Digital literacies and technology in the English classroom: the hold they have on the student's writing performance

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Abstract

English language teachers' classes are evolving as time technology does. These are two concepts that go hand in hand since the implementation of online resources is something that is constantly changing. Digital literacies are daily practices every person with a device that has access to the internet does. It involves the use of digital media from searching as well as contributing. This study asks: what is the hold digital literacies have on the students' writing performance? How to improve students' writing performance by applying new literacies and technology in the online classroom? Research showed how the use of affinity spaces within the digital literacies' platforms have positive outcomes in the language learners' written proficiency. Language learners do not need to have the same level of proficiency to work; as a team they will make use of their knowledge and work cooperatively to achieve the goals or tasks that were given.

Keywords: *Digital literacies; affinity spaces; technology; English learning classroom; online platforms*

Alfabetización digital y tecnologías en el salón de inglés: la influencia que tienen en el desempeño de la escritura de los estudiantes

Resumen

Las clases de inglés están constantemente cambiando al ritmo que la tecnología lo hace. Estos dos conceptos van de la mano ya que la implementación de recursos en línea es algo que está en constante cambio. Las alfabetizaciones digitales son prácticas diarias que cualquier persona con acceso a material digital puede realizar. Involucra el uso de dicho material, ya sea solo como búsqueda o como contribuidor. Esta investigación busca responder las preguntas: ¿cuál es la influencia que tiene el desempeño de la escritura de los estudiantes?, ¿cómo mejorar el desempeño de escritura de los estudiantes aplicando tecnología y uso de la alfabetización digital? La investigación mostró resultados positivos en el uso de espacios de afinidad dentro de la alfabetización digital en cuanto al desempeño de la escritura de los estudiantes. Esto debido a que trabajan en conjunto para lograr las metas preestablecidas sin importar el nivel en que cada individuo se encuentre.

Palabras clave: *Alfabetización digital; espacios de afinidad; tecnología; aula de enseñanza de inglés; plataformas en línea.*

Introduction

Digital literacies are communicative practices that take place in online platforms where people can share, express themselves, and interact. They give their opinion according to their point of view and get different ones from the people they interact with, or from other resources. However, it is important to comment that not all interaction has positive outcomes since fake news is commonly spread. This is something a person who is developing digital literacies needs to be aware of and be able to separate the truth from deceit.

These communicative practices can be implemented within the educational context by carrying out affinity spaces in the classroom. These affinity spaces can be from wikis, and forums, to use of platforms such as Google Classroom, Discord, Google Docs, etc. This paper intends to show awareness of how the use of online platforms can help to improve students' writing proficiency. Moreover, it is important to note that digital literacies are constantly evolving as technology is. This means new affinity spaces will appear as time goes by.

Research goes around how to properly make use of technology, digital literacies, and affinity spaces within the classroom. This means, spreading awareness on how to detect fake news versus accurate ones. Additionally, it also focuses on how to implement technology with a purpose within our classes. And most importantly, how the use of online platforms will help our students' writing proficiency since they work as a community, helping each other instead of just doing individual work.

Problem of study

Technology is a tool that is being more used recently due to the change of modality in educational institutions; face-to-face classes have moved to an online modality. Digital literacies are a "new" implementation that was firstly introduced once technology started having a hold on the educational environment. Digital literacies are communicative practices in which students need to work as a community "new literacies are situated practices that involve people inscribing meanings collaboratively within settings of being involved in shared purposes and activities" (C. Lankshear, personal communication, September 21, 2021- Complete answer in Appendix 1). Nowadays, these activities are taking place in affinity spaces; places where communication and information are shared by multiple people.

Digital literacies imply the use of different linguistic skills such as writing, speaking, reading, and listening. This paper focused on how the use of digital literacies may help to improve the students' writing performance. Studies about the use of digital literacies have reported positive results on the students' writing performance as seen in *Digital Composition in a Second or Foreign Language* by Christoph Hafner (2013).

It is also important to mention that as technology evolves, so do digital literacies. This is a fact since the implementation of technology in the classroom is something that was not real 80 years ago, but it is now, and how people used technology as a teaching tool 20 years ago is not the same as it is nowadays.

Research questions

The focus of the present study is on the students' writing performance and the use of digital literacies in affinity spaces to help them improve it. The questions, we try to answer, are the following:

1. How is it that new literacies have a hold on the student's writing performance?

2. Does the implementation of new literacies and technology in the online classroom have a positive outcome on the student's skills development, specifically on their writing?

3. How to improve students' writing performance by applying new literacies and technology in the online classroom?

Research synthesis

Research synthesis was conducted to get information on how digital literacies have a hold on the student's writing performance and how online platforms and tools could be implemented in affinity spaces for students to work. Professionals in the area were contacted to get their insight on the subject matter and how they see the relationship between digital literacies and student's writing. Lankshear answers the question saying that "the point about new literacies is that they are meaning-making practices that are mediated by texts but are other modes that people use to try to communicate meanings" (C. Lankshear, personal communication, September 21, 2021). From the standpoint of new literacies, people's "writing performances" are always situated, contextualized, and undertaken as part of pursuing and realizing communicative purposes whether they are literal texts, or transcripts of images, tables, etc.

The use of digital literacies – new literacies – within the education context can be presented as practice activities in which students have to work as a team to convey a message through communication. This goes beyond writing – can be presented as an image, animation, video, etc. – but the focus of this study will be on the writing of students and how they can implement other means, as mentioned before, to communicate their work. From this standpoint, information from different professionals was gathered by reading and analyzing their publications. Three topics will be discussed; first, the meaning of *new literacies* will be explained and analyzed from different points of view. Then, different *affinity spaces* will be explored. Lastly, the use of technology in the classroom will be studied by addressing the perspective of different researchers' publications and points of view.

Digital literacies

Digital literacy is a concept that emerged in the early 1990s and was coined by Paul Gilster when he described it as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide variety of sources when it is presented via computers and, particularly, through the medium of the Internet" (Gilster, 1997 as cited in Knobel and Lankshear, 2006). Digital literacies are "newly" applied practices that look for the implementation of technological tools in the classroom. This has been an issue for new literacies researchers and scholars since they had to create a perspective on how these literacies were going to work and how they were going to change in the future.

Nevertheless, this is not a current problem, since "a considerable corpus of research and scholarship has emerged during the past 15 years undertaken from a sociocultural- New Literacies Studies perspective" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2014, p. 97). New literacies are practices newly introduced, this is due to how technology has been fastly evolving in the last decade, more social media spaces where interaction can occur which implies more use of new literacies.

As mentioned before, digital literacies focus on the work the students will produce as a community, this has its pros as the students do not need to be on the same level of knowledge for them to properly work; they tend to mutually support each other while learning from their classmates. In addition, their products need to be related to everyday purposes as Knobel and Lankshear (2014, p. 97) said "this work focuses on skills, knowledge, and tools in use within social practices where participants are undertaking tasks and pursuing purposes in a range of everyday settings". This is due to how the educational system works; preparing the foreign language learner to be able to properly function in real-life situations. With this in mind, it is important to highlight how digital literacies are not only focused on the educational environments – which will be the focus of this paper – but the use of digital literacies can go beyond the classroom, it involves the social online interaction and the manners and proper way of communicating depending on the digital setting where conversations are held.

When it comes to the use of digital literacies, first an argument of what falls under the term and what does not need to be made. Digital literacies are practices people encounter in their daily life, from blogging, websites, fanfiction, social media posts, etc. However, these terms alone are not digital literacies as such "the names do not each refer to a unitary digital literacy. The social practices of any two bloggers may seem as different from each other as writing an academic paper is from emailing a parent, spouse, or sibling" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2006, p. 14). The social practices that happen within these different platforms or online mediums are what make them digital literacies.

Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is to look at digital literacies with an educational scope. That being said, it needs to be stated that the information that is found in these different platforms where "digital literacies" take place is not always real information "instead, information increasingly becomes a resource for participation in affinity practices where concerns about «truth» and manipulation risks are replaced by concerns for social relations and participation" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2006, p. 12). The practice of digital literacies needs to be taken to affinity spaces where people that interact will only bring "real information", or that will interact only after researching the discussed topics.

This is a big concern that needs to be foreseen by the teacher who is thinking about implementing digital literacies and affinity spaces in an education environment. Language learners need to develop critical thinking for them to put into practice the strategies learned on how to communicate using these resources. Moreover, "«literacy» refers to abstracted «skills» or «techniques» – mastery of the technology of alphabetic text/print – and learners are taught to encode and decode as preparation for reading and writing in diverse settings" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2006, p. 12). Students need proper preparation to be able to identify the needed or

accurate information and to decode it from the one that is not or seems to be over-processed – this means, low-quality information.

Different servers can work as affinity spaces for people who want to communicate and share information that they have learned to spread their knowledge. Wikis are a great example of this type of affinity space Knobel, and Lankshear (2009) "wikis are not like static web pages whose content is controlled by the website owner or webmaster. They are more like a shared, online writing space supporting embedded links to other pages internal or external to the wiki" (p. 631) the most popular wiki is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a great example of how a wiki works since everyone can edit the content shared in the platform and the different subareas; moreover, you can include images, graphics, audio, videos, etc.

Alternatively, the fact that wikis are public for everyone to contribute makes them not a completely safe space for a group of students that have a mutual goal "participants learn (about) digital literacies by engaging in digital literacies, within the supportive environment of what Gee (2004) called an "affinity space" (pp. 85–87). In such spaces, participants interact with kindred spirits who have different levels of knowledge and expertise across different areas of competence" (Gee, 2004 as cited in Knobel and Lankshear, 2009). The best way in which a teacher can implement affinity spaces is by creating circles or small communities in which the people involved are aware of the same topic and they share something in common. This can go from studying in the same institution to sharing interests. This will make everyone who is involved feel safe and sure they will get accurate knowledge from within the community.

The use of digital literacies is – somewhat – a new implementation in the classroom. There were many perspectives when talking about the use of them in the language learning environment, multiple opinions regarding the response of the learners were made concerning the fact that digital literacies may not be seen as something that learners gravitate towards to "a [third] problematic assumption within the educational discussion of the social web is the notion that current generations of young people are inherently attuned to such technologies." (Selwyn, 2009, p. 77). It is important to note that this paper was published in 2009, back in the day the perspective of multiple people was different, there was not a lot of hope for online programs where digital literacies could be implemented. This has completely changed due to COVID-19 and how it forced multiple institutions to change their face-to-face programs to a full online modality.

How programs used to work before COVID is completely different from how they started working post-COVID "the debate over the social web and web 2.0 in education has only just commenced, and a great deal of (re)thinking is required before the likely benefits of such technologies can be realized" (Selwyn, 2009, p. 81). Institutions and teachers – that were new to the use of technologies within the classroom - had the challenge to start implementing online resources and/or platforms in their courses/classes. This was something that needed to be assessed in full force to have the best outcomes; consequently, it generated a generous number of researchers that started looking for answers.

Finally, when implementing digital literacies – or new literacies – their purpose needs to be stated. A fine line exists between using them and technology as resources for learning to just using

technology, since the modality of the course may be online. Educators need to be prepared and aware to start implementing technologies in their classes since "it is clear that effective media education depends upon teachers recognizing and respecting the knowledge students already possess about these media – while also acknowledging that there are limitations to that knowledge, which teachers need to address" (Buckingham, 2006, p.32). It is then important to know what the purpose of implementing technology and digital literacies in the classroom is. In addition, educators need to be aware of how much their students know about using different platforms or online tools. Digital literacies need to be done once the learners know the meaning behind the activity; if this process is not stated the affinity space might face interference from within the community; consequently, creating a threatening environment for learning to happen.

Affinity spaces

Digital literacies take place inside affinity spaces, a concept first introduced by James Paul Gee (2004). This author says that affinity spaces are places or sets of places "where people can affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity, or gender. They have an affinity for a common interest or endeavor (p. 67). In affinity spaces, people with different levels of knowledge gather around an activity that they are interested in. This creates a safe space for learning for the ones that may not have enough knowledge, and improvement for the ones who have more and need to communicate their wisdom.

As stated before, in affinity spaces there is a wide variety of participants with different levels of knowledge. In different spaces, some people have a particular role, the ones who possess more knowledge being the e-tutors. E-tutors have shown positive results when it comes to learning within affinity spaces an example is given by Li and Yang (2013): "e-tutors reflected that the Google.doc provided them with meaningful peer interactions, which would not have been easily achievable using the traditional writing technique" (p. 88) this learning method was something new for the participants since they were not used to having personalized feedback that was directed towards just them, creating a safer environment in their learning, giving them more control over their mistakes.

The use of e-tutors is something that if implemented in the correct way and form will bring positive results to the learners and the tutors. However, it is important to state that e-tutors need prior preparation to be able to have a proper role and control over their groups.

Affinity spaces can occur wherever educational interaction between two or more people can take place, wikis can be implemented as well as the use of online platforms such as forums, wikis, online servers, etc. As previously mentioned, this paper focuses on the use of affinity spaces in an online modality. An example of an online platform for affinity spaces to happen is Google.doc. Fotos and Brown (2004) mention that "over the last decade, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which integrates information technology and English writing, has received increasingly more attention due to the rise in Internet-based learning" (Fotos and Browne, 2004 as cited in Chuan Li and Yang's, 2013, p. 79). In recent years, the use of CALL has strongly increased over

time and the implementation of technology in the language classroom has been a must due to the change of face-to-face modality to fully online courses.

As an instance of what was mentioned before, affinity spaces are not merely to be used as online platforms; they can be implemented in face-to-face modalities or the flipped classroom. Digital literacies can take place in a flipped classroom modality, an example of it is the implementation of a clicker aided flipped classroom: "students were required to answer questions raised by the teacher in class through anonymous polling, which was realized through the clicker system" (Yu and Wang, 2016, p. 302). By implementing this technique, the teachers were able to generate communication and dialogue between the students, they were encouraged to discuss their answers before using the clicker to choose their answers.

The use of a clicker showed positive results since it made the dynamic of the classes different. However, the teacher lacked preparation to be able to perform well in both modalities. Since this paper intends to cover the use of affinity spaces in an online modality by implementing digital literacies, it is important to state that the students' performance will change depending on the modality, that is, if the classes are asynchronous or synchronous. In 2020 the world was forced to start with online classes, this change made mixed classes more prominent. Students' performance changed based on the type of classes they had. Nada Bin Dahmash's (2021) research conclusions showed that asynchronous classes were beneficial for the students since the programs had to be more flexible for them and were complemented by the synchronous English writing class, helping them to improve their listening and pronunciation skills in a safer environment. This study also shows that students' results have proven to be better in affinity spaces during asynchronous classes since they had a wider range of digital literacies to use, whereas, in synchronous classes, they only had the feedback provided by their teacher and classmates.

Affinity spaces also tend to happen in an "indirect way". This can be seen in different social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube, where people tend to debate or share information about a certain topic. TESOL – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages – is mainly focused on teaching digital literacies in print-based affinity spaces. Hafner et al. (2013) say that "the kind of digital literacy practices that are at issue here tend to be marginalized in the mainstream TESOL classroom where instruction remains primarily focused on a curriculum conceived to promote the language skills necessary to operate in print-based environments" (pp. 812-813). It is important to clarify that the interaction that happens in a face-to-face modality is not the same as the one that occurs online. TESOL suggests started implementing independent digital literacies in which the student interacts on the mentioned social media platforms to open their affinity space horizon.

On the other hand, it is important to clarify that digital literacies are not only written communication, but they also involve more than interacting, deducing, and being able to read images, ads, graphics, etc. They are part of the survival skills students will achieve by interacting among different affinity spaces. Eshet (2004) mentions that "socio emotionally-literate users can be described as those who are willing to share data and knowledge with others, capable of information evaluation and abstract thinking, and able to collaboratively construct knowledge"

(Eshet, 2004, p. 102). Digital literacies within affinity spaces help the learners to build their cognitive knowledge to identify and separate false information and reliable sources.

Technology in the English classroom

Digital literacies go hand in hand with technology, without it they would only be literacies. The implementation of new literacies, as mentioned earlier, was to start adapting education in this new age of technology. However, these are not new practices, the use of technology is something teachers have been doing for a long time to encourage the learners' autonomy. Varas Giler et al. (2018). mention that "although teachers use programs in their classes, they do not know high impact applications such as Audio Boo, Blogger, Podomatic, Voice Thread" (p. 1). In this study, they found out that the use of technology within the classes helps and encourages the learners' motivation and autonomy. Learners and teachers tend to look for online platforms in which they can practice the language by using forums, commenting on blogs, or even using online tools for practice. Despite this, it is important to mention that students and teachers need to have previous knowledge of how to search for accurate data – implementing digital literacies – to have a proper learning acquisition of the language.

Implementing digital literacies in the English classroom is a practice that takes time for the learner to master since as Hafner et al. (2015) say: "when learning to read, language learners need to develop a host of information management strategies: how to find texts online, evaluate those texts, distinguish genuine from fake websites, and so on" (p. 1). This means that besides using the language as a communicative tool, which is part of the main goal of digital literacies. The learner needs to develop a strategic judgmental mindset to discard fake information and to be able to collaborate by presenting accurate input in these digital areas that could go from wikis to social media platforms.

Technology has created different online affinity spaces where digital literacies take place. In those, language is used in a non-traditional way because "language use in online spaces is more fluid, often drawing on a form of global English, which may be mixed with other codes" (Hafner et al., 2015, p. 3). The language learning/practice process of the people involved in online classrooms is different from the traditional one, where a standardized use of language is taught in face-to-face contextual environments.

Technology is a wide term in which digital literacies fall under. Digital literacies are tightly connected to communicative skills, writing, and speaking. Moreover, writing using digital literacies needs to go beyond only producing written texts, it needs to involve more of what digital literacies stand for. Hafner (2013) says that "one way of looking at digital literacies is as the sets of skills and abilities that are necessary to accomplish socially situated reading and writing tasks, drawing on a range of digital tools—reading and writing with digital media" (p. 830). By implementing "more" digital literacies it is intended that the learners need to use digital tools in their work, this can be done by using images, videos, graphics, or audios, but also keeping in mind that the goal is for them to use a specific skill, in this case, writing. This author also says that it is important to revise "the processes and social relationships involved in writing, especially the potential role of collaborative authorship, remixing and the role of the reader" (Hafner, 2013, p.)

since remixing is the act of mixing previous information from others while adding the personal experience a person may have, or the knowledge learned through research.

The use of technology in the English classroom needs to cover two main topics: participants – teachers and students - need to be familiar with the tools and to keep in mind the reasons to use technology. Students in an English classroom often have different needs. Since teachers oversee tackling all those needs, it is recommended that they "perform technology-based activities according to the needs of the students, yet the students often do not know about the activities performed through the utilization the results of technology-based teaching often rely on the usage of the technology" (Barzani, et. al. 2021, p. 35). Nevertheless, technology needs to be used mindfully, strategies need to be settled and reasons behind the use of it. Students also need to be able to implement their knowledge to move around the different tools to make this process significant for them and enrich not only their language learning process but their new literacies learning process.

Lastly, it is important to mention how digital literacies emerged. They started to function since technology is an ever-changing tool that will continue to be under construction; and to keep developing different areas, sites, forms of use, etc. Digital literacies need to be implemented as areas that will continue to evolve and change as Tour (2020) well said "the role of the formal learning settings is to prepare students for this ever-changing nature of digital literacies rather than to equip them with a complete set of skills" (p. 4). It is then important for the teacher to help learners acquire skills so they can perform autonomously instead of giving specific commands that may not help them evolve and adapt to the changes in technology.

To summarize, the development of digital literacies involves the implementation of technology and the use of remixed information gathered from different affinity spaces; applying new literacies when creating a product using technological tools which might be used by others through remixing.

Conclusion and reflection

The main purpose of this research was to study the relationship between digital literacies and the students' writing performance and how the implementation of such could be used for improvement; positive results were perceived in different authors' work. As mentioned throughout the sections of *Digital Literacies* and *Technology in the English classroom*, students will be able to use all the resources they find on the internet – digital literacies – to accomplish their goal, in this case, improving their writing skills. This will happen by using online affinity spaces. As discussed in the section *Affinity spaces*, in these places students can interact no matter their proficiency level working as a team. Since these interactions happen in an online mode, students will have to use their writing skills to communicate their needs, opinions, and contributions to their tasks.

New literacies are in a way new practices that take place in online spaces where communication and sharing ideas/points of view are discussed. This is an important fact for the foreign language teacher since the implementation of technology in the classroom is something

that has been and will be continuously evolving along with the newest sites, webpages, social media platforms, etc.

The main use of language is to convey ideas, express points of view, and most importantly to enhance communication which can occur in oral or written form. This paper focuses on how the online interaction that happens among people who may share similar likes – or dislikes – use English as a foreign language to communicate and share ideas, points of view. It also tried to address how people can back up their ideas by using accurate information and being able to distinguish fake news that is found in online sites.

The use of affinity spaces within digital literacies – new literacies – is something that language teachers should implement in their classes to promote and polish writing skill. These spaces allow students to act as a community in which they can help/monitor each other when expressing their opinions about a specific topic. Students who have a higher level could even take the role of an e-tutor by providing direct feedback looking for improvement in the writing of their classmates.

Affinity spaces outside the classroom can be found in social media apps where written interaction usually occurs. By providing classmates a controlled affinity space they might be prepared to interact with people from around the world with a new mentality, one that can help them discriminate information for them to be able to express their opinions properly instead of mixing fake sources with accurate ones. Additionally, by practicing their writing in a safe space – the educational affinity space – they might be able to perform better without being afraid of making mistakes and making them less frequently.

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