Digital literacy and sustainability – a field study in EFL teacher development

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Abstract. This project introduces the concept of digital literacy at a practical level to a group of EFL teachers within the context of a single work place; a technologically well-resourced upper secondary school in Sweden. English teachers were provided with a theoretical and practical overview of the digital literacy concept as described by Dudeney, Hockly, and Pegrum (2013) before being given the task of each teaching a lesson. The teachers' reflective experiences of incorporating digital literacy into advanced level English teaching were then evaluated through a focus group interview. The results obtained show the efficacy of incorporating small scale exploratory practice research projects alongside busy teaching schedules and administrative demands as well as developing teachers' perspectives on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. In addition, the project has promoted synergies and collaboration among a school staff engaged in the long-term goal of continued professional development.

Keywords: digital literacy, exploratory practice, in-service training.

1.   Introduction

1.1.   In-service training and ICT

In the era of digitalization, modern language teacher training faces significant challenges in responding to the pace of technological and educational change and incorporating these developments into a coherent blueprint for classroom practice. Digital literacy, as described by Dudeney et al. (2013), offers one possible

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framework to facilitate the integration of ICT and a language subject such as English. This publication provided EFL teachers with a comprehensive framework for the incorporation of *Web 2.0* digital technology into their daily classroom routines.

This paper describes a small-scale project to introduce digital literacy to a group of EFL teachers. The teachers were first introduced to the digital literacy framework before being asked to select one or more digital learning activities which they should teach and then evaluate. The evaluation of their experiences was carried out in the form of a video recorded collegial focus group interview.

1.2.　Perspectives on teaching training

Beginning in the 1980s, perspectives on professional teacher development have increasingly focused on teachers as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). Inspired by reflective practitioner perspectives, subsequent authors have suggested a formalization of the professional development process in the form of action research; small-scale research projects carried out by teachers in their classroom contexts in response to a perceived problem (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). The action research tradition has, however, tended to be individualistic, with a focus on individual teachers focusing on problems in isolation. The work of Burns (2001) puts the spotlight instead on collaborative action research initiatives with the potential for staff to learn from one another in exploiting the potential synergies of collegial efforts.

More recently within language education, Exploratory Practice (EP) was put forward as a possible method for teachers investigating solutions to educational problems (Allwright, 1993; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997). This alternative approach is a recognition of the significant demands made by reflective and action research projects on the working lives of busy teachers. A central tenet of the EP framework is bringing teachers together and promoting collegiality as an activity "best served if all involved are manifestly working for each other's development as well as their own" (Allwright, 2003, p. 129 quoted in Hanks, 2015, p. 614).

1.3.　Digital literacy

In a series of recent publications (Hockly, 2012; Dudeney et al., 2013), digital literacy has been put forward as a means of seamlessly integrating technology into the foreign language classroom.

Table 1. Digital literacy focus areas (adapted from Dudeney et al., 2013, p. 6)

Language focus	Information focus	Connections	(re-)design
print literacy			
texting literacy	search literacy		
hypertext literacy	tagging literacy	personal literacy	
multimedia literacy	information literacy	network literacy	
gaming literacy	filtering literacy	participatory literacy	
mobile literacy		intercultural literacy	
code literacy			remix literacy

The outline has been favourably received by the international EFL community. However, White (2015) has criticized the framework for a perceived imbalance in its focus on the receptive rather than productive skills.

2.   The study

Eight English teachers with between two and 21 years' teaching experience at a large upper secondary school in southern Sweden took part in the study. The design of the project encompassed three practical stages:

- two initial seminars/workshops offering teachers a theoretical and practical overview of the concept of digital literacy as well as outlining the teaching task;

- teaching of a digital literacy-based lesson using one of the 50 activities provided in the *Digital Literacies* resource book;

- a concluding focus group interview in which the teachers offered their experiences of integrating digital literacy into advanced level English teaching.

Each teacher taught at least one lesson based on lesson plans provided by Dudeney et al. (2013). After teaching their lessons the teachers were gathered in a focus group interview where the teachers provided their reflective experiences of (1) incorporating digital literacy into advanced level English teaching at the school, (2) the extent to which digital resources can replace or augment 'traditional' course books and finally (3) the efficacy of lesson evaluation as a form of exploratory practice. The focus interview was recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Table 2.   Outline of teacher activities and digital literacy areas in the focus group

Teacher	Activity from resource book	Aim	Digital literacy
EL	No. 12: Sales Techniques	produce an advertisement in the form of a vodcast	multimedia
SJ	No. 27: Tree octopus	raise awareness of the importance of evaluating information on websites, by visiting a number of spoof websites	information
JK	No.3: Faking it	raise awareness of social networking profiles, online identity and identity management	personal, network
MO	No.17: Choose your own adventure	raise awareness of and implement basic game design	gaming
	No. 18: History hunt	create a local history quiz in the form of a multimedia mobile app	multimedia, gaming
DS	No. 4: Extreme Weather	raise awareness of how to convey a message via different genres of online text	print, information
	No. 6: Codeswitching	raise awareness of codeswitching	texting, print
AS	No. 12: Sales Techniques	produce an advertisement in the form of a vodcast	multimedia
	No. 44: Vox Pop	make a vodcast about culture	intercultural, multimedia
MSB	No. 6: Codeswitching	raise awareness of codeswitching	texting, print
	No. 12: Sales Techniques	produce an advertisement in the form of a vodcast	multimedia

3.   Results and discussion

The responses to the interview questions are presented below in accordance with the three focus areas outlined above.

3.1.   The teachers' reflective experiences of incorporating digital literacy into advanced level English teaching

The teachers all agreed that the integration of digital literacy into advanced level English teaching greatly stimulated interest in learning English, especially among pupils who had opted for more practical, vocationally-orientated subject combination profiles. Teachers responsible for more academically-orientated subjects in the *Technology Program* were also positive, claiming that the incorporation of digital

literacy into their EFL classrooms had inspired their pupils. Staff also reported that the opportunity to work with intercultural literacy was most appreciated by the pupils involved. Pupils were offered the opportunity to explore communication in a cultural content involving people coming from other cultures, through Skype or recording a video presenting their hometown.

3.2. The extent to which digital resources can replace or augment 'traditional' coursebooks

Teachers highlighted the added multimedia dimension to their teaching which introduced a new level of creativity into their classroom practice, having previously worked with more traditional language teaching activities such as gap-filling, vocabulary lists and coursebook exercises. A number of teachers expressed that their pupils performed better when digital literacies integrated into their English teaching, since it was easier to adapt their teaching to the needs of individual pupils. It was also noted that the approach lent itself readily to the incorporation of authentic material in their classrooms, encouraging pupils to think critically about the reliability of digital information sources.

Another positive feature was the opportunity to analyse texts from different digital contexts or genres, as well as adapting texts from one digital context to another, such as converting a blog entry into a tweet, *Facebook* post, etc. These comparisons led to a heightened awareness among pupils of the differences between informal and Standard English varieties. Other pupil discussions revolved around open educational resources and *Creative Commons* digital copyright issues.

3.3. The efficacy of lesson evaluation as a form of exploratory practice (collegial learning)

Participating in the *Digital Literacy* project, teachers had an opportunity to learn and reflect upon concepts of professional relevance of digital literacies. Many teachers found that they had developed their repertoire of teaching activities in which digital literacies are integrated in advanced English language learning. Above all, this group of teachers now has access to concepts of professional relevance and an overview of digital literacies, which can be made of use in future in-service training, or collegial learning. Developing a professional language and an ability to teach digital literacies constitutes an updated professional identity for this group of teachers and is also a guarantee in itself of sustainable in-service training.

4.   Conclusion

A major challenge for researchers is to bring positive change in the classroom without impinging too heavily on other professional priorities such as lesson planning, grading and assessment and pastoral considerations. The results suggest a way forward in promoting the sustainable incorporation of ICT into mainstream English language teaching and encouraging professional development on a collegial level. Future research will be directed towards building upon this collegial knowledge of digital literacy in developing greater consistency and objectivity in the assessment of digital projects.

5.   Acknowledgements

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