The interplay of technology and context in Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a research study that aims to understand Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices and the factors that influence these practices. So doing, it seeks to find answers to the research questions of "what factors influence Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices?" and "what (types of) language do Syrian university students use online?". It uses the survey approach as a main research method which employs both questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured group interviews.

The findings reveal that Syrian university students use a variety of languages in their electronic literacy practices and that many factors influence these practices. Some of these factors are related to technical issues such as availability and easiness of internet access while others go beyond the computer screen and relate to the context where these practices are performed.

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1. Introduction: literacy is a continuously-developing concept

One interesting feature that attracts attention to literacy is how our understanding of this concept has developed with the development of our thinking. At one point of time, literacy meant the ability to read and write and nothing more. However, the more we developed, the more we challenged this basic definition of literacy which Street (1984, 1993) called "autonomous" and tried to expand it to an "ideological" definition (Street, 1984, 1993) which includes different skills that make us literate in addition to our ability to read and write. In this skills-based view of literacy, knowledge of culture and context seems an important factor that makes us literate. Hirsch (1987) therefore defines literacy as awareness of one's own culture, not the ability to read and write. Similar to Hirsch, Friere and Macedo (1987) argue that literacy is knowledge of the world we live in which includes our personal experiences and values. Our understanding of literacy continues to evolve with the proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (henceforth referred to as ICT). In fact, ICT has deepened our understanding of

literacy and it is necessary and important to understand electronic literacy in its contexts of practice so that we can smoothly progress our understanding to the next movement of literacy when it comes. This paper reports on a research study that explored university students' electronic literacy practices in Syria and presents some contemporary insights on their electronic communication in social life and learning contexts.

2. Electronic literacy

Similar to previous phases of understanding literacy, our understanding of electronic literacy takes into account the influence of technology on our present day. Selfe and Hawisher (2002) argue that electronic literacy means "the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments as well as the values associated with such practices — social, cultural, political, educational" (p. 232). Similar to Selfe and Hawisher's definition, the New London Group (1996) defines literacy as:

> "the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on. This is particularly important in the mass media, multi-media, and in an electronic hypermedia" (p. 64).

One major dimension that distinguishes electronic literacy is that it is multidimensional and multi focal. Also, it is socially-situated and not isolated from its contexts of practice since it happens in specific times and places and it is different from one context to another depending on the culture and values of each context. In addition to these, electronic literacy presents other distinctive dimensions and differences from print literacy. These dimensions include (but are not exclusive to) new language norms and conversions (such as transliteration and emoticons), new ways of reading and writing texts in multifocal attention, nonlinear reading and writing, the ability to interact with texts, connected texts (as in hypertexts), new ways of communicating with other users online (such as online forums and social network sites), and more (Cooke & Simpson, 2008; Kress, 2003; Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000; Snyder, 2001; Warschauer, 1999). Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) argue that "although reading and writing on-line are closely related to reading and writing in print, the two literacy contexts are also sufficiently different to demand theoretical and practical attention" (p. 172). Electronic literacy therefore seems a rich field of study which needs to be explored and researched so that we understand how technology is influencing the way we practise literacy.

One important feature of electronic literacy mentioned above is that it is influenced by the context it is practised in. Warschauer (1999) argues that "technological change intersects with other social, economic, cultural and political factors that determine how literacy is practiced" (p. 1). Other research studies on electronic literacy have revealed that it has to be studied in relation to the contexts it is practised in because it influences and gets influenced by these contexts. Snyder and Prinsloo (2007) argue that in electronic literacy practices "social context, far more than hardware, shapes the use of new technologies" (p. 175). Similarly, Mitsikopoulou (2007) argues that "ICT literacy practices should not be studied on their own but in the context of the range of out-of-school literacy practices of the adolescents and their families" (p. 233). The arguments above show that electronic literacy practices are interrelated with the context where they are performed and the nature of electronic literacy practices differ from one context to another based on the nature of that context. This is the theoretical framework the study is trying to develop in its attempt to explore a group of Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices.

3. What is unique about studying electronic literacy in Syria?

This study is bringing one insight on electronic literacy from a context only a little is known about (at least until its Civil War) which is Syria. Studying literacy in Syria has symbolic importance in the first place since Syria offered humanity its first alphabet (UNESCO, 2014). In addition, the socio-cultural, linguistic and demographic composition of the Syrian society presents very interesting features that are rarely found somewhere else in the world which may influence the types and practices of electronic literacy in this part of the world. Syria has been a melting pot for different religious, political, linguistic, and ethnic influences for centuries. It is home to some of the world's oldest continuously-inhabited cities: Damascus and Aleppo, and it was a major hub for trade and transport in the Ancient World. Syria was also a centre for Muslim and Christian influences. More recently, Syria was subject to the influence of two colonial powers: the Ottoman and the French. This situation resulted in different (and sometimes contradictory) Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek, Roman and Persian influences which shaped the nature, history and identity of the Syrian society. In addition to its diverse past, Syria has made big advances in adopting ICTs in different aspects of life on both public and official levels. Syrians were rapidly attracted to the new technologies that flooded the country and the number of internet users in Syria has rocketed over the past decade (Internet World Stats, 2015). In addition, internet cafes emerged as a new social space for young generations to meet and socialize. These advances have changed the way Syrians in general and young Syrians in specific communicate and socialize where technology has become a main part of any social activities they do. In addition, the proliferation of ICT supported by the status of English as an international language have changed the way young Syrians perceive and define literacy; literacy, for many young Syrians today, means the ability to surf the internet and communicate in English (both online and offline). This has resulted in two views in both academic and social circles in Syria. Using English in online communication is viewed by many Syrians as fashionable and trendy, while it is viewed as a form of embracing an alien culture by those who oppose this behaviour. Interestingly, both arguments are based on socio-cultural, political and religious grounds which influence the way young Syrians practise electronic literacy as this paper reveals. All these past and present experiences create an amazing mosaic which Syrians bring into their electronic literacy practices and make it very necessary and interesting to explore and understand how electronic literacy is practised in Syria and what influences does the Syrian context play on the way Syrians practise literacy online.

To address this goal, this research investigates a group of Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices and their use of language online and explores the factors, if any, that influence their electronic literacy practices. The research has targeted university students as the main group of investigation because younger, and particularly educated, generations in Syria have more access to the internet and also this study is part of a university program and it focuses on university students. This study therefore addresses the following research questions:

- What factors influence Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices?
- What (types of) language do Syrian university students use in their electronic literacy practices?

4. Research design

This study has an exploratory and data-generating nature and research methods which best address the nature of the study need to be used. Therefore, the study adopts the survey approach and employs questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews as research methods. The questionnaire is employed to provide a general picture of Syrian university students' electronic literacy practices, while the interviewing is employed to get a deeper understanding of these practices. As mentioned above, the theoretical framework this study is trying to develop is that a relationship exists between electronic literacy practices and the context in which these practices are performed. Since there is no already existing data on young Syrians' electronic literacy practices, the research is designed to collect exploratory data that help depict the general picture of these practices. After reviewing electronic literacy studies that have been conducted in other parts of the world (Koutsogiannis, 2007; Lam, 2004; Mitsikopoulou, 2007; Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007; Warschauer, 1999, 2000; Warschauer, El Said, & Zohry, 2002), the survey is designed to explore factors such as Syrians university students' internet competence, frequency of internet access, location of internet access, electronic literacy practices and the form of language they use to perform these practices.

4.1. Rationale for selecting the survey

The rationale for using the survey approach in this study is