

## *English as an Additional Language: Enhancing Critical Digital Literacy*

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### **Abstract**

Recognizing the socio-cultural elements of language decoding and production, many modern EAL programs utilize a content-based approach. In the case of school-based EAL programs, this content often includes investigations such as understanding local values, citizenship theory, sustainability, media awareness, and digital literacy. This choice of content is partially due to a recognition that the socio-cultural components of language are crucial for accurate comprehension and production. It is also because these programs are designed to help integrate students from diverse backgrounds and give them the tools to participate fully in society using the English language (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). However, Jenkins (2006) argues that schools have been slow to adapt to the increasing need for critical digital literacy skills and that these skills are necessary to function effectively in participatory culture. Digital literacy skills, envisioned in this way, go beyond career-based training (although employability remains an objective) and into the realm of effective citizenship education. Jenkins (2006) argues from this basis that it is important for all young people to know how to use, interpret, and produce digital and traditional media, to understand how their perceptions are shaped by it, and become socialized into the ethical norms of participation in digital media cultures as part of their basic education. This paper will orient readers to the theme, provide a summary analysis of digital literacy coverage in EAP syllabi from two nations, and give recommendations for policy, curriculum developers, and classroom teachers.

Keywords: EAP, Digital Literacy, Digital Citizenship

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## **Introduction**

English as an Additional Language (EAL) is an important and rapidly growing school subject around the world (Crystal, 2008). Recognizing the socio-cultural elements of language decoding and production, many modern EAL programs utilize a content-based approach to enhance depth of learning and student engagement. In the case of school-based EAL programs, this content often includes investigations such as understanding local values, citizenship theory, sustainability, diversity tolerance, and media awareness. Examples of such programs can be found within the most current EAL/ESL syllabus documents from a range of jurisdictions such as the Western Australian (2014) and Ontario (2007) ministries of education. This choice of content is partially due to recognition that the sociocultural components of language are crucial for accurate comprehension and production. It is also because, as well as having linguistic objectives, these programs are designed to help enculturate students from diverse backgrounds and give them the tools to participate fully in society using the English language (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Such objectives are important, not only for linguistic reasons, but also because the goal of encouraging a participatory culture that tolerates diversity and supports collective action on matters of national and global interest (such as sustainability) is necessary for social function in pluralistic societies faced with long term problems such as inequality, intercultural conflict, environmental degradation, and sociopolitical function in a media environment that is rapidly transforming and that has a powerful impact on opinion. Such competencies are often considered central to effective 21<sup>st</sup> century education (OECD, 2016).

However, Jenkins (2006) believes that schools have been slow to adapt to the increasing need for critical digital literacy skills and that these skills are ever more necessary to function effectively in participatory culture. Digital literacy skills, envisioned in this way, go beyond career-based training (although employability remains an objective) and into the realm of effective citizenship education. Jenkins (2006) argues from this basis that it is important for all young people to know how to use, interpret, and produce digital and traditional media, to understand how their perceptions are shaped by it, and become socialized into the ethical norms of participation in digital media cultures as part of their basic education. Furthermore, Jenkins (2006) states that the rapid and ongoing shift from traditional communication and text types to digital or multimodal communication and text types necessitates a much stronger emphasis on digital literacy within subjects and across subjects, as well as outside of formal education structures. He therefore states that digital literacy objectives and teaching methods should be re-evaluated in school systems to better support traditional and digital citizenship and full access to participatory culture. This paper is a brief exploratory evaluation of how some school-based EAL programs might better achieve that goal.

## **Context, Research Problem, and Relevance**

English as an Additional Language is an important subject for many students regardless of whether they are residing in the inner, outer, or expanding circles of English speaking nations (Kachru, 2006). For those within the inner circle of English speaking nations (Australia, Canada, the U.K., the U.S., and New Zealand), English is the dominant language and proficiency is therefore key to their participation in many

key aspects of life. While English may be less dominant, those who live in the post-colonial outer circle countries such as India may also find many of their life opportunities decided by their proficiency in English as the administration of political and economic life is often in English. Even those in the expanding circle nations, such as China, may gain enhanced access to global education, career, social, and political opportunities with strong skills in the language. Given the stark differences in participatory opportunity that can result based on English competency, it is important that EAL programs are strategically designed to be as empowering as possible for students and, when one considers the weight and influence of Jenkins' (2006) report about digital literacy and participatory culture, it is important to consider how English as an Additional Language is fairing with regard to supporting English language learners in the digital realm specifically. The relevance of this research paper builds on Jenkins (2006) belief that the ability to fully engage in participatory culture by being adept consumers and producers of digital communication imbued with an understanding of rights claims and the potential dangers of using the digital medium, may dramatically affect the social, economic, and political life outcomes of students by extending the same belief to EAL students specifically.

This paper will focus on just one of the key contexts, which is in classrooms using EAL curricula from inner circle countries. This is because these particular curricula are delivered to a variety of students with a high stake in the participatory and citizenship outcomes being discussed. Students within the inner circle who are in EAL classrooms are often immigrants, refugees, or come from remote areas. Such students are vulnerable and may be marginalized if they cannot participate fully in the culture around them. These curricula are also important as they are often delivered to students in the outer and the expanding circles of English speaking nations who are planning to study or move to inner circle countries in the future. Such students are therefore likely to be inner circle students one day and, even before immigrating, English may act as a social, political, and economic gatekeeper within their own countries. Finally, because these curricula originate in inner circle countries, they are most likely to have non-linguistic objectives embedded in them as part of their purpose is enabling entry into English language majority participatory culture, while other curricula may be more focused on linguistic attainment without sociocultural competence and citizenship being expressly considered.

With this context and rationale in mind, this paper will briefly investigate how digital literacy for participatory culture might be improved within inner circle EAL curricula. Importantly, the analysis will stay focused on elements of digital literacy that match well with current language program objectives so as not to undermine the core linguistic objectives of the subject. Given the space limitations, this investigation will not be exhaustive, but will instead focus on a few key components that reoccur in the literature.

### **Theoretical framework**

This investigation utilizes sociocultural theory as an important component of language education, and, as such, argues that linguistic competence beyond the most basic level requires an understanding of the sociocultural elements of meaning and the social relations of those engaged in the communication (Vygotsky, 1962). Furthermore, with regard to language education, it is informed by ongoing discussions

of the importance of Language Awareness and Critical Language Awareness in a complete language education (Svalberg, 2007). This critical perspective asks students to explicitly explore power differentials that emerge through language use and thereby seek to rebalance them through awareness. When considering literacy theory, the multiliteracies work of the New London Group (1996) drives the discussion on broadening the view of literacy and text type, integrating critical analysis with an understanding of the importance of cultural diversity and power structures, and promoting the need for a citizenry that is both technologically and interculturally competent. Multiliteracy theory can also be used to broaden our perspective on what communications are appropriate subjects of study in the English as an Additional Language classroom.

## **Literature Review**

The inclusion of critical digital literacy programming into formal and informal education is well supported by the literature. Major international policy institutions such as UNESCO and Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills advocate cross-subject digital literacy training for all students. There are also detailed descriptions of digital literacy focal points in the primary research literature on media studies that attempt to keep up with the rapid pace of change in the field. With some variance in perspective and focus, Isin and Ruppert (2015), Poyntz (2011), Jenkins (2006), and Buckingham (2006) all point to the importance of digital literacy skills that are based in criticality, allow meaningful engagement with the broader society, and which take into account the power differentials between users and dangers of digital engagement. In their own way, all of these researchers circle around the notion that true digital literacy extends beyond job preparation and into essential functioning for multicultural societies, changing job environments, and heavily contested political identity spaces that require active participants to function properly. Also, in reality, Shah's (2015) discussion of inclusion, exclusion, inequality, and networked margins applies not only to the marginalized in developing nations, but to those everywhere who find themselves on the fringes of the great power structures of the world. Those in the networked margins have the potential of moving suddenly to the centre and creating dramatic transformation in an instant through the digital or, alternately, may have their voice swallowed completely in the constant torrent of digital noise that is being generated every moment.

This focus on developing tools for functioning within participatory culture also fits well with Isin and Ruppert's (2015) argument that the role of digital citizenship is based in the act of making digital rights claims and thereby becoming active in the constantly transforming and contested space of the internet. This highly activist model depends on the ability to interact with the internet using technical skills, but also necessitates more traditional literacy skills such as a high degree of communicative competence and considerable language awareness for the detection of rhetoric or bias in multimodal texts. As citizenship, socioeconomic participation, and communicative competence are express objectives of many inner circle EAL curricula, and digital citizenship is becoming an ever more important component of these objectives, this discussion of the ability to make these rights claims and critically examine the ramifications of doing so is an important consideration for those wishing to offer students the ability to engage in tasks that are important and relevant to them in English. Similarly, as digital rights acts increasing move across poorly defined

international jurisdictions in cyberspace, digital citizenship begins to meld with Global Citizenship Education.

An example of an inner circle syllabus that draws upon critical digital literacy and multiliteracy objectives is the Ontario Ministry of Education's curricular document for English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development (2007). It states that "the ESL and ELD curriculum is based on the belief that broad proficiency in English is essential to students' success in both their social and academic lives, and to their ability to take their place in society as responsible and productive citizens" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p.3). Within this document are numerous references to digital and multiliteracy objectives that serve to guide teachers in preparing their students to engage fully and safely with the society around them. Some of these objectives will be discussed and analyzed further in relation to this literature review.

Another example of an inner circle program can be found in the Western Australian Certificate of Education's (WACE) English as an Additional Language or Dialect Year 11 (2014) syllabus. Given similar overarching objectives as the Ontario (2007) ESL syllabus, it states that, "students learn to create, individually and collaboratively, increasingly complex texts for different purposes and audiences in different forms, modes and media." (p.1). Among other text types to be utilized in lessons, media texts, digital texts, and multimodal texts are listed.

Both of these documents provide insight into the direction that teachers are being given in EAL classrooms that use inner circle curricula. However, though they do clearly aim to stimulate critical digital and multiliteracy style literacy, they do not provide adequate descriptions of what this entails or go to a depth that might allow a teacher to take clear direction for skills and capacities deemed important by those who are at the forefront of theory and policy generation. An example of this is found in the Western Australian (2014) syllabus. There, among the general capabilities that will "assist students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century" (p.9), multimodal literacy, critical thinking, and information and communication technology are highlighted and given brief descriptions and limited classroom activity examples for illustrative purposes. Unfortunately, these general capabilities are simply raised as targets of teaching in instances when the opportunity arises and are not to be formally assessed unless specifically noted in the unit objectives. Nor are they articulated in light of current research. Finally, though it is possible to find an impressive range of linguistic objectives scattered throughout the document that relate to critical digital literacy, they are not explicitly linked in any meaningful way for the reader.

With these potential problems in mind, Jenkins (2006) highlights the need to address several areas of deficit in current digital literacy levels and the education that contributes to this form of literacy. His report on the education requirements of modern digital participatory culture is based on the premise that enabling participation in the social, economic, artistic, and political life of a community should be the focus of digital literacy because it, rather than technological aptitude alone, is the desired end goal of education. The first of these areas of deficit is *the participation gap*, which refers to inequality in the full range of experiences and skills that allow people to participate fully and seize opportunities. The second is *the transparency problem*, which refers to the way perception and belief are influenced in ways that are not

obvious to media users. The third is *the ethics challenge*, which is the lack of strong social and professional frameworks to guide people in their production and consumption of media.

Jenkins (2006) also discusses how the drive to empower participatory actors has created the need for a new emphasis on skills arising through community involvement, networking, and collaboration. These include playful problem-solving, appropriation of media, collective intelligence, transmedia navigation, and networking among others. As with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, in reality, these are not entirely new. However, the importance of them, the manner in which they can be used, and the socioeconomic and political contexts of use have all shifted to the extent that emphasizing them has merit. Importantly, Jenkins (2006, p. 7) says of societies built upon participatory culture, “not every member must contribute, but all must believe that they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued”. By defining these skills as core enablers, both to support the individual in contributing, and to build the necessary levels of society wide contribution for a participatory culture to exist at all, their relative importance to educators becomes apparent. Articulating this in the main curricular documents of modern EAL programs would therefore seem prudent.

Buckingham’s (2006) seminal article on priority learning objectives in digital literacy hone in on many of the features that Jenkins (2006) highlights as crucial to fostering participatory culture. Buckingham’s discussion centers around the notions of criticality and explicitly learning about digital media rather than just through digital media. To elaborate, he states that, if schools want to use digital media in their classrooms (which is a common technique in language classrooms) students should engage in critical digital media studies to acquire the necessary literacy skills around their use. Buckingham’s (2006) perspective is informed heavily by traditional media studies and posits that digital literacy is not just about gaining skills to allow access to digital information or communication, but also requires critique of that media through an appreciation of the motivations and techniques that go into digital production. He outlines four threads of study for critical digital literacy.

The first thread is that of *representation*. Buckingham (2006) describes the study of representation as an analysis of viewpoint, motivation for production, the inclusion and exclusion of specific voices, use of authority, and bias. These analyses are highly relevant to many academically oriented EAL classrooms and are often used on texts in EAL programs. For example, the Western Australian syllabus (2014) includes the identification and use of persuasive and rhetorical language in traditional, media, and multimodal texts. It also describes critical thinking as a core objective. Unfortunately, again, the document lacks detail regarding digital literacy such as a simple synthesis of concepts from a range of digital literacy sources to give users a clear indication of the points of theory that they would use to derive teaching methods from. Though there should be a high transferability between traditional mediums and the digital, it is important for teachers to highlight issues that are unique within digital spaces such as traceability or the customization of news (Isin & Ruppert, 2015).

Another interesting point of convergence in the objectives of EAL programs and the multimodal literacy objectives found in Buckingham (2006) is his description of the *language* thread, which bears a striking resemblance to Language Awareness (LA)

and Critical Language Awareness (CLA) as detailed by Svalberg (2007). Though Buckingham (2006) does describe the core LA features of grammar and word choice for meaning, there is also a broader exploration of the unique genres/text types found in digital spaces as well as the persuasive and power dynamics arising from uniquely internet based “grammar” such as how sites are hyperlinked and what power relationships underlie communication. This fits well with language acquisition theory that outlines a need for language students to ‘notice’ elements of communication from the level of the phoneme up to the level of power dynamics if they wish to truly comprehend a text or produce an utterance as intended (Svalberg, 2007).

Buckingham’s (2006) *production* thread not only highlights the need for students to produce digital text types, but also for them to build their awareness of why others build them the way they do (again using multimodal Critical Language Awareness) and the potential ramifications of doing so. Again, the Ontario ESL curriculum (2007) does specifically list the objective of having students produce media texts for a variety of purposes and audiences and to be able to articulate why they chose a particular format. However, there is none of the theoretical support in the document for this kind of task that is found for sociocultural and citizenship objectives and therefore the type and depth of criticality that should be embedded in the workflow remains unclear to EAL teachers not fully acquainted with the digital literacy literature.

The final thread Buckingham (2006) discusses is that of *audience*. This thread fits particularly well with EAL programs and many language professionals will be familiar with an audience analysis as part of decoding more traditional text types. However, there are unique issues relating to audience in the digital sphere that can and should be investigated, such as how information is targeted at users based on previous interactions with the internet and how data is gathered on them while they interact with it. Important considerations such as these are not articulated in either the Western Australian (2014) or Ontario (2007) syllabi.

### **Critical Analysis and Implications**

It is generally accepted that language, identity, and citizenship are deeply entwined. However, it is less well known that English as an Additional Language education commonly carries strong elements of cultural, media, and citizenship education along with it in order to foster participation and smooth social function according to local sociopolitical theory. This is particularly true in inner circle K-12 curricula, which target a range of students who are likely to be immigrants, refugees, or from remote areas and therefore easily marginalized from full participation in the wider English dominant society. Increasingly, empowering participation through literacy efforts includes delivering a quality digital literacy education (Jenkins, 2006). As important as this may be in mainstream English classrooms, it is even more relevant as a component of EAL. This reality is apparent in the curricular documents themselves, though it is not elaborated upon to the extent necessary for adequate transfer of objectives into the classrooms of busy teachers who may not have time to read up on digital issues. For those who feel instinctually that critical digital literacy does not belong in a language classroom designed to support communication in English, it should be noted that outside of school many students communicate in public digital spaces such as social networks as often, or more often, than they communicate in analogue spaces. It would therefore seem relevant to include digital communication

and production as an important means of communication in the target language. Similarly, arming students with knowledge about how the communication they receive in the target language can be influenced by commercial or political forces that might not be apparent to them should be considered an important (and potentially engaging) part of their language education.

Digital literacy is already an express objective in many progressive high school EAL programs such as those developed in Western Australia (2014) and the Ontario (2007) who fit their language education within content-based curricula that share much in common with mainstream English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. As well as teaching the English language, these courses teach critical citizenship through social science based content. Given the wide range of content topics found in EAL curricula such as gender studies, race studies, global issues, popular culture studies and other topics, governments might target as important for the socialization of young immigrants, such programs should be able to integrate discussions and analyses of digital media seamlessly into their curriculum.

This investigation shows that the ESL/ELD syllabus of Ontario (2007) and the EAL/D syllabus of Western Australia (2014) do provide a basic framework for delivering digital literacy training for engagement with participatory culture in English language learners. To this end, it is apparent that they do attempt to integrate some basic elements of critical media analysis, multimodal production, local citizenship theory, cosmopolitan/global citizenship, Critical Language Awareness, and empowerment for engaging in participatory culture and the development of core competencies for modern living (UNESCO, 2014).

However, the limitations of these documents are in the detail and explicitness with which the objectives and potential methods of actualization are articulated. It should not be assumed that all teachers will have a high level of knowledge about all features of multimodal literacy, digital literacy, and Critical Language Awareness as in-depth explorations of these topics typically occur in graduate school rather than in pre-service teacher education. This suggests that making the curricular document more detailed, with clear but concise descriptions of the major theoretical constructs which form the context for the objectives, as well as explicit references to these constructs in the objectives themselves would be an improvement. Also, in the case of the Western Australian (2014) syllabus, incorporating digital literacy objectives into the assessed objectives would help to highlight their importance and assist teachers in emphasizing it to students. Optimally, these changes would be further supported by enhanced pre-service digital literacy training for EAL teachers and ongoing professional development for practical application in classrooms.

This insufficiency in core curricular documents has important implications because without proper guidance or training EAL teachers are unlikely to articulate the aims and objectives of full participation in society through digital media. Nor are they likely to adequately cover the depth and breadth of digital literacy objectives that are articulated in elementary ways in the curricular documents. As digital media become ever more important and high frequency means of communication, EAL students may therefore miss some of the sociocultural understandings and Critical Language Awareness necessary for accurate encoding and decoding of important texts. They may also misinterpret or be unduly biased by information they come into contact

with. They may feel less confident or be objectively less skilled in producing the multimodal texts that enable their voice to be heard or give the ability to fully articulate the digital rights claims necessary for modern national and global digital citizenship (Isen & Ruppert, 2015).

These, among other implications may widen the participation gap (Jenkins, 2006) and further marginalize students within the inner circle. Though students who are situated within the outer and expanding circles may have a less immediate need for digital literacy in English, the digital realm is actually the one in which they are most likely to engage in authentic English use and is therefore still very important. Also, as previously noted, many of these students will eventually study in inner circle countries or navigate English language gatekeeping mechanisms in their own.

With regard to pedagogical implications, Buckingham (2006), Jenkins (2006), and Svalberg (2007) all provide useful ways to investigate, critique, and produce within the English language classroom. A common thread in all of these works seems to be explicitness. Discussing the nature of media and extending the notion of Purpose, Audience, and Language (PAL) analysis through multimodal forms to uncover power differentials, resistance, and rights claims have the potential to fill a range of linguistic, sociocultural, and digital literacy objectives simultaneously.

Importantly, Burwell (2010) suggests going beyond the critical analysis of media texts to investigating interactive practices in the classroom such as “viding, blogging, photosharing, podcasting, social networking, and creating user-generated content” (p. 397). Burwell (2010) identifies these practices as fertile ground for a wide range of contemporary issues that are core to many people’s everyday lives such as “agency, community, appropriation, intellectual property, and commodification” (p. 398). Aside from being highly relevant to the lives of students, such classroom investigations can provide a segue into broader discussions on the nature of citizenship at local, national, and global levels as well as whose voices are heard and whose are not. As well as being important for EAL and digital literacy objectives, such competence fits well with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (P21, 2017) Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2017), Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2014) and global competency (OECD, 2016) policy directives that underlie many international best practices in education. However, bringing these kinds of activities into the classroom successfully can be fraught with challenges (Jenson, Dahya, & Fisher, 2014) and therefore teachers need as much support as possible if policy initiatives and research recommendations are ever to have a successful impact in classrooms.

The kind of discussions that are envisioned in these types of critical digital literacy lesson activities can be placed within the wider learning context of multimodal Language Awareness and a broad vision of Critical Language Awareness (Svalberg, 2007) that have already been identified as important dimensions of analogue EAL programming. In particular, power differential analysis in English language communications is not simply acceptable as content for the EAL classroom (based upon the syllabus analysis), but is highly appropriate given the potential for the marginalization of immigrants and refugees who do not speak the dominant language within the inner circle and the discrimination and/or socioeconomic disparities between elite users of English and those who are learners in countries for which

English is not the native tongue. As such, the use of this critical agency based approach in the English language classroom can not only serve as a medium for effective and authentic language learning but also has the potential to assist in the claiming of linguistic identity rights, citizenship rights, and agency at the level of global digital citizenship (Isin & Ruppert, 2015).

In summation, enhancing the depth of critical digital literacy content and classroom activities offers opportunities to engage language students in authentic and meaningful communication that could help to rectify Jenkin's (2006) identified deficits in participation, transparency, and ethics, for students who are particularly vulnerable. There is a strong argument that such training should have a place in any classroom that deals with communication. However, given that sociocultural theory states that true understanding of a communication can only happen with an understanding of the cultural context of that communication and that the finer aspects of such cultural context come into play when interaction takes place, including the analysis and participation in interactive digital communications in English as an Additional Language classrooms could be argued to be a priority learning objective.

## **Conclusion**

EAL classrooms are spaces to build communicative competence in the English language. That language has a unique role for many people around the world. For those without financial resources who do not live in English dominant countries, the digital sphere is perhaps the only space in which authentic use of the language is likely to take place. For learners situated in inner circle countries, effective use of the language can make the difference between social, economic and political exclusion, or inclusion. This is also true for a lesser extent in outer circle countries. For those in expanding circle countries, English is becoming a language of the global elite in political, economic, and academic life. In all of these circles, it is often used as a lingua franca. Sociocultural theory states that true competence in encoding and decoding language can only exist when there is an understanding of the cultural realities attached to the communication when it is used. Digital media provide the vector of communication for a tremendous number of communicative acts in all of the circles, but communication in the digital medium carries special attributes that are not necessarily obvious or transparent. Therefore, it seems imperative to arm language users with an understanding of communication issues the digital realm as well as an understanding of the implication of communication in this space. Furthermore, there is an ethical responsibility to empower language users from a variety of background with equal agency and therefore equal voice. Doing so requires more than just technical skills, but also skills of critique and critical language awareness, productive ability, and an understanding of agency and rights claims that stretch from the linguistic to the economic and political. By reimagining Critical Language Awareness as a component of a multiliteracy approach that encompasses the full spectrum of analogue to digital communication in English, teachers, students, and policy makers can work toward making language studies as relevant, authentic, and empowering as possible. As a step toward that objective, providing educators with enhanced theoretical and practical descriptors in curricular documents, mandating digital literacy as an assessable objective, deepening pre-service teacher training with enhanced digital literacy theory, and providing ongoing professional development for

implementation in classrooms are all possible ways to help improve professional practice in EAL classrooms.

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