21st Century Literacy Practices and Communities

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Abstract: This essay aims to reflect on my own stories and experiences in relation to the meaning of literacy in the current 21st century communities and the pandemic world. The essay discusses the importance of academic literacy and English literacy to international students and young people. In order to have a deeper understanding of how students' literacy has been changed through the COVID-19 period. Hence, a qualitative research was employed. A total of 12 international students were involved in this study. Through a group conversation, the research found out that students' language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) has been affected to varying degrees, as well as their conception towards literacy in political, social, and cultural areas has also changed through new modes of literacy learning.

Keywords: literacy, academic literacy, English literacy, distance learning, cultural identity

1. Introduction

It took me a long time to figure out what topic I want to demonstrate in this assessment. However, unlike the given examples on LMS where people have had various experiences before, such as teaching students with autism, having multicultural backgrounds, or participating in special events, I am just an ordinary international student who lives a quite tedious and routine life.

However, there is one thing that is probably worth mentioning, which is I spent almost three years in this foreign country alone and finished my bachelor's degree at the Queensland University of Technology. Then, after two months of intense studying, I passed the language exam (IELTS & PTE) and met both academic and language requirements to achieve a master's of TESOL at the University of Melbourne.

In comparison to undergraduate studies, postgraduate studies present greater challenges, from the initial entry criteria to the learning process. Especially in this special global pandemic period, the change of learning methods has caused international students, like me, to encounter some problems in different literacy aspects. Thus, in this essay, I tend to connect my understanding of literacy with the experience of how I went from preparation to formal classes studying at the University of Melbourne. Meanwhile, I have conducted a focus group to figure out what has changed in our literacy ability through this particular situation.

2. Academic literacy

Spack (1997) [1]claims that academic literacy is defined as reading and writing diverse texts for university courses. While anyone who has attended graduate school, taught graduate classes, or supervised graduate students is well aware that the acquisition of "academic literacy" is needed for graduate studies, it is more than just read and write effectively. Comprehending one's chosen profession, research skills, and strong reading and writing skills is just the beginning of acquiring academic literacy (Braine, 2002)[2]. Hence, graduate students must quickly adapt to their host environments' academic and social culture and the perceptions and requirements of their professors, academic advisors, and peers to build on this base.

The number of international students studying at anglophone universities has increased dramatically over the last two decades. A figure below show year-to-date international student numbers in Australia (ATIC,2021)[3]. In 2020, the total number of international students has reached 593,718. There is a slight decrease in 2021 due to the COVID-19 national boundary lockdown policy, but still, 512,855 international students are currently studying in Australia. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the number of pre-sessional ESL programs that prepare students for their subjects' linguistic and academic needs. A parallel and equally important trend has been the increase of academic exams, like IELTS, TOEFL, and PTE, used for university admission.
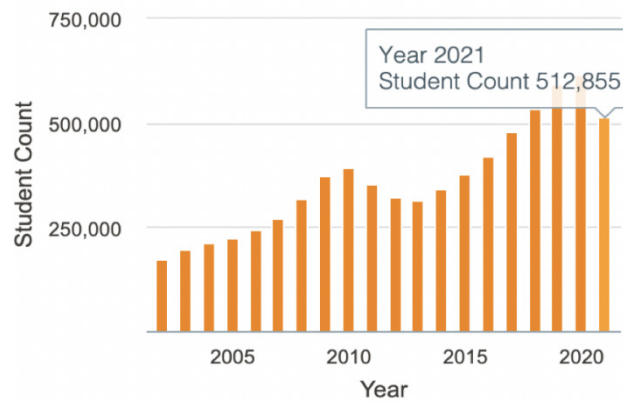
Figure 1. International students number in Australia

From my own experience, it should be noted that although studying for a language test can improve the candidates' English test-taking ability in a short amount of time. The requirements for academic literacy under the college curriculum are quite different from the content of the exam. Moore and Morton (2005) [4]. point out some notion of academic literacy in their research underlying the IELTS test format:

-spontaneous writing

-opinion-giving writing

-use personal anecdote/experience as supportive evidence

-writing an essay that is separated from reading.

These features are in opposition to the structure of university evaluation assignments. First, writing is rarely spontaneous under the college curriculum. On the other hand, academic writing applies to the body of current information and thus involves a critical analysis of the existing sources (Kruse, 2003) [5]. In addition, opinions are permissible in certain situations, but not when they are based solely on personal understanding and story; relevant evidence is generally perceived as scientific observations or proven scholars' definitive statements; writing is framed more around analytical than realistic rhetorical forms. More importantly, it is a process that is closely tied to reading.

This reminds me of why universities ask for strict language test scores because to some extent, they can represent one person's literacy ability. From the historical perspective, in the 1980s and 90s, methodologies emphasized proficiency, which is" the capacity to utilize language in real-life settings in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed setting" (ACTFL, 2015)[6]. Language requirements were first discussed in terms of two approaches to obtaining foreign language competency for credit in higher education. The first is setting a time requirement. For example, arranging various duration English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses to cater to different students' abilities at different English learning levels. The second solution is to require tested competence in a foreign language (especially English) to prove whether a student meets a university's entry requirement in academic literacy. Like my major--TESOL of education at the University of Melbourne—requests at least an overall 7.0 on IELTS academic test, with a written 7.0 and no band less than 6.0. Setting selection standards in English literacy not only ensure the international students have the ability to catch up with the course curriculum, but also allow students receive adequate preparation that might relate to the writing demands they will encounter subsequently in their future university study.

As Matsugu (2011)[7] points out, exams in such domains involve important social obligations. Some issues affect both professional organizations whose service level may be influenced in part by a candidate's communication skills, and for candidates themselves, whose test results will significantly impact their job prospects and, eventually, their sense of well-being in society.

Meanwhile, in Levander's (2019)[8] research, proficiency language test refers to one's ability to use language to accomplish real-world linguistic tasks across a wide range of topics and settings and measure the candidate's ability to carry out these real-world tasks. Thus, the language test is not only a consideration of the corresponding test ability, but also the communication skills, or the comprehensive ability to use language to deal with problems that may occur in performing a variety of tasks.

3. Literacy in English

There is also a growing recognition that, while overseas students can meet English language admission criteria in a variety of ways, they may still require continued English language and academic literacy development to finish their studies effectively (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2011)[9]. In many countries, students' English literacy proficiency is often measured via high-stakes language tests. However, because such examinations do not make students' literacy lives outside of the classroom evident, they are positioned as task responders rather as agentive readers and writers. Thus, passing the language test is only the first step into a graduate study. The first question I encountered from this course is what makes a literate person. The basic definition of being literate is having the skills to be able to read, write, and speak to understand and create meaning (Ferdman 1990)[10]. As a result, mastering a language is essential for being literate. As the world's most widely used language, English not only assists young people in learning about themselves and their surroundings, as well as exploring communication, culture, creativity, and critical thinking, but also facilitates learning and engagement throughout the curriculum. Thus, the range of texts containing the subject English has widened over time, from literary to multimodal, media, and everyday texts (Beavis, 2013[11]).

Literacy, on the other hand, refers to the development of literate practises in all subject areas, allowing students to understand how meaning is created through language and texts. The demands of English require students to use a range of complex literate practises, such as print, digital, oral, or multimodal, and other types of text being read or produced. There are some theoretical frameworks that can be applied to English learning. One way to think about English literacy practises is through Bill Green's 3D Model of Literacy (2012)[12]. The 3D Model unifies basic literacy concepts and recognises that literacy activities are varied and interconnected, and could be classified as operational, cultural, or critical.
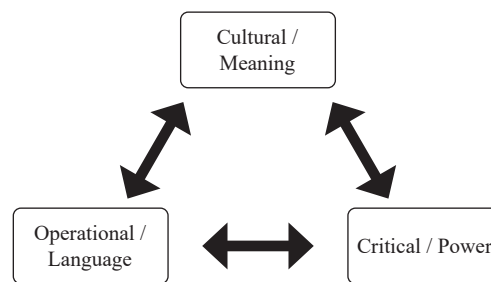

Figure 2. Green's 3D modal

Operational dimension: The operational dimension of literacy is concerned with the 'how to' knowledge, or the mechanical aspects of literacy, such as decoding words and comprehending the various language resources required for various types of texts.

Cultural dimension: The cultural dimension focuses on making meaning, and how does the text relate to individual experience and culture, as well as prior knowledge that people may be aware of in order to make sense of it.

Critical dimension: The critical dimension emphasises activities that challenge the taken-for- granted assumptions about texts and the worlds from which they come, such as reflecting on, questioning, and interrogating views and beliefs that are embedded in texts.

Students are likely to work in numerous dimensions at once, but it is unrealistic to expect all secondary students to bring the essential operational abilities to the English classroom. As a result, all students must develop these operational abilities in order to access the other literacy dimensions.

4. Literacy challenges under pandemic period

After understanding the importance of literacy in English, new challenges come up due to the force majeure factors. Because of the COVID-19 lockdown policy, overseas students are away from schools and physical learning environments. However, literacy learning has to be continued. Thus, students, teachers, and other stakeholders may have difficulties through the transition from traditional on-campus learning to new virtual teaching and learning. To better understand students' current concerns towards their literacy development in terms of the new online learning mode, I have conducted a focus group, invite 12 international students to figure out how distance learning affects their listening, reading, writing, and speaking as well as what their tutors do to promote their global, critical and multicultural literacy.

Many participants mentioned that through online teaching, teachers adopted different modes of learning which seldom

used in the classroom. For example, before lockdown, lectures are in a relatively simple form, with only one lecturer standing in front of the blackboard and just reading from their PowerPoint. However, with the support of multimodal literacy that is involved in the online teaching curriculum, many participants mentioned their communication practises are increasingly shaped by information and multimedia technologies. YouTube videos, Sway, voting software, or even online-game took up in classes. A multimodal text provides meaning by combining two or more modes, each of which serves a distinct purpose and function in the meaning-making process (Kress & Selander, 2012) [13]. Students who are exposed to multiple learning styles (multimodal) can learn quicker, deeper, and also retain more of what they have learned.

Back to the influence on their academic literacy. Most of the respondents reflected that their listening and writing didn't have a huge difference compared with traditional learning. The number of lectures that need to be watched and the assessments that need to be completed are almost the same as before. What's more, as multimedia technology is used in the teaching curriculum, repetitive recording, extra zoom Q&A sessions, and creative videos help the students learn in different aspects. Moreover, unlike offline learning, which is relatively fixed in time, distance learning provides students with the option to arrange their study time freely. They can have plenty of time to take notes and listen to the knowledge points that they did not fully understand in the first lecture. Nonetheless, there are still shortages in writing and reading. Distant assessment has become unavoidable as a result of social distance restrictions and remote learning, necessitating a compelling requirement to insure learning results. Because remote assessment is conducted without the presence of a proctor, it poses particular issues in terms of cheating and maintaining fairness (Sam et al., 2020)[14]. One student said: "Thanks to Google and other online learning platforms which provide us with the easiest way to finish my exam with a perfect score that I could hardly imagine before." The facilitator sits in the classroom during an on-campus examination at a school or university can deter students from cheating, but it is much harder when the exams are taken online. Despite some schools are using tracking software like ProtectU through online exams to suppress cheating behaviours (Nizam et al., 2020)[15], students can still take corresponding countermeasures to avoid getting caught.

I have read some articles about how educators and institutions fix this problem. Methods like Bio-Imaging tracking systems, 3D coordinates, or Zoom monitoring are proved to be effective ways in controlling cheating behaviours. Others suggest that educators should utilise multi-media technologies from evaluating memory to assessing integrated critical thinking. In the meantime, assessment objectives, methods, and perspectives need to change as well (Lee et al., 2020)[16]. To me, I think that integrity is a choice.

Whether it is online or offline exams, there exists the possibility of cheating. It is necessary to strengthen supervision to solve immoral behaviours, but for educators, it is more important to let students be aware that complying with the test rules and disciplines is the code of ethics.

As for reading, since students could not get the worksheets and supplementary papers sent by the teacher timely, more materials would be posted on school websites like LMS and blackboard. Therefore, the reading volume of the students has been greatly improved. And some feedback mentioned that sometimes because of lateness and other reasons, they couldn't find a good place in the classroom which may cause them not being able to see the blackboard or hear the lecturer clearly, but this would not be a problem in online learning — the only thing they need to do is to zoom their screen or raise the volume.

However, speaking is the biggest problem that students encounter. According to research, a lack of engagement with classmates and teachers, as well as concerns about their progress in learning, are often linked to the perceived difficulty of this school curriculum. In particular, speaking has been linked to anxiety (Maican &Cocoradă, 2021)[17]. Oral presentation, group discussion, role- play, and the whole-class discussion between peers and teachers are the typical forms of academic speaking activities. Students must speak and demonstrate their intellectual abilities in these events. Hence, oral presentation becomes challenging because of the weakness in fluency and self-confidence in conveying ideas (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020)[18]. When communicating through Zoom, the screen will automatically display the speaker's face, which intensifies their anxiety and fear. Being afraid of asking questions, concerned about their pronunciation, and slow when talking with native speakers lead respondents to often mute themselves to avoid talking. However, there are no special therapies for anxiety considering academic speaking. Our tutor always encourages us with positive attitudes to show our thoughts in the class and always gives us supportive feedback no matter how illogical or stumble we were, which really releases my anxiety and inspires me to share my views bravely.

It is also interesting to note that the part students miss the most is socialization. They said that prior to the epidemic, they were unaware of its significance in their lives. This is understandable and can be justified by the fact that education is above all socialization, which is rather impossible to be done online (Condrat, 2020)[19]. As distal antecedents, the necessity of social separation, loneliness, and low individual control are likely to exacerbate the unfavourable assessment of the online learning environment, where social connection is poor. Some participants mentioned that it could be uncomfortable and

isolated when having an online conversation. Physical presence is far more appealing to them. To them, true intellectual growth cannot be attained in an online context. The interaction with teachers and classmates, to see their facial expressions and feel the vibe in our classroom are far more attractive than facing a cold screen.

Meanwhile, the outbreak of the coronavirus has affected individuals' lives, as well as their understanding of the interconnected world as global citizens. An idea drawn from Hanvey's (1976)[20] global literacy is defined as the literacy practice that focuses on promoting global perspectives as a way to understand "self" and "others" around the world. While global literacy helps people become more aware of the current world by providing relevant facts, critical literacy focuses on analysing the text and the world through a critical lens (Yoon, 2016)[21]. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be a chance to promote students' critical consciousness about the world and have a global mindset. Interviewee reflected that their tutors may have discussions with them about how they think about the current policies applied to people's lives during the pandemic, whether those restrictions which limited individual's rights and freedom, such as face mask rules, social distance, and stay-at-home are reasonable to implement under the pandemic situation. In this way, educators situate their instruction in critical literacy may invite young adolescents to pose questions about the world and act as active agents, rather than being passive learners who just accept what is being given to them (Yoon, 2020)[22].

What is more, teachers may share the latest news related to COIVD-19 in terms of different countries' positions. For instance, one participant said that instead of showing ABC News, his tutor also asked them how the pandemic was reported in their local news. Although several TV stations, such as CNN and ABC News, might cover the same story, each channel's headlines would alter in order to draw viewers and communicate their desired political message. Instructors may help students realise how different media sources may have various political biases while covering the same event by having them explore each channel's distinct approach to presenting the same issue. Therefore, it is clear to see that text reading is equivalent to world reading, and critical consciousness is vital to explore existing knowledge about the world. The premise of critical literacy practice is that the world is political, not neutral. Inspired by Grant and Sleeter's (2008)[23] multicultural methods, multicultural literacy is described as a method that enhances individuals' cultural variety awareness, highlighting cultural pluralism. Individuals are encouraged to maintain their unique cultural identities in the prevailing culture under this framework.

One of the main goals of intercultural literacy is to promote social justice and equity for everyone. It is possible to accomplish social justice and fairness through promoting the intermingling and negotiations of different cultural elements When they are having conversations via Zoom, group members may also talk about how pandemics are going in their own country, and how are people dealing with the policies related to the epidemic. One respondent from UCLA told me that after talking with her group members from the USA, both of them were shocked about how the Chinese people and American people act when people are forced to wear masks. At that time, when the number of infections increases slightly, the mandatory mask restrictions were informed by the Chinese government. Almost everyone put on their medical mask (Feng et al., 2020)[24]. However, until April, seldom people wear masks in the US even though the number of people infected has passed one million.

Following the conversation, they realised that cultural practises would differ depending on the country and circumstances. Students will learn through this practice that a rule in one nation may not apply equally to other countries. The approach for responding to the pandemic might be viewed from different perspectives since facial coverings vary from cultural and societal constraints. Therefore, no cultural behaviours are superior or inferior to others, and that cultural practises must be evaluated within the settings of each nation.

5. Conclusion

Reflect from the experience of how I enter into the undergraduate study to other challenges that I encounter during the following learning. I have a deeper understanding of what academic literacy means to us and why English is essential, not only as a subject but also in literacy, how literacy changed locally and globally during the pandemic period. What's more, the reflective process continually reminds me of a well-known Chinese writer. Mr. Lu Xun once said, "Never-ending travel and countless people, all are related to me." I believe that respecting one's own culture and history, maintaining curiosity, and unique thinking about the world are also manifestations of being literate.

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