



The interplay of global forms of pop culture and media in teenagers' 'interest-driven' everyday literacy practices with English in Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an ethnographically oriented multiple case study examining the everyday literacy practices in English of Greek teenagers. Informed by theoretical and methodological understandings from the New Literacy Studies, discourse analysis and ethnography, the study extended over a period of eighteen months and employed a combination of data collection tools to provide an 'emic' account of the everyday literacy practices in English of fifteen teenagers aged 14–15 living in Athens, Greece. The focus in this paper is on the interplay of global forms of popular culture and media in teenagers' 'interest-driven' everyday engagements with English. In particular, I discuss teenagers' everyday English literacy practices as they relate to their interest in various forms of popular culture entertainment such as music, sports and films. I discuss how such practices are characterized by rich intertextuality, circulation of texts and media and genre crossings and illustrate the ways they impact teenagers' positionality. I conclude my paper by discussing broader implications for English language pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

In Greece, as in most European countries, virtually all young people are now exposed to, encounter and use the English language outside school settings on a daily basis (Berns, deBot, & Hasebrink, 2007; Olsson, 2011; Sifakis, 2012; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). This contact begins early in their lives – sometimes even before they receive formal education – and is significantly more common than with languages such as French or German (i.e., the next most taught foreign languages) (Dendrinos, Karavas, & Zouganelli, 2013). Also, facilitated by technological advancements and characterized by a constant flow of media, texts and cultures, everyday contact with English increasingly concerns teenagers' "ruling passion" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) for various forms of globally disseminated popular culture products and intersects with their hobbies and out-of-school interests (e.g., online games, music, sports) (Chik & Breidbach, 2011, 2014).

However, while teenagers' literacy practices in classrooms and their school-based experiences with English in European and broader international contexts have attracted the attention of scholars working within various areas of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) field (e.g., classroom discourse, testing and assessment, use of Interactive Computer Technologies in the classroom),

teenagers' everyday encounters with English outside educational contexts have not been systematically explored in the literature, especially through intensive literacy ethnographies (see, however, Benson & Chik, 2010; Chik & Breidbach, 2011, 2014; Leppänen, Pitkänen-Huhta, Piirainen-Marsh, Nikula, & Peuronen, 2009; Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008; Pitkänen-Huhta & Nikula, 2013 for recent projects on young people's out-of-school literacy practices in English as a foreign language). What is more, in the existing body of literacy studies conducted outside schools, the focus has been mainly on everyday literacy practices in settings where English is the dominant, native language (e.g., Knobel, 1999; Moje, 2000), on adolescent immigrants' translanguaging out-of-school literacy practices in bilingual contexts/communities (e.g., Song, 2015; Stewart, 2014; Yi, 2010) or on young children's literacies and multimodal text-making with popular cultural materials and/or digital technologies in home settings (e.g., Koutsogiannis, 2011; Pahl, 2008; Shegar & Weninger, 2010).

This article, and the larger study on which it draws, aims to fill this gap by highlighting teenagers' everyday English literacy practices in a European country (Greece) where English is a foreign language. In this transitional period for most European countries during which access to interactive digital media and to high-speed Internet connections is rapidly transforming the landscape of literacy practices, teenagers' easier access to various cultural products (e.g., computer games, films, music) is visibly increasing (Chik & Breidbach, 2014). This article's aim is thus twofold: (1) to present

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and discuss young Greeks' everyday literacy practices with English as they relate to global flows of media and pop culture products, and (2) to illustrate the impact of these resources on teenagers' positionality.

The first half of the paper outlines the theoretical and methodological framework guiding the analysis that follows. In the second half of the paper I discuss examples of literacy events trying to capture the links that bind them as they flow from teenagers' particular interests (e.g., sports, music, films) and thus to illustrate that teenagers' English literacy practices involving global forms of popular culture and new media often consist of an extended web of interconnected events.

2. A social view of literacy

A key theoretical framework underlying this paper and the larger study is the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which promotes a social view of literacy and a framework for considering the relational aspects of youth's literacy practices. According to this view, literacy is conceptualized not "as a set of abilities or skills residing inside people's heads" (Gee, 2008; p. 2), but as a set of practices grounded in the activities of everyday life and underpinned by people's attitudes, concerns and values (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995; Baynham & Prinsloo, 2009; Street, 2003). Scholars adopting this view have thus questioned many of the simplistic claims about the transformative effects of literacy on human cognition (see Barton, 2001 for an extensive review of the field), emphasizing the importance of investigating the ways literacy is used and valued in the multiple social contexts in which individuals operate.

More recently, NLS scholars have challenged traditional conceptions of literacy as a linear process of reading and writing words alone as no longer adequate to capture individuals' engagements with multimodal texts (Kress, 2003) and have thus attempted to address the complexity of literacy through constructs such as new/digital literacies (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) and multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996). Above all, by foregrounding a sociocultural view of literacy, such understandings have challenged the prevalent presumption that school-based literacy that is restricted to formalized, monolingual, and rule-governed forms of language is the principal literacy to be utilized by individuals throughout their lives (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Accordingly, over the past decades these trends have led to an increased interest in young people's literacy practices situated within everyday life outside institutional contexts (e.g., Hull & Schultz, 2002; Knobel, 1999; Stewart, 2014; Yi, 2010).

In addition, when considering literacy as a set of social practices shaped by the contexts in which they occur, it becomes necessary to examine positionality in parallel to literacies (Moje & Luke, 2009). Thus, just as literacy is no longer seen as a fixed or static construct, neither is one's positionality or identity (Bartlett, 2007), which is also viewed as socially constructed and multiple, depending on the different contexts that individuals inhabit. Indeed, the New London Group (1996, p. 71) note that "people are simultaneously members of multiple lifeworlds, so their identities have multiple layers that are in complex relation to each other". This holds especially true for today's youth who, as a result of the affordances of digital technologies, are members of a multitude of "affinity groups" or "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2004) wherein they connect by their common interests (rather than their fixed identity characteristics such as race, gender or social class) and enact their identities in deliberate, resourceful and strategic ways (Lewis & del Valle, 2009).

3. English literacy and youth identities in a globalized world

Given the situated nature of literacy outlined above, this article accordingly takes the view that teenagers' literacy practices in English are no longer solely regulated by, bound by, or confined to educational settings and the associated forms of formal learning as traditionally presented in many [foreign language] classrooms (Swaffar & Arens, 2005). Instead, their practices are always socially constructed, locally enacted, and negotiated in the various social worlds, domains and spaces that they inhabit (e.g., home, peer groups, online spaces, hobbies) for a wide array of personal purposes ranging from entertainment to self-expression. These practices are also increasingly embedded in teenagers' often vernacular activities of everyday life and are shaped by their personal meanings, attitudes, and values (Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008; Pitkänen-Huhta & Nikula, 2013; Rothoni, 2015).

Facilitated by the dominance of English in digital technologies, youth-oriented media and popular culture products, I also hold that teenagers' English literacy practices increasingly occur in "globalized online spaces" (Benson & Chik, 2010), "translocal activity spaces" (Leppänen, 2009), or "passionate affinity spaces" (Gee & Hayes, 2011) (i.e., online communities, gaming activities). These various distributed spaces create networks of affiliation and open up a new world of international contacts and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Kanno & Norton, 2003). Further, such contexts extend beyond the here and now through which young people can connect, not on the basis of face-to-face encounters but "through the power of imagination" (Kanno & Norton, 2003; p. 241). Perhaps more significantly, I argue that their practices in these spaces are powerful in making the English language more appealing and in opening up opportunities for them to articulate their eagerness to be part of the world as well as their desire to "inhabit their bodies in more powerful ways" (Kramsch, 2006; p. 102), thus having a significant impact on their self-perceptions and positionality as I demonstrate below. In this paper I thus analyze teenagers' everyday English literacy practices with global media and pop culture products in order to better understand their construction of this global language as a resource that is infused with symbolic significance (Alim, 2009; Pennycook, 2007) and which opens up possibilities to access 'imagined communities' of English users in which teenagers can construct their youth-specific identities.

4. Methods

The data and findings presented in this article come from a larger ethnographically oriented, multiple case study conducted in 2010–2011 in the home settings of fifteen 14–15 year-old boys and girls living in Athens, Greece (Rothoni, 2015). Building on the rich tradition of ethnographic literacy studies (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Knobel, 1999), the purpose of the overarching research study was to provide a fine-grained account of the personally meaningful ways in which English is used by young people in Greece in their everyday lives and to obtain an in-depth understanding of their English literacy practices as a whole. What follows is an overview of the participants and data generation and analytic procedures of the study from which the data presented in this article come.

4.1. Participant selection and data collection

Using a combination of purposeful (Patton, 2002) and convenience sampling techniques, the 15 participants included in the study were 14 to 15-year-old teenagers (seven of which were girls) living in Athens, Greece (see Table 1). All participants had received

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