Hybrid Texts, Hybrid Identities: A Case Study of an Indonesian English Language Learner’s Literacy Practices and Identity Construction on Twitter

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines an EFL learner’s online literacy practices on Twitter and how the practices afford opportunities for L2 learning. The study involved one Indonesian college student who was actively tweeting posts in English and self-rated herself as an ‘intermediate’ English language user. Grounded in New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework and using discourse analysis method, this study reveals the diverse ways in which the learner code-meshes Indonesian and English grammatical structures to establish meaningful communication with her peer-based communities. Various data sources were used to gather information on the learner’s online experiences on Twitter, including in-depth interviews, online observations, as well as written artifacts from the learner’s Twitter page. Data showed that through the practice of code meshing and hybridizing texts, not only did the learner develop awareness of the complex semantic and syntactic structures of her second language, but also construct identity positions that allowed her to actively participate in her transnational spaces and to take on the role as a competent language user. This study corroborates existing findings on the importance of constructing identities that are relevant to learners’ personal goals and imagined communities of practice. This study has implications for educators who seek new ways to bridge learners’ out-of-school literacy practices with school-based learning. Teachers can raise learners’ awareness of the potential of borrowing and hybridizing texts that allows them to explore different identity positions.

1. Background and Objectives

Over the past decade and across the globe, young people are growing up where digital media have become part of the taken-for-granted social fabric of everyday lives. Many of them gain knowledge and competencies in the contexts that do not involve formal instruction (Gee, 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Ito et al., 2010). In the context of second language learning, studies have called our attention to the affordances of digital technologies in providing language learners with alternative opportunities to participate in meaningful interaction and to learn in the context of that participation (Lam, 2000; McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg, & Saliani, 2007). As these young people use the new media, many have asked the question: How does the Internet alter the nature of learning and literacy? (Coiro, Knobel, Lanksheear, & Leu, 2008) The objective of this presentation centers around understanding how learners develop second language literacy in the context of their participation in social media.

As a developing country, Indonesia has witnessed an unprecedented increase of Internet penetration in 10 years, from a modest 2 million users in year 2000 to 55 million in 2012. Among these are the 30 million users of Twitter. In 2012 alone, Indonesian Twitter users produced around 15% of all tweets globally, making the country the 3rd largest tweet
producers after Brazil and the U.S. (Internet World Stats, 2012). Although the majority of social media users in Indonesia use their native language when producing digital texts, an increasing number of them interact with English either by reading, writing, or sharing English-based texts (Salin Silang, 2011). Unfortunately, many English programs and curricula that exist in Indonesia today fail to keep up with students’ literacy experiences in the digital world. The majority of English classes across Indonesia places heavy emphasis on the technical aspects of the language and is disconnected to real-life communicative contexts (Alwasilah, 2009). Yet beyond the classroom walls, Indonesian students continue to immerse themselves in multiple English-mediated discourses.

As an Indonesian educator, my attention is drawn to bridging these disparate realities of out-of-school and school-based learning. The first step toward that effort is to explore the complex language/learning process in out-of-school contexts, to then draw from it implications on classroom pedagogies. Specifically in this study, I explored how the textual practices of one Indonesian college student on Twitter provide the scaffolding for developing her English literacy. This study expands the scope of the literature by drawing attention to the role of digital technologies on second language learning in contexts where primary access to the second language is online (Hornberger, 2007; Lam, 2009). Furthermore, this study contributes to the expanding body of literature in second language education that have pushed for a paradigm shift in conceptualizing literacy and literacy learning as socially situated practice (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Álvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Hornberger & McKay, 2010).

2. Theoretical Framework

The two overarching conceptual frameworks that I use in looking at textual practices and literacy development are Bakhtinian intertextuality (Bazerman, 2010; Fairclough, 1992; Kristeva, 1980) and Vygotskian sociocultural theory of mediated action (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981; Wertsch, 1991). The term intertextuality is conceptually rooted in the social semiotic approach to language, which generally views texts as reproduction of social interaction and practice. Consequently, every time a text is analyzed, it is analyzed in relation to the sociocultural contexts that shape it. Intertextuality, then, is the ways in which a specific text relates to other texts – whether it be explicitly signaled/traced in another text or connected through a more abstract conventions, genres, or discourse types (Ivanic, 1998).

Though this approach helps explain the role of social interaction in the reproduction of language and meanings, many research that work with this framework do not focus on changes, or development, of language-in-use over time for the individuals involved in this process. Recent scholars such as Ivanic (1998) and Bazerman (2010) have attempted to use Vygotskian sociocultural theory to bridge this gap. In this context, Vygotsky’s theory is used to explain development in terms of “intermental” and “intramental” functioning of the mind (Wertsch, 1991). That is, whatever an individual becomes able to do independently is a result of social experiences with other humans. As I analyzed my data, the connection between intertextuality and intermental scaffolding became salient, because it explained how my participant was able to engage independently—or “intramentally”—with a second language as a result of the many and frequent discoursal borrowing of texts that she adapted from others

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1 Textual practices are defined here as the diverse ways –or practices- in which people produce and interpret texts (Hornberger, 2007; Ivanic, 1998; McGinnis et al., 2007)

2 Name used in the finding section of this paper is a pseudonym.
“intermentally” via Twitter. This study also interrogates the notion of unilinear development –from lower to higher mental functioning– as originally proposed by Vygotsky (1981).

3. Methods

The study uses ethnographic case study as its methodology, informed by the methodological traditions of ethnography (Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Green & Bloome, 1997; Wolcott, 1987) and qualitative case study (Yin, 2006). I coded the participant’s Twitter posts and interviews using Nvivo10 - a qualitative method software that allows systematic capturing and querying of social media data like Twitter. To analyze my participant’s textual practices, I first identified the different types of texts that she produced online using a combination of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and theoretical coding (Yin, 2006). Next, I used discourse analysis methods to identify the syntactic structures and discoursal functions of the texts that she borrowed and appropriated in the literacy events. I later compared and contrasted these features with the surrounding texts (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gasparov, 2010; Gee, 2011). Finally, to adopt the insider’s perspective on her literacy practices I triangulated the themes that I discovered from the Twitter posts and observation memos with her interview data. This triangulation served as the methodological apparatus for deriving insights on the connection between intertextuality, intermental functioning, and literacy development.

4. Data Sources

The data from this study come from three main sources:

a. Written captures from the participant’s Twitter timeline over a period of 9 months (including 3178 posts captured by Nvivo10 between March – November 2012).

b. Online observation notes of the individual tweets and retweets. My observation began in June 2012 and ended in June 2013.

c. Five semi-structured in-depth interviews between June 2012 – March 2013, each lasting between 90-120 minutes.

5. Findings

Intertextuality

Although the majority of the posts that appeared on Cassie’s timeline were written in her native language, it is worth noting that the proportion of English texts that she read (retweeted) and wrote (tweeted) online was relatively balanced (i.e. 56% of the posts were directly retweeted from some other users; and 44% were either retweeted from other users but with addition of her own English/Indonesian words or were tweeted as stand-alone tweets that might or might not be originated from her (See figure 1 and 2).

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3 See footnote 2.
This phenomenon hints at Fa iclough’s (1992) and others’ (Lilis, 2001; McGinnis et al., 2007) argument of the embeddedness of one’s text in the interactional forces that surround it. Though the ‘social interaction’ in this study was not necessarily bidirectional—in a sense of her exchanging words with the Twitter users she retweeted from—Cassie still actively sought to derive and convey meanings by engaging in this intertextual practice. As shown in the two examples below:

**Example 1:**

On July 2, Cassie tweeted a post expressing her feelings:

Do you know how much I want to see you right now?

On the same day, she retweeted a post by a quotebot @ihatequotes expressing similar sentiment, which served the same discourse function of displaying emotions as the text that she posted earlier:

RT @ihatequotes: There goes the moments when you miss someone so much that you just want to pick them out from your mind & hug them ...

The next day, on July 3, seemingly still engaged in the same conversation with herself—as if responding to the previous retweet, she posted:

Simple. Just try to not to think about it. Easy to say but hard to do. Deym.

**Example 2:**

In a more telling example of how her texts are inextricably linked with other texts that she encountered, Cassie retweeted from another quotebot @FactsOfSchool on July 11:

RT @FactsOfSchool: Don't text me back? I understand. Don't hang out with me? I understand. But, when I start not giving a fuck anymore, you better understand.
In a rather separate literacy event and timeframe, she tweeted a stream of emotions through a tweet on July 26:

_Why give a fuck about something that never gave a fuck about you? They're just a waste of your time_

Notice that her last tweet about her nonchalance for her love interest was not only similar to @FactsOfSchool’s tweet in terms of its discourse function, but also in terms of some of its syntactic structure (i.e. in the phrasing of “[…] give a fuck”). To use Volosinov’s argument (in Bazerman, 2010), in these two separate units of literacy events like many others on her timeline, Cassie’s texts not only draw on a history of language use, but are also responsive to prior utterances and carry forward that history. While Bakhtin (1986) originally called such intricate relations among texts _multivoicedness_, others following him called this _intertextuality_ (Fairclough, 1992; Kristeva, 1980). And as Gasparov (2010) further argues, this kind of intertextual borrowing is not restricted to literary texts originally analyzed by Bakhtin or Kristeva. Intertextuality occurs all the time in our perfectly ordinary speech. In Cassie’s case, the second example is set apart from the first example as it shows Cassie’s creativity in interweaving previously encountered texts to make it her own.

**Intertextuality as intermental encounters that lead to literacy development**

A more significant insight that can be drawn from the study is how intertextuality as a mechanism of social reproduction of symbols/meanings also affords opportunities for higher mental functioning such as learning a second language or developing specific literacy discourse. Her intertextual practices show interactions between her mind and others’. In turn, these intermental encounters allow her to become able to practice new ways with English intramentally. As Cassie noted in an interview:

*Researcher: Have you ever felt like [adopting texts from quotebots or song lyrics] helps you somehow with English?*

*Cassie: Oh of course. Sometimes when I stumble upon a word that I don’t know, I become curious and look it up. Also sometimes these lyrics or quotes use slang words, so it helps me a lot to understand how the slang words or expressions are used there…. And sometimes, when I listen to a song, I translate it…[S]ometimes it comes from my heart; these songs just pop up in my head and I want to write them down…. I mean, these songs express how I feel (December, 2012).*

In deriving this insight I am cautious not to frame this kind of literacy development in terms of progression from lower to higher forms of literacy. As observed from the two examples, Cassie seemed to be comfortable with expressing herself in the second language in the first place. What the intermental encounters do, rather, is to widen learners’ repertoire of discoursal choices to be used as they move in and out of different social contexts.

6. Scholarly Significance and Implications

This study contributes to new conceptual directions for understanding literacy in the context of digital media. First, this study sheds light on the embeddedness of literacy practices in individual as well as in interactional goals. Any fragment of speech that language learners read or write during their literacy activities cannot be understood independently from its particular discourse function, genre, and history ((Bazerman, 2010). Furthermore, what people do with texts is purposeful. Unfortunately formal institutions like schools often time frame literacy –especially academic literacy- as an end in itself. In an attempt to help students adopt and eventually be immersed in the genre of academic English that is central to school-
based practices, educators need to find ways to make the academic English relatable, purposeful, and meaningful to the students.

Second, and more importantly, this study demonstrates the role of digital technologies in making different literacy practices available to students instantly and for free (Gee, 2008). As Cassie seamlessly travels in and out her Twitterverse to Google and websites and Youtube videos, she connects the dots of her linguistic experiences. As such, new literacy practices are acquired through the process of informal learning and sense making. This has direct implications on school-based learning in that schools need to understand how their students engage with different forms of literacy via digital technologies. Making these informal learning processes explicit for students is important because their understanding of their own learning experiences guide their action both in and out of school contexts (Barton et al., 2000).

References


