. In the event that technology is not readily available, educators can still use the format of microblogs to encourage middle school English learners to share text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world connections in brief (e.g., 140 character) written responses within a journal or on notecards using L2 to post on a classroom wall. In this way, English learners have the opportunity to view and review their thoughts in L2, to read what others have written, and to engage in further oral and/or written discussion. Within the classroom, educators can teach students about the format and features of microblogs first (i.e., educate students about the media) and then either provide access to technology to allow students to read and write within microblogging sites (i.e., facilitate education through the use of digital literacies) or utilize the format of such sites for in-class reading and writing activities. This type of classroom application of digital literacies provides opportunities for middle school English learners to explore out-of-school technology for authentic purposes within the classroom to facilitate communication with peers as part of literacy instruction.

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