Critical Literacy and ICT: Experiences of ESL Students in Australia

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SUMMARY In the era of globalisation, ESL (English as a second language) speakers frequently engage in technology-mediated international business, culture, science and education. They need to be able to participate in these practices in meaningful, intelligent and reflective ways. This requirement highlights the importance of developing students’ critical capabilities in the context of technology use in ESL. However, the development and enhancement of these capabilities may be challenging for teachers and students in Australian educational institutions because of ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic and educational diversity in almost every classroom. Drawing on a part of a larger qualitative research study of four international students from Thailand, China, Saudi Arabia and France, the chapter discusses ESL students’ critical literacy practices in a technological environment. Informed by sociocultural theoretical orientations to understanding literacy and the 3-D model (Green 1988), it describes the students’ challenges with these practices and discusses their nature. The chapter argues that there is a need for ESL educators to address the students’ difficulties and rethink pedagogical practices with information and communication technologies (ICT) in ESL education.
9.1 Introduction

Critical literacy has become a popular approach to language teaching, promoted in many countries, including Australia. Engagement in critical literacy practices has the potential to give students the opportunity to understand the complex relationships between language, social practices and power and to learn how to question social disparity. These capabilities are especially important in the context of the Digital Age when ICT offer many benefits to consumers but their use also carry some risks. However, the development of relevant critical capabilities represents a challenge for international students in Australia because they are using English as their second language and using technology in a new context. Teaching critical literacy in the context of ICT to ESL students is also problematic because of the complex factors affecting the teaching environment: different ethnic groups, English language proficiency, experience and attitude to technology, and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. These factors have had complex implications for ESL education and, in particular, for technology use in ESL pedagogy.

A number of researchers argue that it is necessary to be vigilant about ICT and to approach technology use with a certain degree of scepticism (Lankshear et al. 2000; Murray 2000; Morgan 2001; Snyder 2008). They emphasise the importance of teaching critical literacy associated with ICT use because these capabilities are not naturally acquired. However, their research has focused on first language learning; the research on critical literacy associated with ICT use in the context of second language is not as extensive. Moreover, often the dominant perspective on the role of ICT in ESL classroom focuses on the improvement of language proficiency. These practices are valuable but insufficient in the technology-driven era for the learners who need to
participate in technology-mediated international business, culture, science, and education in meaningful, intelligent and reflective ways.

This chapter draws on a qualitative study which involved a class of ESL learners, with a focus on four students and their teacher at Briston University English Language Centre (BUELC), located in Melbourne, Australia. The participants, Kate (Thailand), Ahmad (Saudi Arabia), Chen Lin (China) and Pierre (France), were in their 20s and all of them intended to start their postgraduate degrees at Briston University upon completion of the English language course. The Computer Study Skills Module was of particular research interest as the main focus of this module was the development of certain capabilities associated with ICT use for academic purposes. Informed by a constructivist paradigm, the research followed a multiple case-study design (Yin, 2003). Employing such methods of data generation as class observations, participants’ diaries of ICT use and interviews with the students and their teacher, the study examined (1) how the international students were engaged with ICT use in ESL in their studies and everyday lives, and (2) what challenges they experienced in these practices and why. Critical literacy practices associated with technology use were a part of overall participants’ experiences with ICT as suggested by the theoretical framework which informed the study.

9.2 Contemporary perspective: what does it mean to be literate?

The view of literacy has undergone many changes over the last half century within larger epistemological shifts through Marxism, structuralism, and modernism to postmodernism and post structuralism (Purcell-Gates 2007). The New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Scribner and Cole 1981; Gee 1991; Street 1995; Barton et al. 2000; Gee 2000; Hamilton 2002; Lankshear and Knobel 2003; Pahl and Rowsell 2005; Street 1999) has brought about a major shift in the field of
literacy research by challenging and questioning the long-dominant belief in literacy as a decontextualised set of skills, dependent on cognitive ability. These researchers argue that literacy practices are always a part of diverse social, cultural, historical, political and economical contexts. Elaborating on this view, Barton et al. (2000, 12) state that, ‘[l]iteracy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others’. This suggests that literacy is not value-free and neutral; its nature is highly ‘ideological’ (Street 2005, 417). Within this understanding of literacy, the power of language is recognised; texts and associated practices are viewed as being closely linked to purpose, intentions and ideology – they represent some views, values and beliefs and silence others’. This conceptualisation of literacy has brought the critical aspect of literacy into focus when thinking about pedagogy.

The definitions of critical literacy in the academic literature vary because critical literacy refers to a wide range of educational philosophies and practices (Snyder 2008). Nevertheless, these definitions overlap in many ways. For example, Luke and Freebody (1999, 6) view critical literacy as an approach which enables ‘teachers, students and communities to explore alternative ways of structuring practices around texts to address new cultural and economic contexts’.

Similarly, Luke (2000, 453) defines the focus of critical literacy as ‘teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position-taking with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work’. Morgan (2001, 36) refers to critical literacy as, the understanding that all users of language aim to persuade their hearers or readers of their viewpoint; and that all texts offer a particular angle on society and human interactions. Moreover, different groups in the society have different access to power, status and wealth; this depends largely on the ways they and their worlds are described and defined through language and the values that are promoted by these
means. So the work of critical literacy is to investigate how those forms of knowledge, and the power they bring, are created in language and taken up by those who use such texts. It asks how language might be put to different, more equitable uses, and how texts might be (re)created that would tell a different story of other possibilities for a more just world.

According to Snyder (2008, 78), critical literacy is concerned with ‘the politics of meaning: how dominant meanings are maintained, challenged and changed’ and its overall aim is ‘development of social awareness and active, responsive citizenship’. Furthermore, she argues that the most extreme aim of critical literacy education is encouragement and preparation of people to take an action for ‘radical democratic social transformations’ (79).

A number of approaches have been developed by Australian researchers to address the development of these capabilities in the context of literacy education in schools. Two of the most influential are the Four resources model (Luke and Freebody 1999) and the 3-D model (Green 1988). Luke and Freebody’s model suggests that the learners need to assume four roles when engaging with a text – code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst. Green’s model (see Figure 9.1) views literacy as comprising three interlocking dimensions – operational, cultural and critical – each of them deals with different aspects of literacy practice and associated capabilities.

Figure 9.1. 3-D model of literacy (Durrant and Green 2001, 152)
Both models argue for critical literacy (e.g. text analyst in the Four resource model and the critical dimension in the 3-D model) as a part of contemporary literacy education. Importantly, the 3-D model emphasises that words, texts, meanings cannot be separated from the contexts of their use and they require not only ‘decoding’ or ‘encoding’, but also interacting, analysing and reflecting their purposes, interests and biases.

Informed by a social perspective, which views literacy as a context-situated practice, another significant change in understanding literacy is associated with the development and spread of ICT. Technology use has become an increasingly important activity in the lives of many people – modern society and many aspects of its life are highly dependent on information and services which are produced, consumed, exchanged and preserved in an electronic form today. The texts in a technological environment are dramatically different from print-based – they are multimodal (i.e. meaning may be constructed in linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and multimodal ways) (New London Group 1996), connected in a non-linear manner, highly dynamic and flexible and can be situated in a wide range of easily accessible local and global contexts. To be able to deal with these issues, imposed by ICT, people need relevant literacy capabilities. Thus, the definition of literacy and characteristics of a literate person in the twenty first century continues to expand (New London Group 1996; Lankshear et al. 2000; Snyder 2008, 2009). Different terms co-exist in the academic literature and mass media to describe and characterise the strategic capabilities of a literate person in the Digital Age – technoliteracy (Lankshear et al. 2000), electronic literacy (Warschauer 1999), digital literacy (Gilster 1997), silicon literacy (Snyder 2002), and multiliteracies (New London Group 1996). The terms vary as their informing theoretical perspectives do; however, they all argue that the concept of literacy is no longer
associated with linguistic symbols only and also that literacy associated with the use of ICT is more than an ability to decode and encode with the help of technological devices.

The term ‘technoliteracy’ was chosen for the study on which this chapter draws because it captures the notion that literacy practices are enacted in a technological environment and it also conveys a broad understanding of literacy needs in contemporary society. The concept of technoliteracy capabilities is defined as ‘being able to decode and encode fluently; using literacy abilities and understandings involved in researching and reporting information; reading and deciding what is relevant; notetaking; scanning, and collecting information in a selective way’ (Lankshear et al. 2000, 25). Technoliteracy requires traditional skills but also some new capabilities associated with different dimensions of technology. Lankshear et al. (2000) suggest that the 3-D model, valuable for a holistic understanding of print-based literacy practices, also enables the understanding of the complex nature of technoliteracy practices in the most comprehensive way. It brings all the dimensions (operational, cultural and critical) of literacy as a social practice equally to both language and ICT. The operational dimension refers both to the language and technology aspect (e.g. capabilities to deal with language system and the technological skills). The cultural dimension focuses on meaning – capabilities of understanding and producing meaning in a context-appropriate way. The critical dimension of literacy deals with social construction of knowledge and developing the ability to critique, evaluate and redesign the resources which mediate these technoliteracy practices. The model facilitates understanding that these interrelated capabilities make the technoliteracy practice successful. This leads to the conclusion that if individuals experience challenges when using technology, these capabilities or some of them may be insufficient or limited. Such a perspective has
informed data analysis in the study. However, given the fact that the model has not been used as a research perspective in the context of second language, it guided the analysis, not limited it.

To sum up, contemporary conceptualisations of literacy views it as contextual, active and multimodal. It also emphasises the importance of critical literacy in the context of ICT use where multiple and easily accessible sources of information and services, and digital texts which are designed to manipulate are ubiquitous. In response to this current debate, in the following section, through the lens of the 3-D model, I examine ESL students’ critical literacy practices with technology to argue that these practices are deeply problematic and thus, it is important for ESL educators in Australia to understand why addressing these issues in pedagogy may represent a challenge and what can be done to encourage and enhance critical literacy in the context of technology and ESL use.

9.3 Critical literacy and ICT: challenges for ESL students

The study found that the participants used a wide range of technologies for a variety of purposes – services, information, communication, entertainment and learning – and these practices required the users to be sceptical and critical. However, the participants often did not engage with technology in a critical manner. Their main challenge was limited understanding and knowledge of critical literacy as well as associated capabilities which I explore and, importantly, explain below.

Language proficiency was a significant obstacle for critical engagement with technology, especially in an academic Discourse. For example, Kate said that her English language
difficulties often prevented her from expressing her ideas in academic writing in an argumentative and persuasive way\(^1\):

I have to show my opinion [in writing]... [T]eacher says it makes no sense... I think it’s a very big problem for me because if I go to Master [degree] I cannot express my opinion! And nobody can understand me. That’s not good.

Ahmad told that his particular concern was with understanding academic articles in the online journals. Struggling with ‘decoding’ the content, he often failed to engage with it critically:

[T]he writers [academics]... are using academic style and strong vocabulary and I don’t know what they are talking about. I don’t understand the point of this paragraph because they are using very difficult vocab and very difficult structure.

The participants also said that being unconfident in their ESL capabilities they often relied on technology. For instance, three of them reported that they trusted absolutely the spell check in word processing, although several of them referred to situations when the spell check and especially the grammar check were unreliable. As Durrant and Green (2001, 160) argue, ‘practices need to become “meaningful” before they can become “critical”’. Critical practice requires access (encoding/decoding in terms of language; navigation in terms of technology) and comprehension in contextually appropriate ways. Indeed, lack of confidence and limited ESL proficiency encouraged the participants to rely on technology and associated practices, preventing them from engagement with them critically. The findings suggest that critical literacy capabilities require both linguistic and technological competence, which Lankshear et al. (2000) refer to as the operational capabilities.

Another reason for the difficulties with critical literacy practices was lack or limited knowledge of the context in which these practices were embedded. During one of the observation sessions at

\(^1\) The language in the examples is as spoken by the participants.
I observed the class searching the Internet to answer some questions about Australia as a part of the task. Although the students managed to find the answers about Australian pop-singer Kylie Minogue and the Australian men’s soccer team, Socceroos, on Google, they could hardly read the names aloud and they did not look confident about their answers. This indicated to me that they were unfamiliar with Australian pop culture and sport and thus could not evaluate critically the reliability of the information. The problem is that Google is not neutral (Haigh 2006; Dean 2008). Intent on gaining commercial advantage, individuals find ways to improve the search ranking of their websites and place them in Google top search results. These websites are not necessarily the most popular nor the most reliable, but many users are unaware of this fact. Similarly, Ahmad referred to his GPS navigator use and reading online news. He told me that he trusted absolutely the information when he did not have any experience or/and knowledge about the content and its context. But if he was familiar with it he always questioned what he read or heard:

It [trusting] depends on the subject. For example, if they are talking about…for example the war in Iraq… what’s going on there I always don’t trust them… I think I know what’s happening in the Middle East. But when they are talking about Australian culture or something about Australia – yeah… I always trust in this subject.

Ahmad recognised that language was not neutral and might be used to persuade and manipulate people. His background and related perceptions of the world encouraged him to question the information about Middle East. However, having the capacity to be critical in the native environment does not necessarily mean that the capacity will be evident in a new socio-cultural context. The learners cannot think and read critically if they do not have background knowledge (Thistlethwaite 1990; Durrant and Green 2001). Unfamiliar and inexperienced with a new culture and social practices, the participants in the present study tended to accept things. They did not recognise the need and, perhaps, did not have the skills (linguistic and/or technological)
to check the reliability of the information associated with the Australian context. Contextual knowledge and understanding the role of context, as components of the cultural dimension of the 3-D model, represent important capabilities for using technology in ESL critically because technoliteracy practices are meaningful, reflective and thus effective and beneficial if they are performed with context-appropriate awareness and experience.

Critical literacy practices in academic settings were especially challenging for the participants. Although they were explained and introduced certain terms, strategies and techniques, their capabilities were still insufficient. For example, during an observation session, the students were given a task – to read an article, find arguments, and position themselves within the topic, referring to other articles as well. Many students in the class were confused with the task. Their particular challenge was to assume an ‘academic position’. They did not understand what that meant and what they were supposed to write in this section of the task – the teacher had to explain several times, even though those issues had been discussed during the last class. Similarly, Kate commented on her knowledge about the reliability of the articles she could use in essays: ‘I just heard from teacher that here we have to choose peer-reviewed… but I don’t know much about it. How they can become peer-reviewed?’ Three of out of four participants reported that they were unfamiliar with critical literacy approach before they started learning at BUELC. Ahmad remembered that back home the lecturers at his University encouraged students to ‘go and find some information from online’ for academic writing but did not emphasise the need for critical awareness and learning relevant strategies. Only Pierre said that a critical approach to technology use was practised at the educational institutions where he studied in France and Spain. The teacher said that most of the students in the class were not critical and seemed to be
indifferent to critical literacy practices. They also did not know much (if at all) about writing strategies and techniques for academically appropriate genres, involving critique, analysis, and personal opinion.

Overall, critical literacy in the class seemed to focus only on academic practices – searching relevant information in reliable sources; identifying and comparing different academic positions; analysing power of language and its means in different genres; engaging the students with academic discussions and encouraging them to take a stance in these debates; writing with arguments and evidence. However, the need for a broader critical attitude to technology and technoliteracy practices in and, especially, out of the classroom appeared to be neglected. When the participants referred to absolute trust in some technologies, they were asked why. Kate replied: ‘they are machines! They should work well!’ Pierre also spoke about technology in a similar manner: ‘There is always like errors but I think for the use the errors is very low…’ One of the ideologies underpinning a range of discourses about ICT is a belief in the positive influence of technology on most human activities (Morgan 2001). This is evident in these examples and helps to explain the nature of absolute trust in technology. Thistlethwaite (1990, 587) also argues that ‘a critical reader realises that everything that is read needs to be read critically’. Although at BUELC the participants developed some understanding about critical literacy, they did not seem to acknowledge that they should always question and critique any existing knowledge and stereotypes about any technology on account of the power relations and ideologies in technoliteracy practices. Furthermore, they needed to develop more profound capabilities to be able to apply critical literacy strategies when using ICT in different contexts. These capabilities constitute the critical dimension of the model.
Personal interests and characteristic, which are not a part of the 3-D model, were identified in the study as a significant factor which influences individual willingness to assume a critical perspective and taking social or political action. Among all the participants only Chen Lin was interested in independent critical literacy practices online and in class. She appeared to be an active critical user of technology who resisted the power of text and participates actively in transforming literacy as a social practice. Chen Lin told that she often participated in online discussions and as one of the examples she referred to her reaction to the online article which supported restrictions on abortions in Australia. She strongly disagreed with the article, calling it ‘a stand in one side’ because its main argument was ‘abortion-is-cruel’. She considered it to be limited and ignoring many other aspects of the problem. Chen Lin posted online her comments with explanation and examples. In contrast, Ahmad said that he hardly commented on any video he watched regularly on Youtube or any article online: ‘I don’t care about the comments… I just ignore’. As Thistlethwaite (1990) argues, readers are more likely to read critically if they have enough interest in the topic. This suggests that a sufficiently interesting and provoking topic may encourage the students to respond and engage in critical literacy practices.

9.4 Conclusion: implications for pedagogy

Being critical is one of the important characteristics of a literate person because of the contemporary complexity and multiplicity of relationship between ICT, social practices and power. As the overview of the research and this study suggest, many researchers and practitioners have done and continue to do excellent work to develop effective theoretical
approaches and integrate them in teaching. However, engaging the students, in particular ESL students, in these practices is challenging and problematic in many ways. The challenges discussed above suggest that ESL learners also need more opportunities to increase their awareness about the need to be critical with technology in different contexts, to develop relevant capabilities to be able to use technology and associated products critically and to be more motivated to engage actively in critical literacy practices in a technological environment.

Looking at technology use in an ESL context through the lens of the NLS and the 3-D model provides valuable insights into how ESL students participate in these practices and what factors may prevent them from critical engagement with technology. ESL students need a wide range of interrelated operational, cultural and critical capabilities to be able to deal with technology in a profound, thoughtful and intellectual way. The language proficiency of the students may vary significantly; however, this does not suggest neglecting the development of critical skills in the early stages of second language learning. Rather, it emphasises the importance of linguistic support for the students to assist this development. Teaching about technology, its functions and how they work as well as about the practices and experiences technology offer is important to encourage engagement in critical literacy practices in different ways in and out of classroom and to enhance the development of a sceptical attitude to technologies.

Furthermore, understanding the context in which technologies are used is essential so that the students recognise that any technoliteracy practice is always situated in a specific context which shapes it. Being unfamiliar with new contexts, the students need more opportunities to learn how
to find out what the texts mean and how they position them as readers (or listeners). To address critical technoliteracy in pedagogical practices, educators also need to teach the students what concepts, issues, techniques, and strategies critical literacy practices may involve. Introduction and explanation is significant because critical literacy may not be a part of the students’ previous educational experiences. Critical technoliteracy needs to be applied to a broader context of ICT use but not limited to an academic one. It is important to facilitate students’ understanding that ICT and texts in a technological environment are not neutral and their use always carries ‘hidden’ implications, influencing human interests both positively and negatively. Technology supports and improves human life in many ways but absolute trust in technology is full of risk, whether it is a software, a self-service machine in a public place, information from an online resource or a reliably-looking text message.

Finally, critical technoliteracy in an ESL context has great potential for intellectual and academic learning as well as social activism; thus, it is important to promote, support and encourage critical literacy with ICT among ESL students in a positive, interesting and stimulating way to engage them in these experiences. This will empower the learners to understand how textual practices in a technological environment, shaped by their own biases, influence and change them as members of society and respond to these attempts in an active and questioning manner. The discussion in the chapter draws attention to what it means to be literate in the twenty first century and why the critical aspect of technoliteracy practices is so significant for ESL learners and challenging at the same time. If this is understood by educators and appropriate steps are taken toward meeting the ESL learners’ needs in these practices, then ESL students will have more
opportunities to be prepared and confident to participate actively in a world in which technology-mediated practices are integral.
References


