Literacy online: Multilingual English Language Learners' Electronic Literacy Practices Outside Class

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Introduction

Contemporary global society is characterised by international movements of people, many of whom come to a new country with a need to learn a new language. This paper concerns the electronically-mediated literacy practices of adult migrants to the UK who are learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). It reports on an aspect of a British Academy-funded project which investigates identity construction in text-based electronically-mediated communication, *Identities Online* (Simpson and Hepworth 2010)[i]. In the broader project the participants' electronic literacy practices are conceptualised as occurring in two domains: with teachers and classmates within the centres where learning takes place; and with peers, colleagues, friends and families in everyday sites of electronic literacy practice. Permeating these 'real life' settings are the virtual spaces where online interaction happens. This paper focuses on one of these domains: multilingual students' electronic literacy practices in their out-of-class lives.

The paper is structured thus: this introduction is followed by an outline of the key theoretical and contextual areas which have informed the work. The main part of the paper comprises a thematic overview of students' out-of-class electronic literacy practices, expanding on each of the major themes generated from a content analysis of the group and individual interviews with students on the project. The overview is in four sections: emergent themes; specific practices; constraints on ICT use; and identity construction in online discourse.

The data from interviews with learners was analysed using a grounded approach, generating the overview: categories were defined through an analysis of a first set of

interviews, then expanded in analysis of subsequent interview data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This approach to interviews is tightly accountable to the data, allowing as it does categories to emerge from the data themselves, rather than be pre-defined by the analyst[ii].

Background

Migration and transnationalism

Adult migrants who find themselves in English language classes in the UK come from a hugely diverse range of geographical, social and economic backgrounds, and include refugees seeking asylum, people from well-established communities, so-called economic migrants escaping poverty in their home countries, and people joining their spouses and family members. Contemporary migration, moreover, frequently involves continued movement after the initial migration event. In 'classic immigration' it was at least assumed that migration would be 'for ever.' In contrast, *transnationalism* is now commonplace. Relative ease of movement, coupled with the possibilities of connectivity afforded by relatively cheap travel and of electronic communication, ensures that maintaining the links and networks that extend between the host country and the homeland is feasible for many migrants. Furthermore, migration is increasingly seen as something that is not necessarily permanent. Thus transnationals have a stake in retaining connections at a distance with their place of origin. Some people of course become well-established in a new country, and on a superficial level resemble the 'classic migrants' of the past (though even this notion has long been contested: see Cerase 1967 on the mass return to Italy of US migrants). Even so, established migrants still travel to their country of origin fairly frequently, and make extensive use of internet-based tools of electronically-mediated communication such as email and *Skype* to maintain links with their families and friends back home and in other parts of the world. Moreover, Britain's towns and cities, rather than being host to stable settled communities, increasingly display what Vertovec (2007) describes as 'super-diversity' or the 'diversification of diversity' characteristic of contemporary urban life.

Literacy online

The study focuses on *literacy online*, a shorthand phrase to describe what happens when individuals engage in electronic literacy practices: plural social practices involving the use of ICTs such as email, text chat, social networking, blogging, and mobile phone messaging. Communication using new literacy technologies has profound implications for the notion of authorship and the construction of identity: by its nature, electronic communication offers the opportunity to develop and emphasise different aspects of identity with new sorts of writing, and in new, multimodal, multilingual and globally-spread social spaces. Thus online textual identity is of a different order from other aspects of identity. Electronically-mediated written interaction is often produced in real time, with only a minimum of reflection and editing before posts are sent. This is particularly the case in synchronous electronically-mediated chat (text chat) and mobile phone SMS messaging, known for their interaction 'on the fly.' It can also be the case with supposedly more reflective asynchronous forums, for example communication using email.

Participants

This paper draws upon data from interviews with 26 adult students, multilingual learners of English, conducted over the course of the *Identities Online* project, which ran from October 2007 to March 2010. These included group interviews and more in-depth individual interviews. All students attend state-funded classes of ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages – at colleges and centres in cities and towns in the North of England.

Of the 26 interviewed student participants, 15 are female and 11 are male. All are aged between 18 and 45. 18 of them come from Asia, with eight from Iran, Iraq or Kurdistan, four from Pakistan, and others from India, China and Japan. Six come from Africa, with students from the Congo, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Ethiopia. There is only one European student, from Slovakia. The students also vary in terms of their immigration status in the UK. For example, almost half the participants are refugees. Some are on their own but the majority are in the UK with partners and, often, young children. The group includes women who are separated from their partners and living in the UK as

single parents. A number of the students are married to British citizens and some are actively seeking British citizenship. The participants are bilingual and, in many cases, multilingual. Common languages include: Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish and Urdu. Most have a reasonably good level of English and are at Level 1, or Upper-Intermediate level on England's National Qualifications Framework.

Emergent themes: Electronic literacy practices inside and outside class
Cross-cutting issues

Some issues cross-cut the data set. Firstly, there is the question of access to technology. This is connected to practical matters such as time, money and opportunity, and is thus related to factors like employment status and educational access in the UK. It is concerned with aspects of what is known as the *digital divide.* In Graddol's terms (1997: 39): 'unequal access to information technologies will create new distinctions between the information poor and the information rich.' (See Warschauer 2003 for a nuanced account of this notion.)

Gender issues also emerge as a significant factor. For example, being the primary care-giver in a young family often restricts access to ICTs, if only in terms of time available. Women, often with young children in the UK education system, make up the majority of the participants, which corresponds with the general pattern of the student body in England's ESOL classes: Baynham et al. (2007) found in a survey of over 500 ESOL students that around 63% were female, and a similar proportion was found in a more recent survey of over 200 students by Simpson et al (2011).

Then there is the question of language, which runs through the data and is tightly connected to the theme of identity. The ways in which language is used whilst engaging with ICTs is noteworthy. There is evidence that English is, perhaps not surprisingly, used as a *lingua franca*, but there is also evidence that some students use English, or a blend of English and mother tongue, when communicating with friends who share the same expert language. This multilingualism might be the result of factors like a long

period of residence in an English-dominant country or an identification of English as the language of new technologies (see Cooke & Simpson 2008: Chapter 6).

Finally, there is the question of age and the life course. A good number have children in the UK education system and some explicitly refer to the ICT practices of their children. Age is an interesting factor to consider in relation to electronic literacy as many of the ICT practices evident from the data, e.g. the use of messenger programmes, are relatively new. Age is also closely connected to education, and indeed to access, with the school-age children of multilingual migrants having regular access to new technologies, and instruction in their use, through the UK education system.

Spaces of use

There are a number of physical spaces where the students on the project engage with ICTs. The most common are the classroom and the home. Beyond this, other spaces include public libraries and internet cafés. The use to which ICTs are put differs markedly inside and outside the classroom space.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, one of the most common places where individuals engage with ICTs is the home. For the participants in the study, the most common purpose for engaging in electronic literacy practices is undoubtedly to maintain contact with family and friends in the country of origin and, where other family migration has occurred, elsewhere. This contact takes place when people are at home.

In their places of learning, the other main site where participants engage with ICTs, this sometimes takes the form of accessing computers in college libraries but, more often than not, centres on the classroom. In sum the teachers of the students in the project actively incorporate ICTs into their classroom practices. For a number of the women with young families, attendance at college provides an opportunity to use computers that they do not get time for at home, and to use the internet to seek information that is not related to their English language learning. So practices may bleed across domains of

use: college computer use may have characteristics of non-college use, and the ICT facilities in college present simply an opportunity to get onto a computer.

Beyond the home and the classroom, there are more public spaces: the public library and the internet café, for instance. Discussion in the interviews turns on questions of money, guidance and privacy. On the question of money, one student says:

> *now I use not cyber cafe but if I want to go internet I want to use internet I go library because is free and cyber café you have to pay*[iii]

So internet use is free in the public library but internet cafés charge. This is clearly an important economic consideration and a potential barrier to access. Another student notes that help and advice in searching for web-based material is available from library staff. However, a lack of privacy is highlighted as a potential drawback of computer use in the library. For example, one student points out that '*in library everybody sit and know what you are doing*.' Another picks up this thread, pointing to the advantages offered by the cyber-café in this regard:

> *if you go to cyber café and you need a computer and you need also privacy so and the cyber café manager he give you a separate room or separate equipment where you can go and doing your own work*

There is also a point to make about the people the students are communicating with, in terms of where they are accessing computers. For example, the student from Japan says of her interlocutors:

> *back home they don't have a computer at home just in the internet café things these type of things places*

Finally, in the course of a discussion of ICTs in public domains, a young female participant originally from Pakistan makes an interesting point about domains of use, saying:

I don't like to go to a café or somewhere or in the library I just use my phone

There is clearly an issue about feeling safe or comfortable using computers in public domains. This is not elaborated upon in the interview but, for a young Pakistani woman, there is a way in which issues around both gender and culture are implicated here. The home is a safe, secure and private space but public spaces less so and perhaps especially so for young ethnic minority women.

Tools and frequency of their use

The main ICT-tools and programmes used by participants on the project are:

- Synchronous text-based chat using *MSN Messenger*, *Paltalk* and other messenger programs.
- Audio/video text-supported chat using *Skype*
- Social networking (web 2.0) sites such as *Facebook*
- Email
- Mobile phone text messaging

As far as the use of text-based chat is concerned, some participants are heavy users. One young man, for example, says that he goes online '*maybe three or four times a week'* and chats for '*maybe three hours.*' More common were those who use it regularly but less frequently (perhaps weekly) and for a shorter duration to keep in touch with family.

Email use varies from those who use email every day, through those who, perhaps most commonly, use it two or three times a week, to those who don't use it at all. Similarly, with mobile phone text-messaging, there is a cluster around those who say they use it

'*not every day sometimes*.' Some are heavy users, one student sending '*more than 10 every day*.'

Out of class electronic literacy practices

Maintaining links with family and friends

Perhaps the most common electronic literacy practices visible in the data set is the use of text-based messenger programmes. The primary function here is to keep in touch with family and friends in the students' countries of origin. Many of the students use ICTs for just this purpose:

> *if you go to the messenger yeah and you want to talk with somebody for example […] I am at home and you are at your own home yeah and so we chat on internet with each other and if we want to know how are you how you are looking or something then we use webcam so we saw the pictures live and then we use the headphone for talking also […] like mobile*

The affordances of this practice in terms of its interpersonal function are elucidated clearly here, using a web camera and a headset to see, as well as talk to, family members across long distances. Some students also use e-mail to stay in touch with family back home but the advantages of synchronous, video-supported tools such as *Skype* are captured by this student, when she talks about communicating with her husband in Iran:

> *voice is better you feel closer and you can see each other from webcam it's better*

When using *Skype* or *MSN Messenger* the students engage in a variety of different practices. Some use the webcam and speak without necessarily typing, while others type too. Many of the students prefer to make use of headsets and webcams, even though they use email to keep in touch. A South American student says:

> *I need to hear the voice […] email for me it's just sometimes I don't think email you know you can tell everything I think when you listen the voice you feel emotionally*

The question of typing raises also raises the issue of literacy, including electronic literacy. Of text-based chat, one student says:

> *chatting is difficult because it have a different alphabet and it's difficult to chat writing*

So some students are engaging in text chat using Roman letters and the English alphabet. If they are coming to text chat with expertise in a different writing system, the process is potentially problematic in terms of the literacy burden it imposes.

Other decisions about whether to speak or write online are made for practical reasons associated with the technology and connectivity. For example, one female participant from Iraq says that she writes if the audio connection is not good or if she is sending a photograph. The selection of a particular ICT practice is not just dependent upon language; it is dependent upon the skills people have in manipulating the technology itself. For instance, another Iraqi student says that she talks to her parents back home using *Skype* and a webcam but doesn't type, as they lack the necessary keyboard skills. This clearly implicates factors like age and access to education in the new digital technologies. The strategy adopted by this student to use voice-based electronic communication is analogous to the pre-digital age use of cassette tapes amongst migrant communities to communicate with family and friends with restricted literacy.

Creating new links and making new friends

For a small number of the participants, the use of text-based chat programmes and social networking sites like *Facebook* fulfil another function: that of forging new links as well as maintaining old ones. Kaya puts it memorably when he says that ICT offers a '*window to new world.*' He talks about being able to move beyond the constraints of making friends within his class. When asked who he is in contact with he says:

> *not at all in classroom […] people around the world […] some of them in UK some of them in my country […] some of them all over the world*

He relates how he has just been to visit a contact made on the internet in Switzerland, attesting to the potential of new technology to make new links across distance. For another of the students, these new links extend to finding potential romantic partners online: he has established links across the UK.

It is interesting that the two students who engage most extensively in this type of ICT practice are young, male, and unattached in the UK. Both are refugees seeking asylum and both have had difficulties making friends with immediate classmates and housemates. Saddique arrived in the UK unaccompanied from Kurdish Iran aged 15. Now 18, he is still awaiting the outcome of his claim for asylum. In the meantime he is aware that if he falls foul of the law or runs into trouble with the police, his claim will be jeopardised. Hence he tries not to leave his flat after dark, and his 'face to face' socialising is minimal. The internet and computer-mediated communication offer an opportunity to forge a social life and friendship ties that are not available in daily life for this isolated youngster.

Programmes used to communicate with new friends include *Paltalk*, *MSN Messenger* and *Facebook*. However, a number of the female students also reveal that friends, male and female have used chat-rooms to find potential partners. One female student says, of the affordances and outcomes of social networking:

> *it give you more chance to meet new friends […] I know I have two friends […] they are get married my friend he used chat room he met a girlfriend many years ago they get married they are very happy and I have a friend she study in the university next week she come she are going to China to get married*

Another student relates a more cautionary tale about how a female friend had been deceived by the online identity adopted by a potential partner, which raises the question of online security. This issue is thrown into particularly sharp focus when children go online. In the following discussion on social networking sites and web-chat, the need to control and monitor internet access for children is highlighted as a concern for students with younger children.

> *Shari:*   *my children [...] not much allowed (.) going and talking and typing the same time as the other person*
>
> *Researcher:*   *you say not much allowed (.) do you mean you don't let them*
>
> *Shari:*   *yes for children (.) but [...] sometimes I don't know who is their friend so for safety reasons [...] we check them first and then they go for the computer*

Here, the difficulty of knowing who children are chatting to online is a major concern for Shari, as for a number of other mothers interviewed for the project.

Reading on the web

Staying with the idea of keeping in touch, some students use the internet to access news from back home, in their expert language as well as in English. For example, Javed says :

> *I went to BBC News I like reading news about everything [...] sometimes in English sometimes translation for Arabic because I speak Arabic [...] sometimes I don't understand in English very well I go to Arabic translation and I read all this*

Some of the students use the internet to check information pertinent to their status in the UK on the Home Office website. Javed explains

> *yes always Iraq and about the Home Office site yes because I have no any definite (.) I like read about what happens in Home Office what decided in future I read this for some information about this*

In many respects the participants' use of ICTs is quite mainstream: they are after all consumers online. As one student says: '*if you have internet websites you can find anything*' and other uses the internet identified included shopping for plane tickets and cameras. One participant makes extensive of the internet to work from home as it allows him to spend more time with his young family. He says:

> *it's better than that going to work for 10 or 12 hours for somebody who say oh do that oh do that [...] my job is if I need I'm going to do it but if I don't need I stay home chill out with the family or visit somewhere or go to holiday [...] better yeah I think its better*

Although this blurs the domains of work and home a little, it is interesting that he separates these by using two different computers: a desk-top for his personal and recreational ICT use, and a laptop for work.

Constraints on ICT use

Access to ICTs is an issue which implicates the socio-economic realities of students' lives: time and money are commonly invoked as barriers. A less obvious but still salient issue is that in classroom settings, and in many out-of-class areas of use, students are faced with the linguistic and socio-cultural demands of engaging in online practices in a non-expert language.

Time

A number of constraints on ICT use emerge from the data. To begin with, there is the constraint of time, especially for some of the female students with children to look after. The question of time impacts upon the question of when, where, and how often ICTs are accessed: often later in the evenings, when children are in bed. One female parent, when asked if she used computers outside class, says simply: '*no I have no time (.) in holidays maybe.*' Another is similarly constrained by time: '*I don't have time to go back in the library and use the computer now I'm with two children*.' The issue of gender emerges

here, and childcare commitments limit the time they have to access ICTs and also impacts upon the way they engage with them. One mother chooses speaking over writing for practical reasons as well, saying '*I don't have time to write*' and '*it's difficult to write with small children.*' The heaviest users of ICTs among the participants are young, single men.

It is worth noting that even those students who have no home access to computers manage to make use of them elsewhere, either at friends' houses, or at college. So questions of access impact upon domains of use. A few of the female students commented upon the fact that they only use ICTs in any significant way in college.

Money

There is also the question of physical access to a computer. A number of students did not have access to a computer at home. Still others had computers but no internet connection. The question of a 'digital divide' is an important in the context of students who are generally living on below-average incomes or existing on benefits. The student quoted above, for example, is a non-working refugee and the single mother of two small children.

Cost is related not just to the buying of a computer but also to the ongoing engagement with ICTs, a factor which emerged from the interviews. Luisa says that once computers are purchased, computer-mediated communication is cheaper than telephone contact:

> *I use email just to email in my country in Angola in Brazil you know because you know to phone them is very expensive*

This perhaps explains the significant use of *Skype* among the participants, as it is free to access if you have an internet-connected computer. Text messaging is also a common practice in connecting cheaply with friends and family.

Language and identity online

> *if I need to write a message to my friend from Slovakia […] I write in my own language in Slovakia but if I need to tell something to my friend for the job (.) he's from Italia then I have to speak with him in English* (Milo, from Slovakia)

The interviews reveal interesting things around the language choices ESOL students make when engaging in ICT practices. To begin with, English has currency as a *lingua franca* both in the context of the multilingual workplace, as the quotation above reveals, and in the context of the multilingual classroom, where students are expected to communicate with each other, and their teacher, in English.

It is also the international language of technology. Access to English gives access to all the resources of the worldwide web, access to capital, in fact. In talking of his education, one of the students says:

> *in secondary school we used Word and Powerpoint it was in lessons in my own language but access was in English because if I go on internet the website are in English*

English is less a *lingua franca* here than a necessity to participate in practices on the worldwide web. Thus, English is not the end, only a means to an end. It is interesting to consider this in the light of debates on whether English is the dominant online language. Graddol (2006) points to the increasingly multilingual flavour of online communication whereas Warschauer has a slightly different take, characterising the relationship between English as a global language and the internet as self-perpetuating. He says:

> A mutually reinforcing cycle takes place, by which the existence of English as a global language motivates (or forces) people to use it on the internet, and the expansion of the internet (and online English communication) thus reinforces English's role as a global language.

(Warschauer 2003: 98)

The language behaviour of students who have multiple transnational contacts is a particularly interesting feature. For example, a student from Pakistan, who is married to a British citizen, says she prefers to use English because she likes it. She uses English when talking to her children, who were born and are in education in the UK. However, when talking to her in-laws she needs to use her expert language because they do not use English.

Multilingualism online adds to an understanding of the role of computer-mediated communication in processes of globalisation. Because computer-mediated communication is not associated with one particular fixed geographical place or – in the case of English at least – one particular population, it seems to be contributing to the destabilisation of linguistic and cultural boundaries. Electronically-mediated practices in multilingual online spaces often involve code-switching and language alternation.

Users of languages with non-Roman writing systems transliterate them using an emergent vernacular, where elements of the expert and non-expert languages are used when engaging in ICT practices (see Palfreyman and Al Khalil, 2003, for a description of 'Arabic in English'; papers in Danet and Herring 2007; Warschauer et al 2002). Thus, for example, when Shahedah emails her Indian friend in Florida, she uses an emergent variety which includes aspects of Gujarati, Hindi and English. She describes it thus:

> *sometime I'm using many words in English but in between our language like Hindi or in translated English*

Luisa also talks about a friend who blends elements of her expert and non-expert languages, as well as the abbreviations and shorthand forms familiar from online communication:

I got a friend she writes me like this […] she came here she came with eight years old and she mixed the Portuguese and she doesn't know the right word you know and then she mix all the phrase with she's start in Portuguese then she use English then she abbreviate things yeah

Vernacular transliterations of the type described here are particularly predominant in sites where users are globally spread or where they are part of a diaspora (see Lam 2004). Research in this area suggests that using such vernaculars better enables individuals to navigate between their native language and culture and those of their adopted home. Warschauer (2009: 126) notes that 'They allow those who cross physical and societal boundaries to experience *transculturation* rather than *acculturation*.' That is to say, rather than having to reject a previous culture when adopting a new one, electronic communication using emergent vernaculars makes it possible for people to better cross *between* cultures.

Conclusion

Computers are part of us (Indian woman)

ICT use and electronic communication suffuse the daily practice of the adult migrants who were interviewed for the project reported here, as is common in contemporary life generally. Their electronic literacy practices outside the classroom are chiefly interpersonal ones: ICTs are used to maintain relationships with friends and family, especially across long distances, a task for which the tools employed (email, text and voice chat, social networking sites and media) are eminently suited. A section of the participants use the tools of computer-mediated communication to make new friends. Web sites are widely read to keep in touch with news from countries of origin, and to keep up with developments in UK immigration policy.

The spaces where people use ICTs and electronic communication outside their places of learning are predominantly: the home, the classroom, the library, and the internet café. Particular practices are more associated with some places than with others: for example, people are more likely to be in touch with family 'back home' when they are in

their own homes, and will use other spaces for less personal practices, for instance, reading the web. Questions of access also emerge: the economic position of many on the project preclude the purchase of expensive computer equipment, and they are obliged to use the library or their college's computers for web access, for instance.

In terms of languages used in online written communication, language alternation is prevalent, as well as emergent hybrid varieties and vernacular transliterations (e.g. 'Urdu in English'). This is particularly the case when people are communicating with others from their own countries of origin but who themselves are migrants (i.e. communication in diasporas).

The distinction between 'inside-outside' (i.e. inside and outside class) is a useful heuristic for viewing current practices in ESOL classroom-based research; as other parts of the project show, there is a noticeable disjuncture between the ICT practices inside and outside the classroom. However, there is also a sense in which practices mix together across domains of use. A direction for further research is to investigate ways in which students can appropriate the tools and spaces of new technology in ways which benefit their learning, just as they have done for other areas of their communicative lives.

Endnotes:

i. Funded by the British Academy, grant number LRG45480.

ii. I would like to thank Michael Hepworth for his preliminary analysis of this data set.

iii. Transcription conventions for this paper:

(.)   short pause

[...]   omitted text

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