

# *A Critical Comparison of the Lifewide and Lifelong Literacy Practices of Two Adults*

Chang Liu, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

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## **Abstract**

The field of literacy studies has witnessed a paradigmatic shift over the past few decades — from a skills-based paradigm towards one shaped by socio-cultural practices. Informed by this social constructivist turn, this study critically compares and contrasts the lifelong and lifewide literacy practices of two adults (Daiyu and myself). Based on thematic analysis of data collected from a semi-structured interview, this study identified four salient themes: 1) literacy as social practices, 2) multilingualism, code-switching, and translanguaging, 3) digital literacy and multimodalities, and 4) literacy education and societal views of illiteracy. This paper found that despite numerous commonalities of our literacy practices, particularly in the school context, certain nuances still exist owing to our differing identities and life trajectories, notably concerning multilingual and multimodal practices. By analysing our lived literacy experiences through the social lens, this study brings valuable implications for policymakers and educators to interrupt the established meanings and norms of literacy education.

Keywords: Literacy Practices, Multilingualism, Social Turn, Multimodalities

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## Introduction

Commonly understood as the ability to read and write (e.g., Blake & Hanley, 1995), the concept of literacy has received considerable academic attention during the past few decades. New Literacy Studies (NLS), framed within a social constructivist epistemology, has contributed significantly to a paradigmatic shift in the field — from a skills-based cognitive approach towards one anchored through the socio-cultural practices individuals engage in (Gee, 2005). Informed by this social turn, the present research compares and contrasts the lifelong and lifewide literacy practices of two adults: a young Chinese lady named Daiyu (pseudonym) and myself. After obtaining voluntary informed consent from Daiyu, I conducted an audio-recorded semi-structured interview (lasting thirty-two minutes) using an interview guide (See Appendix A) formulated in line with the aim of this research. Through an inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcript (See Appendix B), I identified four pertinent themes that permeate her literacy practices: 1) literacy as social practices, 2) multilingualism, code-switching, and translanguaging, 3) digital literacy and multimodalities, and 4) literacy education and societal views of illiteracy. These themes will be analysed in relation to my own literacy practices and the academic literature on literacy studies.

## Literacy as Social Practices

I started the interview by asking Daiyu's understanding of reading and writing. Despite her initial conceptualisation of it as “a way of inputting and outputting”, which is perceivably a cognitive process, she went on to explain that reading and writing allows her “to understand the world more deeply [...] to express [herself] to the public and individuals”. This addition implies that literacy serves a social function by relating people to others and to the world (Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Mace, 2003). Since practices also entail “values, attitudes, [and] feelings” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7), I probed Daiyu's idea of what constitutes a good reader and writer. Her response interests me:

I'm a good reader because I have an accurate understanding of the text I read. Significant misinterpretations are rare [...] I don't think I'm a good writer [...] I don't write much, so I haven't achieved coherence in writing.

Clearly, Daiyu's reflection on her own literacy level neglects the forces of the broader social environment. She seems to subscribe to the *skills-based model*, which reduces literacy to a set of “concrete, measurable skills” (McCormac, 2012, p. 38). This theoretical position has been problematised by the social model endorsed by NLS, which maintains that reading and writing does not make sense without considering its socio-cultural embeddedness (Gee, 2005). Nevertheless, Daiyu's follow-up description of a good writer as someone who “give[s] the reader a rich reading experience” highlights the audience-oriented nature of writing, and hence takes the social aspect into account. As Daiyu also mentioned that she “write[s] comments on other people's social media pages”, she reminds me of how I improved my social media productions based on my viewers' comments. This dialogical relation between the author and the reader creates an “intersubjective space” (Glăveanu, 2010, p. 87), in contrast to a process of “individual cognition and coordination” (Duncan & Schwab, 2015, n.p.).

Daiyu's socially situated literacy practices also manifest at her workplace at a design company. Specifically, she learns writing techniques from sample project booklets designed by others in order to craft her own. This emulation of conventions within a shared culture, according to sociohistorical psychology, involves internalisations of previous works and subsequent externalisations of her own creative piece (Moran et al., 2003). I concur with this as in my

academic literacy practices, I consult more knowledgeable others and read their written work in order to polish my own thinking and writing. Corresponding to Lave and Wenger's (1991) *legitimate peripheral participation*, this socially situated learning has facilitated my transition from a novice to a beginner academic in the educational field. My acculturation to disciplinary norms seems to be captured in the *academic socialisation model*, which presumes that students are able to reproduce certain academic discourses without difficulty after socialisations (Lea & Street, 2006). In actuality, I have struggled to meet the institutional preferences dictated by authorities (e.g., tutors and examiners) who hold power over me. In accordance with the *academic literacies model* (ibid.), I have encountered epistemological discontinuities, including those concerning conventions of attribution and critical thinking. Thus, my freedom to represent the world through academic literacy practices are restricted by the socially constructed institutional standards (Ivanič, 2004).

### **Multilingualism, Code-switching, and Translanguaging**

As the data analysis revealed, Daiyu's literacy practices are mediated by different languages, including Chinese, English, and Japanese, in the order of decreasing prominence, and the major site of her multilingual practices is the online space. For someone who has never lived abroad, it is expected that the primary medium is her first language (L1) Chinese, followed by her second language (L2) English. While we share similar linguistic repertoires, our linguistic behaviours differ. I mostly read and write in my L2 English in a cross-border context owing to my current *identity* as a university student taking a reading- and writing-heavy course in the UK and my *imagined identity* (Norton & Toohey, 2011) as a future English-as-a-medium-of-instruction teacher. My L1 Chinese, however, tend to dominate in my informal literature reading and diary-keeping practices. Besides our common L1 and L2, surprisingly, we are both learning Japanese. Just as the prevalence of English as an L2 (Huang, 2018), the popularity of Japanese in China has been historically, politically, and culturally shaped (Otmazgin, 2012). While I study Japanese systematically for academic purposes, Daiyu is motivated by her passion for Japanese animation and literature, as she said:

I'm interested in one of [the Japanese animations] and found its original novel. Although I'm not a serious learner and my level is mediocre, I read the Japanese novel slowly with a translator while trying to understand the words.

Out of an intrinsic desire to understand Japanese cultural products, Daiyu picks up the language in an informal manner through investment in Japanese-mediated reading practices. When conversing with people from Japanese-speaking or learning backgrounds, their shared linguistic capital allows "concise communication" as if they are "people in the same cultural circle" (Daiyu). Her incorporation of Japanese vocabulary in Chinese- or English- dominant interactions mirrors my multilingual literacy practices. As a direct consequence of receiving English-medium education, translating certain words such as "moodle" and "handbook" into Chinese is deemed unnatural. Thus, during my socialisations with fellow Chinese international students, *intra-sentential code-switching* (Myers-Scotton, 1998) frequently takes place, where we spontaneously shuttle between English and Chinese within a sentence. This not only eases our meaning-making efforts, but also reflects our collective identity as overseas Chinese students.

Related to our explicit behaviours of code-switching is the mechanism of translanguaging, whereby we use our full linguistic repertoire to achieve a communicative aim (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; García & Kleifgen, 2010). For Daiyu, with the primary purpose of sharing ideas with fellow Japanese culture enthusiasts across the globe, she deploys different linguistic

resources available (e.g., Chinese, English, and Japanese) to optimise meaning conveyance. Similarly, as a part-time English tutor, I avoid a strict English-only pedagogy and strategically use translanguaging, where students' whole linguistic system is activated to enhance their communicative competence and metalinguistic awareness (Cenoz, & Gorter, 2020). While Daiyu seems to interpret language in a narrow linguistic sense, I embrace the view that language is "any system that uses systematic codes, symbols or signs [...] for purposes of communication and interaction" (Mkandawire, 2018, p. 42). This conceptualisation brings me to the next emergent theme.

## Digital Literacy and Multimodalities

Reminiscent of what Mills (2010, p. 246) calls the "digital turn", a significant example of contemporary literacy practices is digital literacy. Based on the interview data, Daiyu participates actively in online activities, including reading blog articles, writing comments, and chatting with colleagues on instant-messaging tools. These practices coincide with mine as both of us are "digital natives", who grew up interacting with technology (Prensky, 2001, n.p.). Nevertheless, we agree that when we were young, paper-based materials such as textbooks served as our central mediation tools. Our shift towards screen-based practices, as pointed out by Daiyu, can be attributed to "identity and environmental changes", where we transitioned from school to university and workplace, respectively, amid rising penetration of digital technologies in most facets of our lives.

Linked to the previous theme, Daiyu's participation in multilingual practices has been transformed by the new communicational landscape made possible by digital technologies. As argued by Darvin (2017) and Norton (2015), social media and the Internet empower language learners to partake in a broader range of multilingual communities and claim themselves to differing extents as legitimate speakers. Indeed, the virtual environment allows Daiyu to construct her identity as a Japanese language user by providing a more fluid and non-hierarchical space for her to share insights on the Japanese culture and learn Japanese through interactions with her Internet peers. Therefore, compared to my classroom-based English learning experiences ten years ago in China, Daiyu's current language use in the "globalised, online affinity spaces" (Hafner et al., 2015, p. 3) is more authentic and less subject to standardised requirements.

Another prominent feature of our digital literacy practices is the use of multiple modes, such as "image, sound, touch, [and] multi-dimensions" (Rowse & Walsh, 2011, p.54). As noted by Anttila et al. (2014), people's choices of modes are informed by their desires and affordances of modes, where *affordances* is defined as "what it is possible to express and represent readily, easily, with a mode, given its materiality and given the cultural and social history of that mode" (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 14). Different from Daiyu's text-based literacy practices, I spend more time listening to audio books and podcasts so as to minimise digital eye strain. This engagement with the auditory mode is also salient in my media production, where I regularly create podcasts about my study-abroad journeys. Through the affordances of digital media, I feel that I am endowed with "the same tools that professional artists, craftspeople and engineers use" (Burn, 2016), as my works have not only been widely distributed and recognised, they have also positively impacted my audiences' lives according to the comments I received.

Daily digital literacy practices aside, Daiyu also talked about her multimodal practices at her design company. As party B, she has to "introduce and elaborate on a design concept" drafted "according to the requirements given by party A" (Daiyu). In order to deliver informative and

appealing slide presentations to her clients (i.e., party A), Daiyu draws from the repertoire of her representational resources and her sense of the clients' needs and interests. Her decisions probably include the choices of different fonts, the logical use of space, and her movements and gestures. Similarly, I also utilise a variety of modes in composing my academic essays. For example, I tend to bold subheadings to make them more conspicuous and insert diagrams to better illustrate certain educational theories. As claimed by Barton and Hamilton (2000, p. 9), "people use written language in an integrated way as part of a range of semiotic systems", these arrangements of various elements demonstrate our dynamic multimodal literacy practices. While we both appropriate nonlinguistic semiotic resources, this appears more apparent in Daiyu's practices due to her role as an arts designer and less in mine probably because the conventional information carrier in academic writing of education studies is text.

### **Literacy Education and Societal Views of Illiteracy**

Based on the interview data, I noticed a marked contrast between Daiyu's in- and out-of-school literacy practices, with the former being "standardised" and "rigid" and the latter having "no fixed way" (Daiyu). My literacy education resonates with hers as we share similar schooling experiences in the Asian educational contexts. The Singaporean secondary school system, which I have gone through, for instance, places considerable emphasis on the mastery of literacy. The acquisition of globally acceptable English as a "common standard for every student in the classroom" is underscored in our English Language Syllabus (MOE, 2020, p. 13). In this sense, learners' existing knowledge and know-hows, as well as their heterogeneity, are sidelined. Additionally, as Daiyu mentioned that she was taught how to analyse passages and write compositions in a fixed format, this reminds me of how syntax and morphological rules were transmitted to students during my literacy education in Singapore. Moreover, international students like me were offered additional English reading and writing lessons as solutions to fix our language problems. All these align with the *study skills model*, which stresses the surface features of language form and aims to remediate students' deficits while disregards the situatedness of literacy practices (Lea & Street, 2006; Zhang, 2011).

Although Daiyu agreed that "all forms [of literacy] are equal", she acknowledged that "some are more emphasised, valued, and cultivated" in her society. This implies the contested nature of the meanings and practices of literacy, as certain versions dominate and marginalise others (Gee, 2015; Street, 1984). Furthermore, Daiyu noticed that her society "look[s] down on the so-called uneducated people" and "the most obvious manifestation of the uneducated is their poor reading and writing abilities". This taken-for-granted association between low literacy levels and being "uneducated" is captured in what Street (1984) terms the *autonomous model* of literacy, which suggests that introducing literacy to the illiterate will automatically improve their cognitive ability and socio-economic prospects. Mkandawire (2018, p. 37) questions this context-independent demarcation and notes that "everybody in a broader sense is literate and illiterate in some area". This way of looking at literacy is further supported by Luebke (1966), who posits two conditions for a person to be considered literate: first, he has learnt to read and write; and second, he lives in an empowering society where his literacy can be utilised to benefit himself and his community. I embrace this view as it not only reveals how dominant forms of literacy silence others in our ideologically driven societies, but also alludes to the possibility of constructing a more inclusive understanding of literacy in our communities.

## Discussions and Conclusions

Grounded in the paradigm that engages with literacy as a social practice, this study has critically analysed the lifewide and lifelong literacy practices of Daiyu and me. By considering four interlinked themes that emerged from the interview, it has been found that our literacy practices cut across different domains, including work, literature, social media, informal language learning, and formal education, and have changed from more print-based to screen-based ones. It is worth noting that although literacy is traditionally believed to be a decontextualised technical capability (Luke & Woods, 2009), both of our practices testify to the perspective that “thinking is not ‘private’, but almost always mediated by cultural tools” (Gee, 2005, p. 3) and the broader socio-cultural contexts. Despite many similarities found in our literacy practices, notably school literacy education, due to our shared cultural and generational backgrounds, numerous nuances still abound owing to differences in our identities and life trajectories, particularly those concerning multilingual and multimodal practices.

One interesting feature of the findings is that Daiyu did not mention her practices of more functional literacies (Mkandawire, 2018), such as reading road signs and price tags. Types of literacy practices she often cited are those closely associated with work and education, followed by her informal language learning. Moreover, when probed about the changes in her literacy practices, Daiyu said that she “do[es] less reading and spend more time reading social media platforms”. This implies that certain forms are still not fully embraced as real literacy practices and that dominant types in line with the interests of the powerful are well-entrenched in her consciousness. Another noteworthy point lies in the recurrent concept of identity, which is reflected and constructed through our socialisations and intimately tied to our situated contexts.

While this study is framed in the social constructivist approach adopted by New Literacy Studies (NLS), theories from other socially oriented movements, such as sociohistorical psychology and situated cognition have also been used to substantiate the analysis. Nevertheless, due to a lack of follow-up interviews and participant validation of data, some of the analysis could be subject to my own interpretations. Moreover, the interview questions I crafted and the responses from Daiyu could also be influenced by my positionality as a university student majoring in Education and my familiarity with Daiyu. That said, by considering the socio-culturally nested feature of literacy and our dynamic real-life literacy practices, this study brings valuable practical and pedagogical implications for schools to reconsider and transform the role of literacy education. For instance, in light of the diverse range of literacy events occurring in our everyday experiences, policymakers and educators could extend schools’ categorisation of literacies from a narrow focus on reading and writing to multiple forms including digital ones. In addition, given the perceived legitimacy of dominant versions of literacy, sessions on a socially situated nature of literacy could be delivered to empower students to embrace the varied literacy practices close to their everyday lives.

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## **Appendices**

Available online: [https://papers.iafor.org/papers/iice2022/IICE2022\\_61771\\_appendix.pdf](https://papers.iafor.org/papers/iice2022/IICE2022_61771_appendix.pdf)