

## Redefining Literacy in a Digital Age: The Role of Instructors in Promoting Digital Literacy

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**ABSTRACT**

Global technological advancement is changing information dissemination among literates and non-literates. This new development seems to be influencing the definition of literacy. The current paper discusses the changing paradigm from the old perspective of literacy to a new literacy, which is radically affecting every sphere of life, especially education. This position paper shows how this new literacy, driven by ICT (Information and Communication Technology), is shaping the character of the human being, and determining the ways through which knowledge and skills are acquired, thus influencing new expeditions of the school curriculum. This paper attempts a deconstruction of the different arguments advanced for ICT-driven literacy and education. While agreeing that some adverse effects and constraints come along with these new technologies, I am convinced that their dominance is inevitable. As such, the earlier educational stakeholders embrace this new concept and equip the learner with modern literacy skills, the better it would be for the collective benefits of instructors and learners.

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### 1. Introduction

In this digital age, 'literacy' is a concept that a lot of scholars find difficult to define. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'literacy' is being defined in two main ways: (1) One being able to read and write, and (2) One being competent or having knowledge in a specified area. Traditionally, the meaning of literacy has been connected to the classroom and educational system: can one read, write, and also communicate effectively? This traditional meaning goes directly with the first definition given. However, to answer the question "how can we describe a literate in the 21st century", it is very important to consider the second definition of literacy, which duals on one being able to acquire knowledge in specified areas. According to (Alvermann, 2011) this definition is largely characterized by rapid advances in technology, the 21<sup>st</sup> century carries with it a sense of steady change and innovation. Thus, the idea of being literate in this 21<sup>st</sup> century is a concept that is constantly evolving—and to be literate in today's world suggests knowing multiple areas, as one can be literate in many different ways.

Educators are given the responsibility of nurturing the learner to be useful to society and an essential part of this task is making sure students develop the necessary skill to become literate. According to the International Literacy Association (ILA) (2020), early literacy is considered important, while Digital Literacy is the current focus of literacy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literacy goes beyond simply reading and writing; modern emphasis is on culturally relevant literacy. This implies educating and encouraging learners to deploy their literacy in the everyday functions of society, including solving problems, providing and receiving service, accessing and disseminating information (<https://tech.ed.gov/netp/teaching>).

Personal experience as an English language instructor has revealed to me that whenever I mention the word *literacy* to my academic writing students, they immediately think of the meaning of literacy being reading and writing. Whenever the researcher mentions literacy in class, they get bored by the thought of it. However, in this digital era, the definition of literacy has taken a new turn. It is no longer acceptable for students to only acquire traditional literacy skills even though they are important. Nevertheless, if teachers and instructors focus solely on that form of literacy, students are robbed of a large chunk of the literacy skills necessary

for everyday life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are so-called new literacies; but what are they? The National Council of Teachers of English (2013) defines 21<sup>st</sup> Century literacies as the ability to:

- Be knowledgeable and competent with the assistance of technology.
- Create deliberate cross-cultural ties and partnerships with others to jointly solve challenges
- Designing and exchanging data internationally
- Manage, interpret and synthesize several sources of concurrent data
- Create, critique, analyze, and also evaluate multimedia texts. (NCTE, 2013)

## 2.0 Methodology

In academia, there are types of academic papers and journals that members of the academic discourse community need to familiarize themselves with. According to Types of Academic Papers and Journal Articles (2021, January 31), these types are Case studies, Methods or methodologies, position papers, Original papers, Review articles, and Short reports. Based on these types, the researcher selected the position paper which is also known as perspective, opinion, discussion papers. Also, position papers enable researchers to discuss emerging topics and give a good number of recommendations to solve a particular problem identified. Its main goal is to convince readers that the stance one has taken is important and valid. This kind of research paper enhances knowledge and adds to existing literature.

### 2.1 Research procedure

The researcher followed Flemmings (2019) five steps in writing position papers:

1. The researchers Introduced their topic by giving some basic background information to capture the interest of the readers. A thesis statement was built to assert our position on the topic selected.
2. Possible objections were raised to the writers' position.
3. The writers used existing literature to substantiate points raised and acknowledged the opposing points.
4. Researchers explained their position, despite the strength of counter-arguments.
5. Finally, researchers summarized their arguments and restated their position. They gave their recommendations for effective introduction of new literacies in the digital age.

## 3.0 Discussion

With these in mind, it is clear that today's ever-evolving, technological society demands that individuals possess these new literacy skills. Technology has made the world has become "smaller," and people are regularly able to communicate globally. Success in our contemporary world demands the need to be prepared to learn, adapt and use new literacies and since many of these are tied to the proper use of technology, regular instruction and practice on how to incorporate technology platforms in the classrooms are paramount.

As such, teachers at all levels of education must focus on teaching new literacy skills in their classrooms. This will also help bridge the 'digital divide' between students from high socioeconomic families and those from low socioeconomic families. It will also enable students to adequately prepare for their lives after school.

The school system contemporary is technology-driven; with thousands of students accessing direct instructions and using all kinds of applications, directly and indirectly, to engage in their education. Unconvincingly, the school system does not just prepare students for life; being in school itself is life, and life after school is simply a continuation of life. In that regard, the technologies used outside the school should be made available in the school as well if we care to make the knowledge acquired in school relevant when students are integrated into society.

The major argument often made by teachers, educationists, and instructors who do not wish to introduce technology in their classrooms is that students do not need it. One might argue the case that "if they are on their phones all the time, and get distracted by technology, why should teachers grant students more time to be distracted by this same technology?". Students love their phones, however, staying glued to social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook all day long does guarantee a student to be literate in using technology effectively. I was shocked during my first year of teaching at the tertiary level when I had to give students a step-by-step walkthrough on how to search for learning materials online. I had assumed that if they were proficient enough to send texts on fast-paced platforms, then they could surely search for documents online. I was wrong in my assumption. According to Nicholson and Galguera (2013), many students face difficulty in using technology to search for information and collaborate with their peers. The study revealed that "many of the struggles that were handled were not having developed sufficient knowledge related to these new literacies" (Nicholson & Galguera, 2013:21). As instructors of the English language, our role is to

prepare and nurture students for the future, and as such, when students are not taught new literacy skills, they are left unprepared for that future.

Nicholson and Galguera (2013:21) pointed out five skills that must be taught to address the gap in students' new literacy skills. These skills include:

- a) The capacity to identify questions and frame problems that will guide reading on the internet.
- b) The ability to identify relevant information.
- c) Competence with critically evaluating online information.
- d) The ability to read and make use of information from multiple multimedia sources.
- e) The ability to effectively comprehend and also communicating with others in contexts where information is shared collectively.

From the above skills set, students require guidance from their instructors to enable them to practice these skills in a conducive and collaborative environment. Despite the generally accepted notion of the importance of teaching new literacy skills to students, they have very little incentive to implement the new literacies; that is, teachers incorporating technology in their lessons to focus on new literacies. Economically challenged communities have little or no incentive to include online reading skills in their instruction programmes. This implements the new literacy a challenging task. Some schools even face "pressure to provide test scores on reading assessments that have nothing to do the online comprehension" (Miners & Pascopella, 2007)

As teachers, time constitutes the scarcest resources, and incorporating technology into a lesson does seem like an overwhelming waste of time, considering the problems that will eventually arise. First, how do you incorporate this new technology into the classroom? Second, what happens if it fails? Third, what if each student needs to be individually taught how to use a program? How would you monitor every single student's progress? And wouldn't it be easier to simply use a pen and paper activity for this?

Kist (2013), in his article *New Literacies and the Common Core*, offers the best response to these questions. He inquires that "[a]s teachers, how can we hope to prepare our young students to cope with today's society – in which people are connected to media 24/7? ... without giving students some practice with new media at school" This implies that the more skilled in new literacies a student is, the more successful s/he will eventually be.

There is proficiency in accessing technology gaps between students who have access to and use technology regularly and those who do not. According to Leu, Forzani, Rhoads, Maykel, Kennedy, and Timbrell (2014), there is a significant disparity between the percentage of students from a low-income background that have limited access to the internet versus students from a high-income background that have access to the internet at home, with significantly fewer students from low-income households having regular access to the internet (p. 41). They further opine that "the deprived schools are also under the greatest pressure to raise scores on state assessments that have nothing to do with online reading comprehension," (Leu et. al., 2011:10-11). In essence, these deprived schools are being forced to focus on preparing their students for a state standardized test that does not test new literacy skills, depriving these kids of the new literacy skills.

To close the gaps identified, all students need to be taken through activities to enable them to acquire the new literacy skills that will be important to their future success while they are in school. If that is neglected, then it is not guaranteed that students will be adequately prepared for the future.

Public education should be geared towards the preparation of offering all students an equal opportunity in life, however, by failing to prepare students for their needs in society, they will end up facing difficulties after high school. Teachers should make it a point to incorporate technology in their lessons to help students acquire new literacy skills.

New literacy cannot be ignored; it cannot be stressed enough because they are essential to contributing to the success in a student's life. Whether that student attends high school or immediately enters the workforce, they need new literacy skills. All students need to interpret and synthesize loads of information through the use of technology. Most importantly, they will need to do this ethically and professionally – both in their personal and professional lives.

As an instructor, I consider the regular incorporation of new literacies and technology in my classroom as non-negotiable: it is a must in order not to disadvantage my learners in those competitive globalized worlds, hence, teachers who are not able to

incorporate new literacy skills into their daily activities in the language classroom are doing a disadvantage to students. There is an urgent need to integrate new literacy in the language classroom.

#### 4.0 Implications of new literacies

Teaching and learning processes are constantly being modified with the continuous introduction of new digital elements and with new multiliteracy and multimodality strategies. Teachers need to consider new methodologies to cater to students' needs and interests. Today, reading and writing skills are not enough to indicate literacy; although they are fundamental in acquiring and developing skills since the world is evolving. The three "globalization" mentioned by Kalantzis and Cope (2012) indicate that communicating with others has changed and consequently, there have been revolutions in how literacies are being thought of, framed, or learned.

Literacy from an educational perspective has several angles:

1. 'Literacy' displaced 'reading' and 'writing' in educational language; literacy has become a considerable industry;
2. Literacy has assumed a loftier status according to educationists;
3. 'Literacy' has come to apply an ever-increasing variety of practices;
4. Literacy is now being defined with the word 'new' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011:12).

Moreover, literacy has changed the language and added different perspectives in the major fields of development; industrialization, modern schooling, and technologies such as analogue televisions, digital communication, and multimodal communication among others. Due to these developments, more literacies are being realized in major educational sets up all over the world. Different definitions of literacy; what it means to be literate and how views of literacy are evolving are being reviewed to help students acquire the needed skills to thrive in society. Earlier said, teachers, cannot ignore the new technological skill being integrated into the new literacy. Thus, there is a need to integrate this new skill in the language classroom for students to be proficient in all areas of literacy.

#### 5.0 Integrating New Literacies in the SLA Classroom

Several ways and ideas relating to incorporating literacies inside the classroom exist, especially in the SLA context. The following are some of such ideas:

1. Students are different and learn in a variety of modes; thus teachers should adopt varied activities and tasks using different multimodalities to enable students to acquire the necessary skills needed in the language classroom. Teachers cannot give 'one size fits all' method for all students, as everyone is different, and classrooms are made of many different learning styles.
2. Language classes should go beyond focusing on grammar rules and vocabulary. Teachers should be able to develop critical thinking through critical literacy practices. A teacher must inspire an inquiring mind in their students and must be ready to do more than just give answers to students. A teacher should rather lead them to more "why" inquiries.
3. A student's contexts and realities are crucial for creating meaningful classes. All learning has context to it, and it will be beneficial if the teacher understands a learner's context to know how to transform their realities to suit the teaching and learning process. Teachers and learners ought to recognize and respect each other's culture.
4. It will be beneficial to integrate digital literacies (technologies) in this 21<sup>st</sup> century since students are used to them. Teachers should be informed about the new trends in the new media and guide their students to use them properly.
5. It will also be beneficial to enhance collaborative work. This activity will enable students to support one another in the learning (and construction) of one another's tolerance (Gomez, 2009).

For many educators, these considerations would present numerous challenges, given the heavy workload, it may bring as well as keeping up with the rapid pace of technological change.

When incorporating new technologies into the classroom, (November 2013) suggests that teachers should make it a point to concentrate on the development of skills and the learning objectives of lessons rather than focusing on the technology itself. He pointed out that if teachers are not careful, technology will just serve as a distraction".

As part of being literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, knowing which tool is right for a particular job is necessary. An individual has to have a clear vision of what he or she is trying to achieve with their choice of technology before embarking on a project. (Adapted) (<https://www.ourkids.net/school/redefining>).

Again, technology has expanded notions of literacy that have now moved beyond print-based texts. It includes digital texts. These innovations have made it possible for learners to go through lessons to enable them to acquire technological skills.

Some teachers around the globe are trying to integrate technology into classrooms lessons. Ghana is not an exception, as a few experienced teachers are trying hard to help students acquire crucial technological skills. Unfortunately, the integration of technology in the various classrooms has not been smooth due to reasons such as the inability to gain access to most forms of devices and not understanding how to properly integrate the technology (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011).

Therefore, teachers need to acquire an intermediate to an expert level understanding of technological tools. This should be supported in integrating technology for literacy in the classroom. (Jaipal-Jamani & Figg, 2015). Also, teachers need to adopt a broadened understanding of literacy that will help them acquire the new skills and forms of literacy made possible by technological innovations (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

### **5.1 Challenges teachers face when implementing technology**

In the case of Ghana, teachers face a lot of challenges when integrating technology in various classrooms:

1. Teachers lack the needed resources and understanding of the educational practices that support technology integration (Barron, Kemker, Harnes, & Kalaydjian, 2003; Hew & Brush, 2007; Kellner, 2000; Miranda & Russell, 2011).
2. Teachers do not get the needed technical support (Earle, 2002), as well as general support for their efforts from administrators, their peers, and school systems.
3. Teachers are not oriented to accept technology as part of the curriculum, instead, they view it as a separate thing. (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011)
4. Classrooms and schools are not friendly for accessing technology for instruction (O'Brien & Scharber, 2008).
5. Among many teachers, there is the traditional perception that using technology is more elaborate and time-consuming than more traditional teaching practices (Dawes, 2001; Earle, 2002).
6. Some teachers in all levels of education in Ghana are not technologically inclined. There is this notion that they were born before technology or technophobia. With this in mind, they are not bothered to move to the new innovation.
7. Many schools across the country cannot have access to computers. Computers are available in urban schools. With large class sizes, it would be very difficult to incorporate technology in the language classes.
8. Teachers lack training in the use of technology. This is a major problem because if the instructor has technical issues, then it will be very difficult when it comes to its implementation in the classroom.
9. There are internet accessibility and connectivity problems. The internet connection is not stable in many parts of the country. Even those who have access to the internet cannot use it effectively.

### **6.0 Recommendation**

In the wake of the urgent call on teachers to give critical attention to the new paradigm of literacy, I offer the following recommendations based on the critical issues raised in this paper:

First, teachers and educational stakeholders need to embrace the new paradigm and collaborate in defining literacy based on their peculiar sociocultural expectations and constraints. This will involve identifying the relevant real-life demands that modern society makes on the individual, relevant skills and knowledge required in the workplaces, and the required adjustments that the 21<sup>st</sup> century individual needs to make to fit into society.

Second, teachers and educational stakeholders need to collaborate at different levels to promote the teaching of the new literacies, especially across the curriculum. One major challenge in implementing the new literacies is the disintegrated way that literacies are introduced. A concerted approach where teachers weave the literacies across the curriculum and engage the learners to appreciate the connections between disciplines and the literacies would be effective.

Finally, teachers need to be supported in diverse ways to teach the literacies. The first step in this direction would be some form of reorientation. A lot of teachers, administrators, and educational workers have misconceptions about the deployment of literacy and technology in the classroom. Some are concerned with possible distractions that may happen with their deployment whilst others are apprehensive of the extra load or time that needs to be invested in the deployment. Yet, others are simply overly conservative about traditional ways of teaching and learning and are not willing to give up such ways. Any successful change should involve helping the teacher to adapt to the changing trends. After this will be proper training in teaching and the technical support they will need to successfully implement the teaching of the new literacies.

Eventually, educational systems would have to yield to society's demand for literate individuals who are capable of responding to the challenges of everyday life for personal, career, and academic purposes.

## 7.0 Conclusion

This paper argues that with new technologies emerging and penetrating our society to become a part of our new cultural reality, the school curricular experience needs to respond to these changes to bridge the gap between the school and society. Our present educational conversation should centre on demystifying and promoting the use of new technologies within the school context. Of course, with the introduction of new technologies comes new definitions, perspectives, and thus more conversations on literacy. As research brings clarity on concepts, the attitudinal change would be key in ensuring that our present education responds to the societal expectation of literacy.

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