



Title of Project:

Integrating Out-of-Class Digital Literacy Development and English Language Learning Practices with Classroom Language Learning and Teaching in Thailand

Researcher:

Freek Olaf de Groot
Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok, Thailand (Current Institution)
University of Reading, United Kingdom (Doctoral Institution)
freekolaf@gmail.com



Freek Olaf de Groot

Research Supervisor:

Prof. R. H. Jones
University of Reading, UK

Project Summary

Motivation for the Research

The aim of this research was to create a better understanding of the ways in which digital technology affects English literacy practices outside the classroom and how these digital English literacy practices relate to the English language learning and teaching practices that take place inside the classroom. I started this research with the general observation that an increasing number of English learners engage in various digital literacy practices to find opportunities to use the English language in environments in which this type of exposure to English is otherwise scarce. I set out to study this phenomenon within the context of teacher education in Thailand, addressing the specific question of how the student-teachers' use of digital technology affects their English language learning outside the classroom and what the pedagogical potential of these practices might be for learning and teaching in the classroom. In other words, this research explored the opportunities that digital technology created for learners, the limitations these tools imposed on learning, and the extent to which these benefits and limitations were capitalized upon when learners engaged in their day-to-day social, learning, and literacy practices that involved the use of English. Mobility is one of the most important affordances of digital technology at the moment, allowing learners to engage in digital social and literacy practices wherever and whenever they want and to interact with communities that are not within direct physical reach. The affordance of mobility offers great potential for learners in environments, such as Thailand, in which exposure to English outside of classroom contexts is generally scarce.

Research Questions

This research set out to answer three interrelated questions:

1. What are the digital literacy practices of Thai student teachers, the discourses mediating these practices, and the tools they use to engage in these practices. How does the



intersection of these practices, discourses, and tools allow student-teachers to create networks of relations between produced social spaces?

2. How have the digital literacy and language learning practices of the student-teachers been shaped, transformed, and linked to other practices, and what is the pedagogical potential of these practices for the use of teaching and learning in the classroom in particular?
3. How do the individual beliefs of the Thai student-teachers on the role of digital technology in learning and literacy practices link and relate to the larger sets of shared beliefs on this in Thai society?

Research Methodology

In order to answer these research questions a nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) was carried out as an ethnographic approach to studying learning practices and digital literacy development. Nexus analysis finds its theoretical basis in mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon, 1998, 2001). This type of discourse analysis combines the study of language use and social practices, which make it highly applicable for the current investigation of language learning, digital literacies development, and digital learning practices. The tools for data collection in the current nexus analysis drew on a variety of tools for data collection, including classroom observations, focus group interviews, research interviews, on campus out-of-class observations, participants' journals, visual data tracking, field notes, participant tasks and surveys of online digital practices.

A group of 17 fourth-year student teachers at a community teacher training college participated in this study as the primary research participants. In addition, lecturers, university administrators, and officials at the ministry of education were interviewed. The main research site was the campus of a medium sized community college in the center of Thailand. This particular community college fulfills an important role in creating low-cost, low threshold access to education, which offers opportunities for people outside metropolitan Bangkok to increase their social mobility. All data were analyzed within the theoretical framework of mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001, Norris and Jones, 2005). This particular approach to data analysis was suitable for the current study since it studied the use of digital technology where students' digital literacy practices, English learning practices, and their social practices intersected.

Summary of Findings

The results of this study can be summarized in three interconnected findings, focusing on the kind of digital literacy practices in which student-teachers engaged, the implications these digital literacy practices on how the classroom as a social space is conceptualized, and finally, the pedagogical potential of the out-of-class digital English literacy practices have for classroom learning and teaching.

First of all, student-teachers in this study used digital technology in various ways, and some of these ways created affordances which allowed them to be exposed to English or use English as part of their literacy practices outside the classroom. However, there was a large amount of variation observed between the student-teachers in the ways they used digital technology to create opportunities to use English and be exposed to English. For some student-teachers these literacy events were a by-product of their Thai digital social practices, whereas for other student-teachers the digital English literacy events were the main focus. Important to note here is that the



presence of digital technology outside the classroom did not automatically create access to English literacy events. Even if access to English literacy events could be navigated, not all student-teachers would know the normative discourse practices and social relationships that were necessary to actively participate in these literacy events. This variation in individual digital literacy practices of student teachers has implications for the way the potential of digital technology is seen as a tool for autonomous learning outside the classroom and how experiences with technology outside the classroom can be used as a starting point for classroom learning experiences.

The second finding of this study relates to how digital technology influences how student-teachers learn and communicate outside the classroom and what the potential of these practices is for learning and teaching inside the classroom. The data in this study show how mobile digital technology allows student-teachers to engage in their learning and literacy practices in various social spaces, such as the home, a lobby of an academic building, a classroom, or a dormitory room, and how these practices create trajectories and links between these spaces. Mobile technology created an important benefit for them in that it allows them to engage in these practices relatively free of time and space restrictions. This affordance of mobility is important since it allowed the student-teachers to engage in multiple social and literacy practices at the same time in various physical spaces instead of restricting it to the classroom only. However, within these simultaneous levels of interaction, certain practices are given more importance than others at particular moments. The ubiquitous nature of literacy development that was observed in the data also led to a different perception of the traditional bounded classroom. Whereas the student-teachers generally exhibited a more fluid conceptualization of the classroom in which multiple literacy practices took place at the same time, these beliefs co-existed alongside more traditional beliefs about literacy development exhibited in the actions and practices of the teachers on the program.

Finally the pedagogical potential of these out-of-class literacy practices is realized in two particular ways. First of all there is the direct, observable potential through direct applications in learning activities in the classroom. Examples of these can be found in instances in which students are allowed to use certain forms of technology in the classroom. Some of these practices were similar to the digital literacy practices observed outside the classroom whereas others were not. The current data showed very few of these instances, and in the cases they were observed, they were often disconnected from the final course objectives and required more complex digital literacy skills, which were often not included as part of the teaching focus. One explanation for the lack of use of this pedagogical potential was found in a strong deficit discourse from the teachers on student-teachers' abilities to effectively use technology for academic tasks.

In addition to the visible and direct pedagogical potential of digital technology in the classroom, an indirect way was discovered in which the pedagogical potential of digital technology was manifested in the classroom. This indirect pedagogical potential of digital learning for classroom learning is situated in the way that student-teachers engaged in digital English literacy practices outside the classroom. Examples of this were found in the way digital technology increased the exposure to English language in use and the opportunities it created to use the language actively with other speakers of English in a learning environment in which these opportunities were otherwise scarce. This increased exposure and the ability to use and practice the language allowed student-teachers to become more confident, broaden their vocabulary, and engage in meta linguistic discourse. These out-of-class digital English literacy



practices had a notable effect on the way student-teachers performed in English in the classroom. However, this potential for digital technology was largely unknown by their teachers.

Implications

The main implication we can take away from this research is that the pedagogical potential of technology is not always as obvious and is not necessarily situated in the use of digital devices in the classroom. The potential for digital technology lies in the actual literacy practices of the learners and as such, digital technology should not be the main focal point for teaching and learning. The focus should be on those moments and practices where social and literacy practices intersect with digital technology when it extends the range of actions we can take. Since this intersection of practices and digital technology does not always take place in the classroom, educators and administrators should be aware of the range of literacy practices learners engage in outside the classroom.

However, as the current findings also suggest, these literacy practices show that there is a high degree of variation from learner to learner. This individual variation means that as educators we need to look beyond single applications and look at the larger picture of digitally mediated social and literacy practices in which students engage because what happens outside the classroom matters for English language performances inside the classroom as well.

Furthermore, as educators and policy makers we need to take into account that not all students are equally well-equipped to use technology inside and outside the classroom and capitalize on the opportunities it can create. Teaching digital literacies and information, communication and technology literacies should be part of English literacy development in the classroom. This can extend the English literacy practices beyond the classroom and in return integrate out-of-class digital English literacy practices in classroom learning and teaching.

Lastly, current beliefs about teachers' and learners' abilities to engage in digital literacy practices in the context of English language learning are often founded on personal observations in the classroom and firmly established beliefs in society. This often results in a perpetual and persistent deficit discourse, which is debilitating for the pedagogical potential of digital literacy practices. A better dialogue between teachers and learners on these topics is encouraged in order to prevent current unfounded notions of the inability of learners to engage in these practices from perpetuating future professional practices. A better dialogue between teachers and learners is of particular importance in the case of student-teachers, who have notions about literacy development that are strongly influenced by the dominant discourses on literacy development and English language learning in society.



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