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THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL LITERACY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

In contemporary culture, the media, especially the digital media, occupy a central position. Already previously, the traditional mass media largely determined the shape of the cultural environment. Nowadays, because of the proliferation of digital technologies, the role and importance of the media have increased even further. In this situation, the ability to function in this new, more and more digital cultural environment becomes crucial. In its first part, the article discusses the concept of digital literacy and the related concepts of media literacy and information literacy. The article then outlines the importance of actively working to increase digital literacy also in language teaching and learning, and in its last part it discusses practical steps that can be taken in this regard.

Key words: media in culture, digital literacy, media literacy, information literacy, media education, foreign language teaching and learning.

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ВАЖЛИВІСТЬ ЦИФРОВОЇ ГРАМОТНОСТІ У ВИКЛАДАННІ ТА ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ

У сучасній культурі медіа, особливо цифровим, належить центральне місце. Уже раніше традиційні масмедіа значною мірою визначали форму культурного середовища. Нині, через поширення цифрових технологій, роль і значення медіа ще більше зросли. У цій ситуації здатність функціонувати в новому, дедалі більш цифровому культурному середовищі набуває вирішального значення. У першій частині статті розглядається поняття цифрової грамотності та пов'язані з ним поняття медіаграмотності й інформаційної грамотності. Далі у статті підкреслюється важливість активної роботи над підвищенням цифрової грамотності також у викладанні та вивченні мов, а в останній частині обговорюються практичні кроки, які можна зробити в цьому напрямі.

Ключові слова: медіа в культурі, цифрова грамотність, медіаграмотність, інформаційна грамотність, медіаосвіта, викладання та вивчення іноземних мов.

In today's world digital technologies and the information that they carry dominate culture. Some scholars speak in this context of the datafication of everyday life (see for instance, Barassi, 2018). Before the spread of digital technologies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, it was the traditional mass media – print and broadcast, especially television – that significantly defined the cultural environment in which humans

lived¹. Now, due to the digitization of content and the resulting “convergence between all existing media forms” (McQuail, pp. 137–138), hybrid forms such as newspapers available online

¹ The term “traditional mass media” is used here following McQuail (2010, p. 136), who in this way refers to the mass media characterized by “one-way, one-directional and undifferentiated flow to an undifferentiated mass” of audience. These are the mass media from before the time when the new media, “made possible by digitalization and being widely available for personal use as communication devices”, were developed (p. 136). It may be noted that, apparently because of difficulties with definitions, on occasion McQuail uses both adjectives, “traditional” and “new”, in inverted commas.

or internet radio constitute a very important part of the cultural environment. The proliferation of digital technologies has also ushered in new types of media – most notably, the immensely popular social media – that add to the practical omnipresence of the digital media. In order to be able to discuss, and to work to ensure, successful functioning in this milieu, the notion of digital literacy has been introduced. This article reviews the complex meanings behind this notion, including its relationship to the associated notions of information and media literacy, underlines the importance of working towards increasing digital literacy also in foreign language teaching and learning, and then offers suggestions of the ways in which work in this direction might proceed.

The three terms – digital literacy, media literacy and information literacy – are so closely related that a number of attempts have been made to disentangle their meaning (see for instance, Koltay, 2011; Leaning, 2019; Wuyckens et al., 2022). Koltay in his article (2011, p. 215) points to Paul Gilster as the person who introduced the concept of digital literacy in its present sense. In his 1997 book devoted to it, Gilster defines digital literacy as “the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers” (p. 1). In an interview with Carolyn R. Pool from the same year, he offers a somewhat different definition in which he stresses the dimensions of critical evaluation and integration. There, he defines digital literacy as “the ability to understand information and – more important – to evaluate and integrate information in multiple formats that the computer can deliver” (Gilster, as cited in Leaning, 2019, p. 5). Both these definitions retain their validity also now, 25 years after their introduction, yet problems (still) appear when the relationship of digital literacy to media literacy and information literacy is to be characterized.

Wuyckens et al. (2022), offering a systematic review of the three concepts, notice that in the literature on the subject there is “confusion between the constitutive dimensions of literacies, recurrent difficulties in establishing theoretical articulations between contributions, and operationalization problems in observing and assessing these literacies” (p. 170). For future research they propose a set of recommendations, which include always specifying “the disciplinary

anchoring and scientific communities of reference within which definitions are being proposed” (p. 177). The review itself is meant to be grounded in the research field of media education (p. 170) which “seeks to achieve a disciplinary and conceptual convergence, which has been elusive so far” (p. 170). Elsewhere in the study, they define this fourth notion, the field of media education, as “a praxis that combines theoretical knowledge and educational practices”, as it “establishes a disciplinary convergence and uses a conceptual apparatus rooted in a variety of disciplines”, especially communication studies, sociology, psychology, cognitive science, political science and educational science (p. 175).

A convincing historical-theoretical account of the relationship among the three literacies is suggested by Leaning (2019), who follows the tradition of treating digital literacy as a kind of umbrella concept for a number of educational practices, including information and media literacy (p. 4). Leaning is aware of the different disciplinary pasts from which information literacy and media literacy have emerged. In his account, information literacy is presented as being “primarily concerned with the ways in which new technologies make information available. <...> [It] should be understood not simply as expert use of technology but as proficiency in the use of information resources of which digital media are a very significant part” (p. 6). In contrast, media literacy can be defined through identifying “a range of specific skills that a media literate person would possess” (p. 7), or alternatively by adopting “an approach that looks to develop criticality in students. <...> This draws upon the academic field of media studies and constructs media literacy as being able to critically engage with the media” (p. 7). In the latter type of approach, use is made “of the interpretative epistemologies found in the arts, humanities and social sciences as opposed to the science and technologically oriented epistemology underpinning information studies and by derivation information literacy” (pp. 7–8). Historically, as he writes, “[f]rom the mid-to-late 2000’s and 2010’s information literacy has begun to overlap with aspects of media literacy in terms of content, practices and foci and there is now a strong movement towards integrating the two practices” (p. 7). His advice for the future is, generally, to move in this direction,

looking for “opportunities for integration”, without however one field “colonizing” another. Rather, advantage should be taken of the fact that “the fields, under the broad remit of digital literacy address similar issues and combining them aids both in addressing weaknesses” (p. 10). In particular, media literacy can add to information literacy activities its emphasis on building critical skills, while information literacy can help media literacy expand beyond the latter’s largely textual or audience-centred concerns, historically focused on mass and broadcast media, and in this way also to “address the more technological aspects of the media” and technology’s impact on users and user practices (p. 10), especially with regard to digital technologies.

Marin and Castaneda (2022) in the text that reviews developing digital literacy for teaching and learning, admit that “there is not a clear definition of DL” (p. 3) but specify that “DL includes technological, attitudinal and cognitive components” (p. 3) and eventually settle to describe it “as a notion of situated multiple integrated skills and practices (conceptual, attitudinal, procedural, and ethical) that empower people (individuals and groups) to participate and communicate efficiently in society” (p. 5). Indicating challenges for the future, they insist that “[b]ecause of its prevalence in everyday life, DL should [be] actively included in the curriculum at every level, in an active way” (p. 14); that “[t]he approach to DL education must include not only the instrumental use of digital tools but also the use of digital languages and codes for communicating, for assessing, as well as for understanding the world” (p. 14); and that “the relevance of effectively integrating DL into different disciplines and subjects, to be able to adapt the DL education to different curricula and organization structures” (p. 14) should be stressed. With a similar concern, Bacalja et al. (2022) emphasize that “[e]xisting approaches [to digital literacy education] tend to privilege the operationalisation of digital technology. By contrast, teaching is needed which focusses on meaning-making and creating” (p. 1). In brief, in developing digital literacy, understanding the world, criticality and creativity ought to be foregrounded, and because of its significance, elements of digital literacy ought to be integrated into various disciplines and subjects. It may

be important to add at this juncture that, not to descend into indoctrination, such criticality should avoid limiting itself to only one perspective.

As far as foreign language teaching and learning is concerned, studies such as Armanda and Yosintha (2022) discuss aspects of the positive impact that digital literacy can make in this area. Armanda and Yosintha, focusing on young learners and basing their small scale study on questionnaires and an interview, conclude that digital literacy is considered an “effective ability to be acquired by both the teachers and also their learners” (p. 171) and that digital literacy “could increase young learners’ motivation because learning English using technology was easier and more enjoyable” (p. 160). At the same time, they observe that the learners lacked critical digital literacy skills (p. 171). After Avila and Pandya (2013, as cited in Armanda and Yosintha 2022, p. 162), by critical digital literacy they understand “the skills and practices that can drive the creation of digital texts, it also enables and fosters interrogation of digital multimedia texts”.

One aspect of the concern with digital literacy should be perhaps particularly stressed. In the context of the foreign language class or course, work towards increasing, and the practice of, digital literacy can do as much as to help with the teaching and learning of the foreign language itself. Achieving this goal is naturally a worthy outcome in itself. But then, also the work towards the less clearly measurable goal – improving the students’ understanding of the world in which they live, the world in which the media occupy a central position – should be firmly kept in view. This is especially true for the young and adolescent learners, as they should not only be equipped with textbook knowledge and skills, but also, in cooperation with their parents, they should be brought up to act in an ethical manner and to be prepared to fulfil their many present and future life roles, including those of students, citizens actively and responsibly taking part in political life, or parents who will bring up their children as a next generation of conscious media users in a (most probably) even more media-saturated world.

This becomes especially important in the current situation in which the popularity of the new media and digital technologies allows also for the growth of negative phenomena, as such the easy production and distribution of fake news (McBrayer, 2021), or the compartmentalization of social reality, in which the algorithm-based functioning of search

engines and of social media generates for each user a different version of reality, which “erodes the common ground that people need to share in order to build a community and to engage in democratic politics” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 56), among others. This happens in addition to a range of other problems, such as centuries-old attempts to spread propaganda, continued also today and made more effective due to the presence and decentralized nature of the internet (Morozov 2011, as cited by Lindgren, 2017, p. 55), or the recent and very serious questions that the rapid development of artificial intelligence poses.

It is mostly contributions from the domain of media literacy that seem to offer suggestions how practically to go about equipping the language class or course with elements that will help with the development of the skills subsumed under the umbrella notion of digital literacy – even if this will not exhaust the issue (as efforts to build up information literacy may matter too). As to the first general goal – using digital communication to increase the effectiveness of foreign language learning and teaching – one can refer to the 2001 publication by Gregori-Signes entitled “Language learning and media literacy”. As the text was published before the great rise in popularity of the new media, it firmly states that “television has the greatest significant and continued impact on our present culture” (p. 124), and, focusing on the traditional mass media, it does not mention social media at all; yet, its strength lies in offering a list of examples of exercises so universal that they can be introduced at every level of instruction, and for learners of all ages. Further to increase the multi-level and multi-age applicability of the proposed exercises, Gregori-Signes argues for the possible use of the mother tongue media materials in foreign language teaching – as these materials can be a springboard for activities carried out then in (or with the use of) the foreign language taught, at the level appropriate for given students. She proposes such exercises that actually require the use of media and/or of media texts in the classroom, but also such in which media function as “REFERENCE, as a starting point, as a PROMPT and effective motivation for initiating interaction in the foreign language” (p. 127, capitals in the original). The gamut of the proposed exercises is very broad indeed: they range from ones that investigate the daily use of the media by students (“Are you a media person?”, p. 128), to media-specific ones (pp. 128–134). The most numerous are those related

to television. These exercises include, among others, specifying (and justifying the selection of) one’s favourite programmes; identifying television genres; identifying actions; or characterizing stereotypical representations. There are also exercises based on recorded music (discussing group names and related language or cultural issues; identifying and discussing music genres; discussing a favourite song or video clip). A significant group is constituted by exercises related to the print media: newspapers and magazines, including fanzines. Here the proposed exercises include identifying types of print publications on a list; identifying (on a list, or in response to a specific prompt) and discussing features of the regularly read publication; identifying sections of a newspaper (in a word puzzle) and possibly comparing two titles (or two types of publication) as to the sections present in them. Fanzines are also singled out as a potential basis for exercises centring on specialized vocabulary or colloquial expressions: students can browse through fanzines in class and try to establish the meaning of some of the unknown specialist or colloquial vocabulary items that they will find. As the last separate category, the publication focuses on what it calls computer-multimedia, and in particular computer games. Here features of particular types of games can be discussed; while in terms of grammar teaching, games can be specifically recommended to practise grammatical structures and vocabulary used in giving instructions.

As it has been mentioned before, the focus of Gregori-Signes is on traditional mass media, as her text was published before the rise in popularity of the new media, but the exercises that she proposes can be easily adapted to focus on digital communication and the new media. The author herself offers some suggestions how this can be done – for instance, when she advises that in addition to comparing the structure of the content of (printed) newspapers or magazines, the same can be done with comparing the content of the broadcast programming lists of TV channels, or of any webpages on the internet (p. 133). The TV channels (or their broadcast programming lists) can be of course accessed through the internet, as can generally any media content, including radio, music, newspapers and magazines, and internet-based games. Regarding the new media, this may naturally also involve blog posts, social media posts, or podcasts, or the materials offered by streaming services. Any of these can provide the content that

can be used to teach and learn a foreign language, through exercises built on the basis of the content, or by offering a springboard for a discussion in which a foreign language is practised².

Understandably, any such exercises and activities can be administered, and accessed for language learning, with the use of digital devices (such as tablets or personal computers), possibly also with the use of dedicated educational software.

Yet, learning to use, and the use of, digital technology, including the new, digital media, to teach and learn a foreign language more efficiently, is only one possible application of digital literacy. As it is stressed in a number of theoretical accounts of digital literacy, its applications should go beyond the “instrumental use of digital tools” and should involve “the use of digital languages and codes for communicating, for assessing, as well as for understanding the world” (Marin and Castaneda, 2022, p. 14), as well as should keep meaning-making in focus (Bacalja et al., 2022, p. 1) – as two such accounts, discussed earlier in the present article, recommend. With this goal in mind, it seems that it is again accounts of media literacy – which is seen as being subsumed under the umbrella notion of digital literacy (Leaning, 2019, p. 4), and, with its “interpretative epistemologies”, is well-equipped “to critically engage with the media” (Leaning, 2019, p. 7) – that will offer the richest suggestions as to how to equip a foreign language class with elements that will work to increase the understanding of the media-saturated world (again, with a certain role played by information literacy activities too). Potter’s well-known account defines media literacy as “a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the messages that we encounter” (2016, p. 71). Perspectives are knowledge structures that are built with tools (that is skills), raw materials (that

is information from the media and the real world), and the willingness to build them (2016, p. 71). Turow’s *Media today* (2017) brings a whole section on media literacy, with suggestions how practically to “interrogate” the media and media texts, and it is his account that may prove to be especially helpful here. It contains two definitions of media literacy. The first is Turow’s own formulation, in which media literacy is understood as “the ability to apply critical thinking skills to the mass media, thereby becoming a more aware and responsible citizen – parent, voter, worker – in our media-driven society” (p. 20); the second is the definition that Turow quotes after the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, in which media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (p. 20). While both definitions emphasise criticality, each of them highlights different other aspects of the literacy. The first underlines how media literacy helps to perform responsibly many of one’s life roles. The second, in turn, puts stress not only on the reception but also on the production (communication) of messages in a variety of forms; additionally, by dropping the adjective “mass” from its core, it enables one to apply the formulation easily to all kinds of new media, which differ from the traditional mass media (McQuail, 2010, pp. 136–141), but which are hard to define as a category (see for instance, McQuail, 2010, pp. 136, 143–145).

Turow’s account of media literacy includes a presentation of five media literacy tools – which are in fact five categories of questions – that can be applied to a media text and with whose help various aspects of the meaning of the text can be revealed. Naturally, they are perfectly applicable to texts carried by the new, digital media and can be included also in exercises and activities practised in a foreign language class or course, appropriately to the level of language proficiency characteristic of the students. One can suggest that again, as with the foreign language-focused use of media and media materials discussed above, these can be media and media texts in the students’ own language (to be used as a springboard for further activities) or in the foreign language being taught, both domestic and foreign as to their origin – with the foreign media and media materials providing the additional opportunity of learning first-hand about the (mediated) cultural reality and opinions

² In an article describing the advantages of personal-educational digital storytelling (EDS) in the EFL classroom, Gregori-Signes (2008) shows how digital literacy can be developed in a foreign language class, with primary language teaching and learning objectives, also with the help of such a novel educational tool as EDS (2008). As she writes, the process of creating a digital story (“a short film composed of photographs, images, music and a narration” (p. 43)), practises a number of skills that include “research and writing skills, organization skills, technology skills, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, or problem-solving skills, which, in turn, develop digital literacy, global literacy, technology literacy, visual literacy, or information literacy” (p. 45). The tool is innovative and flexible, invites creativity and has the potential to raise motivation (p. 44), and is made possible by the emergence of digital media (p. 44).

present in a given foreign country. Turow's five media literacy tools – the five categories of questions – are presented below. For each, after a category label, the main question devised by Turow and his suggestions of supplementary questions are provided; in some instances, ideas for further questions are also listed.

1. Authorship: “Who created the message and why are they sending it?” (p. 23). Supplementary questions will include asking about the authors of the building blocks out of which the final message is built; if it is at all possible to establish – what choices have been made in the process of creation, what alternative versions have been rejected? As Turow advises, “[i]t is up to us to consider the constructed nature of our media realities and, when possible and important to us, to look for a variety of perspectives on the same realities” (p. 23).

2. Audience: “[W]ho are the intended targets of these media materials?”, and “[H]ow might different people understand these materials similarly and differently?”. Supplementary questions might be, what is it in these media materials that shows the intention of their creators to target a specific audience? or What knowledge, presumptions (or intentions) of the creators concerning the targeted audience do these materials reveal? As Turow promises, the more one knows about the efforts to target efficiently specific audiences, “the more [one] will understand the multitude of factors that lead to the sometimes different media worlds that different people encounter” (p. 23).

3. Purpose: “Why is this content being sent?” (p. 24). To a large extent, this can be regarded as attempting to establish in what ways, through the content being analysed, the message works (or has been intended to work) to produce revenue (ie., respond to the industrial pressures) for the owners of a given media outlet. Turow writes at this juncture about “institutional purpose”, but if on a given occasion it is new media's interpersonal communication that is analysed, one can understandably extend it to cover individual purposes as well – whether of commercial, political or other nature.

4. Content: “What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in (or omitted from) this message?” (p. 24) To have something more tangible to pay attention to, Turow suggests that “[t]he decisions about a character's age, gender, or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes,

and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting <...> and the actions and reactions in the plot are just some of the ways in which values become part of a TV show, a movie, or an ad” (p. 24), and can be asked about. News will also reveal values, but somewhat differently: they will be visible “in the decisions made about which stories go first, how long they are, what kind of pictures are chosen” and in similar ones (p. 24). One may add here that the starting questions regarding content can be as general as: What is this text about?, and What is getting said through this text?, as these, when addressed, can lead to a discussion of less overt aspects of the content of a given text.

5. Creative techniques used: “What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?” (p. 24). The creative components, indicated in Turow's account, will include “words, still images, moving images, camera angle, music, color, movement” and others. Turow rightly points out that “[a]ll forms of communication <...> depend on a kind of “creative language”. For example, use of different colors creates different feelings, camera close-ups often convey intimacy, and scary music heightens fear” (p. 25). It may be added here that a general discussion of how aspects of a message's form (colour, camera angle etc.), through cultural conventions, carry specific meanings, can in itself be a subject of an involving language class and exercises.

Turow's five media literacy tools, presented above, are based on his list of six general principles of media literacy (pp. 20–22), which are basic observations regarding how media function. Even if there is some overlap with some of the particular questions listed above for each media literacy tool, it is worth summarizing these six principles together with the related questions offered or suggested by Turow (again, in several instances, ideas for additional questions will also be presented). In this way, the pool of questions to be used to “interrogate” media or media texts with digital literacy objectives in mind, will be further enlarged.

Principle 1: The media construct our individual realities: what is presented by the media is not reality – this is a human construction that has been built to obtain specific purposes, and offers a script about the cultural environment. (The question that follows from Turow's text is: In addition to what has been scripted and retained in the final

version – what may have been excluded from the script and for what reason? Additionally, one can ask: What features can be noticed that bear witness to the fact that the presentation has been crafted by humans?).

Principle 2: The media are influenced by industrial pressures: they need to produce revenue for their particular owners. If so, then one may ask: “Who paid for this? What economic decisions went into creating this product?” (p. 21). (Additionally, one may ask: Who are the owners of the analysed media outlet? Did they pay for the content, or did they allow content produced by a third party to be made available through their media? Is the ownership domestic-national, or foreign – wholly or in part? Does the nationality of the owners appear to find a reflection in any aspect of the content?).

Principle 3: The media are influenced by political pressures: governmental regulations; various groups’ ideas of how to modify the functioning of the media, and the content of them. (The question that follows from Turow’s text is: What political-ideological implications does the observed media content have? An addition question can be: Whose political interests does the media content appear serve?).

Principle 4: The media are influenced by format: particular types of media have their own ways of re-presenting the reality; particular storytelling forms in the mass media (entertainment, news, information, education, advertising) have them as well. Accordingly, Turow suggests to ask: “What about the format of this medium influences the content? What about the format [of the medium] limits the kind of content that is likely to be shown?” (p. 22).

Principle 5: Audiences are active recipients of the media: the content provided by the media is interpreted through the individual background of the audience members. (The questions

following from Turow’s text are: What is it in my own background that makes me draw attention to certain elements of the presented content? How audiences of different socioeconomic, cultural, etc. backgrounds are likely to view the content?).

Principle 6: The media tell us about who we are as a society: they influence crucially the society’s image of itself. (Turow’s text suggests asking the following questions: What values guide the production, distribution and exhibition of a given kind of content? What biases characterize these processes? (p. 22). Additionally, one may also ask: What commercial, political, or other pressures may stand behind such biases, including overrepresentation, misrepresentation, exclusion, etc.).

Such and similar questions can be addressed, in the exercises administered and discussions carried out in a foreign language class or course, on a level appropriate to the students. Examples of such exercises have been offered in an earlier part of this article. In this way the opportunity that a foreign language class or course offers to employ and discuss communication through the media, including the new media, will be well-used to increase both, the efficiency of foreign language teaching and learning, as well as the understanding of the functioning of the media in the modern world.

The article has discussed the theoretical notion of digital literacy, together with the related notions of media literacy and information literacy. Then it offered some suggestions how practically to go about increasing digital literacy also in foreign language teaching and learning. The role that the media play today is too important not to attempt to use them to teach and learn foreign languages better and faster, but also, more significantly, not to do everything possible to understand their functioning and to make sure that they are a positive and not a harmful factor in individual and collective lives.

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