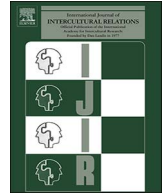


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## Literacy as social (media) practice: Refugee youth and native language literacy at school



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### ABSTRACT

Research indicates that immigrant and refugee students benefit from use of their native languages in education. Nevertheless, what this means in practice has infrequently been examined by researchers, and teachers often struggle to find ways to use their refugee students' native languages as resources that encourage the development of the native languages as well as academic language and literacy in the new language. This small-scale, exploratory project employed an innovative, five-day critical media literacy curricular unit, and then examined how it served as a context for native language and English literacy development. Participants were 14 adolescent newcomers to the U.S. from Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, all speakers of Somali with limited or interrupted formal schooling experiences. Participants had varying but mostly beginning levels of print literacy skills; yet as recent migrants, most used social media to interact with others locally and globally, in multiple languages, oral and written. As described here, our efforts to foster peer-to-peer Somali language communication resulted in multilingual interaction across a range of social and academic purposes in the classroom. These research findings highlight how in-class use of social media analysis can serve to achieve multilingual and (critical) literacy learning aims.

### Introduction

A wide and deep body of research indicates that students' native languages can promote additional language learning, the development of content knowledge and skills, and literacy acquisition (e.g., Cummins, 2000). Furthermore, international research from many contexts demonstrates that the maintenance and development of two or more languages over time is associated with multiple academic, linguistic, and cognitive advantages for individuals (Bialystok, 2007). Numerous, large-scale studies in the U.S. have indicated that students who have the opportunity to develop and maintain their native languages outperform their peers in monolingual programs on measures of both English language literacy and content knowledge (e.g., Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002; Krashen & McField, 2005). Other research indicates that teaching students to read in their native language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in their additional language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008; in Menken, 2013).

For adolescent students with interrupted/limited formal schooling, the value of native language instruction is potentially even greater. One of the few large-scale analyses of adult learners with emergent print literacy found that the use of students' native languages in instruction was associated with faster growth in English reading comprehension and oral communication skills (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009). Overall, the literature on adult/adolescent second language reading indicates that instruction that strengthens native language reading skills positively influences the development of second language reading skills (Carlo & Skilton-

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Sylvester, 1996). Yet despite this solid research base, there has been little documented exploration of how practitioners might productively use refugee students' native languages, particularly when classes are multilingual and the teacher does not speak any or all of the languages of the students. This paper reports on efforts to develop and then evaluate one such effort.

Some of the newest thinking on how multilinguals use their languages in school comes from Ofelia García and her colleagues, who have illuminated the translanguing nature of language competence and use. For García and Wei (2014), translanguaging is the dynamic process whereby multilingual language users mediate their social and cognitive activities through strategic employment of multiple semiotic resources to act, to know, and to be. These semiotic resources might include actions, materials, and artifacts used for communicative purposes, manifested internally or externally (Van Leeuwen, 2004). Translanguaging entails the understanding of the linguistic proficiencies of multilinguals as a unified system, not as separate, independent entities (García & Wei, 2014). While some of the psycholinguistic assumptions of translanguaging have been questioned (see MacSwan, 2017), translanguaging is a particularly useful construct for understanding the language use of migrants in a mobile and highly technological world. This is because it not only incorporates code-switching as a description of linguistic repertoire but moves beyond it to include all discursive practices and semiotic tools available through social media. Translanguaging thus offers a more robust means to account for the linguistic resources gleaned by migrants as they move from place to place; these linguistic skills flexibly expand to reflect the variable demands and opportunities across space and time (Creese & Blackledge, 2010, 2015).

While educators of multilingual students increasingly embrace the idea that students' native languages (and translanguaging skills) are both personal and academic assets, it is often challenging to incorporate students' native languages into their instruction (Karabernick & Noda, 2004), and little research to date has explored these challenges in highly diverse contexts. A common first step for teachers is to establish linguistically inclusive learning spaces in which students are encouraged to use all of their languages to engage with curricular content, for instance, by summarizing a reading with a partner in their native language, or by working with family members at home in the native language on a school task (see Herrmann, 2016 for more suggestions). Many of these strategies, however, are limited to oral modes of communication, and furthermore, are restricted to out-of-school or after-school spaces where same-language peers, family members, and tutors might be available. While recent research has pointed to the importance of fostering student choice and supporting refugee students' developing identities as readers (e.g., Dávila, 2015), relatively little is known about how (monolingual English speaking) teachers might encourage students to grow and develop their native language literacy skills in highly multilingual contexts and among peers with varied experiences with formal education.

One potential avenue for building these language and literacy skills is through the use of technology and social media. For many refugees, connectivity is vital: smartphones and mobile technology are crucial tools for refugees worldwide (Byrne & Solomon, 2015), particularly during times of mobility and then when adjusting to a new country. At the same time, the rapid development and adoption of online communication technologies has made more complex and varied the means by which language is used and broadened the pool of interlocutors with whom we interact. As scholars have noted, for immigrants, refugees, and migrants, this means that leaving home does not necessitate absolute disconnection to the homeland or to the home language (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Vertovec, 2007).

Using social media in classroom settings allows youth to build on existing strengths, particularly through engaging with digital media literacies (Leu, 2001; Warschauer, 1998) or “new literacies”, defined by Buckingham (1993) as “competencies developed across the whole range of culture and communication” (p. 20), which affirm and build on any of the language and literacy skills that the students brought to the academic tasks, including native language and cultural knowledge. According to Gee and Hayes (2011), “digital media are a delivery system for language” and thus are both useful and relevant in the language classroom (p. 2). Additionally, digital and social media provide venues to contribute to and learn within a participatory culture characterized by openness to new members and to their creative contributions (Jenkins et al., 2006). Such practices afford youth social capital among peers and supported membership in their classroom and virtual communities (Leurs, 2014). Moreover, providing opportunities for youth to employ and develop their literacies (home language(s), English language, and digital) by integrating multilingual work in social media mirrors “what people do with others using literacy and other tools and technologies” (Gee & Hayes, 2011; p. 22) outside of classrooms.

### Aims of this study

In light of these broad challenges and opportunities facing all educators, our objective was to examine pedagogical ways to encourage youth to use their native languages across modalities (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, writing, visual, gestural) as part of their writing process and to analyze these practices qualitatively in context. To meet these aims, we designed an innovative, five-day curriculum unit that utilized Facebook to engage students with academic learning in their native language and English while at the same time creating a meaningful, interactive, visually rich context for native language literacy. While leading the unit, we collected student data to address two research questions: (a) How do students respond to efforts to promote peer-to-peer native language communication? (b) How does native language use promote opportunities to learn academic content, skills, and language?

### Methodology

#### Overview of project design

This project developed and then analyzed the implementation of an innovative, research-informed, five-day curricular unit for refugee adolescent students. Informed by current research, our curriculum unit was created with a commitment to literacy instruction

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