Talk Around Digital Texts:  
A Microethnographic Analysis of Learner Challenges  
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ABSTRACT  
Digital, web-based texts as a resource for the classroom present new ways of making meaning as learners draw on a wide range of communicative resources such as gaze and gesture to access and read them. This study employed a multimodal interaction analysis framework to examine an English language class of Japanese university students explaining online video stories face-to-face in a university in Japan. The findings identified a gap in the digital literacy skills the teacher assumed the learners possessed and the actual digital literacy skills required for successful completion of the classroom activity. The findings challenge the assumption that young learners are ‘digital natives’, being capable of using technology for the specific purposes required in the class task. Implications for the planning and implementation of digital media for talk in language classroom tasks are discussed.

KEYWORDS  
Classroom Discourse, Digital Literacy, Digital Natives, Interaction, Learner Challenges

INTRODUCTION

The increasing presence of digital technologies in classrooms presents a range of challenges as well as benefits for language learning. With these technologies come new ways of making meaning as learners draw on a wide range of communicative resources, or modes (Jewitt, 2009a), such as gaze and gesture, to read and communicate with digital texts, which contribute to learning (Jewitt, 2009b). As a result, a greater understanding is needed to identify how digital technology and digital texts can be employed to mediate effective language learning.

Web-based digital texts offer an opportunity for socializing learners into the contemporary social practices of (digital) textually mediated communication. Such texts offer learners opportunities to see ‘the global and the local instances of practices’ (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006, p. 11) through web-based communication connecting people and ideas across the world. By giving language learners opportunities to communicate with web-based technologies, exposure to a wide range of social practices and domains can be provided. Inclusion of web-based texts into language classrooms can help learner motivation through ‘the desire to learn what gives them the power to take a constructive part in society in the present and the future’ (Langford, 2005, p. 147). Similarly, the inclusion of web-based texts for learning addresses the need to integrate skills with communicative technologies

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Beyond reading and writing; skills which Baker, Pearson, and Rozendal (2010) reported are not commonly addressed in the classroom. By providing regular access to web-based texts, learners have the opportunity to build and maintain contemporary communicative practices.

The current study analyses an activity involving web-based texts by Japanese first-year university students learning English. The aim was to examine the potential problems that learners encountered with these texts and their accompanying technologies in the classroom. The activity under analysis involved students explaining stories sourced online through university computers. The findings identified problems encountered by the students when explaining their web-based video stories in pairs.

The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What problems do the language learners face when using web-based digital texts in face-to-face spoken English language learning activities?
2. In what ways do the learner challenges impact their learning?

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**Theoretical Positioning**

The study was located within the field of Literacy Studies, which takes the position that “…nearly all everyday activities in the contemporary world are mediated by literacy and… people act within a textually mediated social world…” (Barton, 2001, p. 100). Central to this definition is the understanding that literacy is a social activity, with this approach highlighting “…the sheer variety and complexity of literate and oral practices…” (Street, 1995, p. 75) which can be placed under the analytical lens. Literacy Studies uses the term ‘literacy event’ to define the context of situation where textually mediated communication takes place. (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005) defined the literacy event as ‘an empirical manifestation, the bit observed from which social and cultural practices are inferred and conceptualized’ (p. 5). The literacy event in the context of the current was the space where the pairs of learners carried out their activity with the computer and mediating web-based text, mouse, pen and papers.

An important theoretical position adopted in this study relates to the conceptualisation of meanings being analysed within the literacy events. Borrowing from Mediated Discourse Theory, social actions are considered as the discourse being analysed. Social actions involve not just spoken language but gestures, gaze and other modes contributing to meaning making (Norris & Jones, 2005). The reason for this choice is due to the meanings being analysed and the manifestation of learner challenges involved a range of resources beyond language such as gaze and hand gestures to access the web-based texts through devices including the computer and mouse as part of the activity.

**Technology for Learning in Classrooms**

Communicative technologies offer rich resources for language learning classrooms, with most texts found on the internet ‘almost always being multimodal’ (Bezemier, Jewitt, & O’ Halloran, 2016, p. 25). At the same time, educators need to be aware of the limitations as well as the affordances that such ‘new media’ offer (Kress, 2009), as technology can also be restricting and limit peoples’ abilities to take certain actions or engage in certain social practices (Jones & Hafner, 2012). This could be particularly problematic when there is an assumption by teachers that all learners are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) who possess the skills and knowledge to harness the technology introduced in class for learning. (See Bennet & Maton, 2010, for a discussion challenging the notion of digital natives and the danger of accepting the notion in the context of education.)

Beavis (2013) highlighted that the younger generation’s experience, access and ICT skills are not evenly distributed. Also, their ability with new technologies cannot be defined simply by age (Gu, Zhu, & Guo, 2013) but also by breadth of use, experience, gender and educational levels (Helsper &
The Development of Digital Competences and Emotional Skills Through the Use of Audio-Visual Technologies

New and Strange Sorts of Texts: The Shaping and Reshaping of Digital and Multimodal Books and Young Adult Novels
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