DIGITAL LITERACIES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION:

Janaína da Silva Cardoso interviews Mark Pegrun (June 2019)

1. How would you describe 'digital literacies'?

The term 'digital literacies' refers to the ensemble of skills needed to effectively manage meaning in an era characterised by digitally networked communications, including blended communications that exploit both analogue and digital channels, often facilitated by mobile devices. Nowadays, there is broad agreement amongst educators that digital literacies are important and can be linked to 21st century skills; and there is also broad agreement that we are indeed dealing with literacies (or at least literacy components) in the plural, rather than one monolithic concept of literacy. Beyond this, approaches vary. As far back as 2015, there were already over 100 digital literacies or digital skills frameworks in existence (BROWN, 2017a, 2017b). New digital literacies frameworks are continuing to appear regularly, including one developed by UNESCO in 2018 (LAW et al., 2018) and one currently under development by UNICEF. The good news, though, is that while there are many specific differences between these frameworks, and while each has its own focal points, there is considerable common ground. I'd say each of these frameworks has something to offer, and it's worthwhile for us as educators to take the time to familiarise ourselves with a few of them before choosing the one, or ones, that we find to be of most relevance to our needs and those of our students.

Over a number of years, I've been working with Gavin Dudeney and Nicky Hockly on our own Framework of Digital Literacies, which draws together literacies that we feel are of importance for language teaching and learning. The original version was published in 2013, with an updated version published last year (DUDENEY, HOCKLY & PEGRUM, 2013; PEGRUM, DUDENEY & HOCKLY, 2018). The new version takes into account the past half-decade of technological and sociopolitical developments, and in particular we've identified three new

macroliteracies – spatial literacy, critical literacy and ethical literacy – which were implicit in our original framework but which, we feel, need more emphasis in our current era. The first relates largely to technological changes: we require spatial literacy in order to move easily between 2D, 3D and even 4D representations of meaning, for example in augmented reality interfaces. The second and third relate more to sociopolitical changes (though sociopolitical and technological changes are at least partially intertwined). We require ethical literacy, which goes hand-in-hand with intercultural literacy, in order to interact constructively and respectfully with others, especially in contexts shaped by linguistic and cultural, not to mention social and political, differences. And we require critical literacy in order to bring an analytical lens to bear on all our digital and blended communications, the hardware, software and infrastructure that underpin them, the innovations that are continuing to emerge, and the ways in which we talk about, teach through and conduct research into our technologies. These literacies involve a recognition that on the one hand we are now swamped with misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, while on the other hand there is more need than ever for the building of intercultural bridges to facilitate global collaboration in tackling the challenges facing humanity, from climate change through to terrorism.

2. Do you believe it is important to develop digital literacies as well as analogue literacies in (language) schools? How can this be done?

The reason Gavin, Nicky and I came up with our Framework was specifically to draw the attention of language teachers and learners to key digital literacies. It is certainly possible for students to develop digital literacies at the same time as, and through the same activities where, they develop language and analogue literacy skills. In fact, we argue that it is not only possible, but necessary.

There's a British Council poster from a few years ago which asks: 'Do you speak languages or do you code languages?' (PEGRUM, 2016). I fully agree with the spirit of this poster, which implies that we have to do both: in other words, speaking languages and coding languages are complementary. More broadly, I'd say that analogue literacy skills and digital literacy skills must operate in concert in the 21st century. A knowledge of language(s) and a facility with print literacy are essential to most human communication; a facility with digital literacies allows us

to use our knowledge of language(s) and our facility with print literacy to communicate with a wider range of people on a wider range of platforms in a wider range of contexts. In other words, digital literacies can amplify the power of language and analogue literacies, making communication rapid, convenient and global – though of course there is a down side in the spread of fake news …

3. Do you agree with the concept of 'digital natives' and how relevant is it to education?

Despite the media myth of 'digital natives', stemming from Marc Prensky's work around the turn of the millennium, a considerable body of empirical research has found little evidence of the existence of a homogenous, technologically able generation of young people (JUDD, 2018). One central issue is young people's variable device and internet access, tied to socioeconomic factors, and its impact on the development of their digital literacies. Another issue is that many young people, almost two decades on from the coining of the term 'digital natives', are better described as being what Mike Sansone has called 'tech-comfy' rather than 'tech-savvy' (PEGRUM, 2014).

The tech-comfy learners in our classrooms are often adept at using their devices for social and entertainment purposes. They tend to engage primarily in content consumption (from watching YouTube videos to checking facts in Wikipedia), accompanied by a minimal level of content production and dissemination (like posting selfies on Instagram or recirculating memes on Facebook or WeChat). The more limited an individual's quality of device and internet access, and the more underdeveloped his or her digital literacies, the more likely this is to be the case; but it is broadly true for the majority of students who arrive in our classes, whatever their social backgrounds.

To become more tech-savvy, learners need guidance in how to use their devices for educational and professional purposes, and how to adopt a more critical orientation not just to the information they encounter but to digital culture in general. Educators have a key role to play here. Older and more experienced teachers, perhaps especially those who recall a time before Twitter and WhatsApp, hashtags and memes, may be ideally placed to prompt students to begin asking critical questions about the culture in which they have grown up.

**4. In your opinion, why is there so much fake news on the web/
social networks nowadays, and what can we do about it?**

I'm glad you asked this. It's one of the most pressing educational
questions of our time: how do we address the down side of the rapid,
convenient, global communications flooding through our digital
networks? Let me say up front that I don't have the answer; actually,
I'd suggest that the answer is something we all need to work towards
together. However, I'll mention a few of what I consider to be the major
factors contributing to this state of affairs – aptly described by the Council
of Europe as *information disorder* or *information pollution* (WARDLE
& DERAKHSHAN, 2017) – and then sketch out a general direction in
which I think we could start looking for an answer.

The first factor is the very rapidity, convenience and globality of
communication where, within certain limitations of device and net access
and with a certain, fairly minimal, level of digital skills, anyone can
publish anything online, without being subject to the traditional vetting
processes employed by editors and publishers, not to mention governments
and education authorities. Those processes had their own drawbacks, of
course, in restricting minority voices and amplifying majority viewpoints
or official perspectives on truth, but they did prevent the proliferation
of the competing versions of reality which we are currently witnessing.
Unfortunately, what was once imagined by some postmodern thinkers
as a future utopia of alternative viewpoints has turned into our present
dystopia of 'alternative facts'.

Which brings me to the second factor: in a stretched attention
economy where we are in a situation of continuous information overload,
censorship of the truth doesn't require blocking information but rather
multiplying information, especially if it consists of partial truths and
partial falsehoods that audiences have neither the expertise nor the time
to disentangle. For the most part, such a strategy works in favour of
entrenched power: how can people disagree with or challenge the status
quo if they are in a perpetual state of uncertainty about what the *status
quo* actually looks like?

And that brings me to the third factor, which is where I think
the crux of the problem lies. More and more of us, finding ourselves
informationally overwhelmed and sociopolitically polarised, are
retreating into a personalised universe where information is not
approached as information per se (which is verifiably true or false, at

least within the parameters of our current understandings) but as a set of identity markers (which advertise our character and beliefs). In other words, we may believe (or disbelieve) a given political statement not because we have critically analysed and evaluated it but because we approve (or disapprove) of the politician making it. Likewise, we may believe (or disbelieve) a given scientific consensus – on anything from climate change to the effectiveness of vaccines – because of the social circles with which we identify. I'm hardly the first to say this but it bears repeating: our sense of reality is becoming ever less consensual, and ever more tribal (BECK, 2017; boyd, 2017 [note that boyd does not capitalise her name]; HARFORD, 2017).

Information literacy – sometimes also called critical literacy (though the meaning Gavin, Nicky and I attach to the latter in our framework is somewhat broader) – has long been touted as the solution. The problem with this is that all human beings are, to varying extents, tribal. No matter how educated we are, all of us have unspoken beliefs and assumptions, whether social, religious or political, to which we prefer not to apply critical lenses. More than this, we are past masters at deceiving ourselves about our intellectual motivations and biases. Individual human reasoning is fundamentally flawed, as psychological research has painstakingly established over many decades (HAIDT, 2013; LYNCH, 2016; MERCIER & SPERBER, 2017). Critical literacy, when individually learned and applied, will always have severe limitations.

So where might we look for an alternative solution? Well, it seems to me – and again, I am not the first to hint at this – that the answer is connected to the fact that we are able to think much more effectively together than alone (GEE, 2017). In other words, when human beings reason collectively, we are much better at avoiding individual bias and arriving at a widely acceptable consensus on reality and how to approach our shared challenges. This does not in any way negate the necessity for individuals to develop information literacy and critical literacy skills, but it does mean they need to learn to exercise these skills in communal settings. At the same time, safeguards are needed in such settings to ensure that minority viewpoints are not simply stamped out by majority viewpoints; this is an area which requires careful thought.

From an educational viewpoint, if we accept the limitations of individually exercised literacies, the consequence must be an increased salience of more collaboratively oriented literacies. Intercultural literacy

is, I think, amongst the most significant of these, and it lends itself to development through carefully framed and scaffolded telecollaboration, also known as collaborative online international learning (COIL), online intercultural exchange (OIE), or virtual exchange (VE) (HAUCK, in press; HELM, 2015; HELM & GUTH, 2016). As students learn to engage with peers across linguistic and cultural boundaries, they have an opportunity to explore varied perspectives on shared conversational ground while seeking mutual understandings of where their commonalities and differences lie. Being exposed to other viewpoints, and having their own viewpoints exposed to the commentary and critique of others, may offer students (and their teachers!) valuable lessons about the limits of individual critical literacy and the potential of shared critical literacy (PEGRUM, in press).

This, of course, represents no more than a first stab at where an answer to our current conundrum might be found. That said, there is no doubt that intercultural literacy is essential for building communicational bridges across cultural and other differences, something that is in turn essential for us to respond collaboratively to the common challenges confronting the human race today. The development of the intercultural literacy skillset, under varying names including, most notably, intercultural communicative competence, has long been seen as part of the remit of language teachers. In our digitally networked era, it is more vital than ever, and should assume a central place alongside the teaching of language and (other) literacies.

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