

## Case Study of Multi-literacy Ability of English Teachers—An Example of Tianjin Open University

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**Abstract.** Numerous attention has been shifted to multiliteracies approaches which prepare students for better achievements and fulfilling employment in their future life characterized by the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity as well as the variety in communication channels supported by high technologies. The traditional literacy pedagogy which focuses on the ability to read and write in formal language is generally discarded since it is unsuitable for the “digital natives” who are born in the digital age and is virtually impossible to equip students with critical awareness to handle social practices in societies. Teaching approaches in classrooms are largely dependent on teachers who are the organizers and conductors of instruction practices. The author of this paper conducts a case study in one of the open universities in Tianjin, China, to investigate whether EFL teachers are competent enough to adopt multiliteracies approaches and how well EFL teachers in China are informed of the multiliteracies approaches. Teachers’ teaching materials including PPT and other resources are analyzed and interviews are conducted to elicit feedback from EFL teachers towards multiliteracies approaches. Results show that sufficient teacher training is necessary to better prepare EFL teachers to implement multiliteracies approaches.

### Introduction

New communication channels supported by modern information technology and growing diversity of cultures and languages require people to have a broader view about literacy, and today’s literacy is not confined to reading traditional printed materials. From the perspective of social cultures, literacy shall not only mean reading and writing in the 21st century, but also be seen as a social communication activity “happened in a certain social and cultural context”. In recent years, more and more researches focus on exploring the influence of multi-literacy methods on students, and many explore the influence of new media teaching on students’ literacy. Lots of scholars have discussed about advantages of multi-literacy teaching methods, including creating learning environment that could attract students by real instances in reality and promoting democratic and meaningful learning. However, so far, no researches have studied on whether teachers are conscious to use techniques in teaching, i.e. multi-literacy teaching method, or how shall English teachers cope with “digital aborigines” who “live in the new era of technology” and spend all their time on “toys and tools of the digital era”. In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China, this is especially true. Therefore, with an example of English teachers in Tianjin Open University, this paper discusses about whether English teachers use multi-literacy teaching method, and to which extent they know about multi-literacy teaching method.

### Literature Review

#### Multi-literacy theory

“Multi-literacy teaching method” was a teaching concept published on “Harvard Educational Review” by New London School in 1996, the authors appealed that “today’s diversified communication channels and growing diversity of cultures and languages require people to treat multi-literacy ability from a broader perspective, which is different from multi-literacy included in traditional language teaching theories”. As mentioned above, traditional cognitive theories only focus on language of literacy, and regard language as a stable system based on some rules. Such views

about literacy will more or less take “authoritarian kind of pedagogy”, while multi-literacy focuses on information transmission modes instead of separate languages. Visual, auditory, spatial, behavioral and other information transmission modes constitute a hypertext in a certain social and cultural context, and express relevant information as a whole. Each information transmission mode has its specific “affordance”, which cannot be replaced by others. Kress pointed out that “meaning can be expressed in one way through one transmission mode, or in another way through another transmission mode (2003, p. 117)”. Based on this, multi-literacy theory believes that all expression forms are dynamic and flexible, and shall be redesigned and revised according to different intentions.

The New London School proposes multi-literacy theory based on two major elements. The first is to integrate and apply a variety of information transmission modes in fields of mass media and multimedia. The second is that people need to pay more attention to diversity of living environment, which is important for everyone’s life. People may encounter people from other countries, regions or communities in life and these people have different customs and etiquettes. For learners, it is critical to know about different social norms which do not exist in traditional teaching. Therefore, multi-literacy refers to an ability to cope with diversified social behaviors and different text forms supported by information and multimedia technology.

### **Comparison of “digital aborigines” with “digital immigrants”**

The comparison of “digital aborigines” with “digital immigrants” was put forward by Prensky in 2001. He pointed out that there was a natural gap between teachers and students in modern society in terms of the application of technologies. Students are “aborigines” in the world of technology, while teachers are “digital immigrants” as they are not good at modern equipment. Prensky pointed out that “today’s students are not those to be taught when we formulate teaching programs”. Today’s students are born in the digital era. They use computers for interpersonal communication, learn with I-phones and entertain with I-pads. Computer games, mobile phones, emails, network and SMS are essential for daily life of students in this era. Students are more expert at modern high technologies than teachers. In addition, proficiency in technology also changes their ways of thinking, and they deal with information in more ways instead of only one way used by the previous generation. Therefore, for teachers, it’s time for them to get out of the ivory tower and rethink about traditional teaching methods.

### **Relevant researches**

Morgan uses multi-literacy teaching method in a course of English for academic purposes (EAP), and applies printed materials and image materials etc for information transmission. Multi-literacy teaching method helps students understand how to match images with texts to achieve certain social purposes. Meanwhile, such teaching method also improves lecturers’ authority.

Harmsen conducts an experiment on three senior students majoring in Pedagogy in the University of Melbourne. Students ask to judge multi-modal texts such as websites and animation etc. Students confirm that “boundaries of literacy behaviors” shall be broadened.

Although lots of researchers have conducted empirical researches on multi-literacy teaching method, no researches study on teachers’ understanding degree of such teaching method. Therefore, this paper carries out a case study in Tianjin Open University, to investigate whether English teachers are using multi-literacy teaching method and to which extent that EFL teachers know about such teaching method.

### **Research Methods**

#### **Case**

School of Foreign Languages of Tianjin Open University has a total of 10 English teachers, and this paper investigates 4 teachers. The author considers about the following factors when selecting research objects. Firstly, the author selects two elder and two young teachers to obtain quite comprehensive results. Secondly, research objects achieve a balance in terms of gender. Thirdly,

Tianjin Open University has undergraduate and junior college courses, two of these four teachers teach undergraduate courses while another two teach junior college courses. Fourthly, these teachers have time to cooperate with my research, as “handy objects” are very important in researches on second languages (Dörnyei, 2007). Genders and ages of these four teachers are shown in the following table.

Table 1. Basic information of teachers

Name (anonymous)	Age	Gender	Seniority	Title	Student level	Courses
Teacher Cui	49	Male	24	Associate professor	Undergraduate	Listening
Teacher Li	54	Female	28	Associate professor	Undergraduate	Reading
Teacher Zhang	33	Male	2	Lecturer	Junior college	Writing
Teacher Liu	31	Female	5	Lecturer	Junior college	Spoken

### Research tools

This research investigates second language teachers’ familiarity of multi-literacy teaching method. Class observation is the most intuitive method to observe teaching styles of foreign language teachers and know about equipment used in distance classrooms. In addition, teaching effects can be intuitively observed by class observation.

Besides class observation, the author interviews these four foreign language teachers. This research uses semi-structured interview, and interviewees shall answer according to preset questions or express their own views. Preset questions are: what’s the difference between today’s English learning and teaching and those 20 years ago, and what’s the role of technologies in learning and teaching?

### Research process

With the consent of teachers, the author observed classes of these teachers. Each class lasted three hours from 6 to 9 pm with 20 minutes of break. Teachers were told that class observation was only for personal academic research, and they could teach as usual. Class observation was carried out in October 2013, which was the middle of the semester. This time was selected so as to avoid the busiest time at the beginning and end of a semester. Meanwhile, teachers usually prepared classes fully in the middle of a semester, which was conducive to smooth conduction of this research. Teacher Cui’s class was observed on October 11; Teacher Zhang’s was observed on October 14; Teacher Li’s was observed on October 18; and Teacher Liu’s was observed on October 25.

After class observation, teachers were required to stay, and the researcher would conduct semi-structured interview for about 30 minutes. For the convenience of expression, the interview was carried out in Chinese, and the interview process was recorded with the consent of interviewees, and identities of interviewees were kept confidential for the sake of research morality (Dörnyei, 2007).

## Research Results

### Class observation

After observation of four teachers’ classes, the author finds that traditional teaching methods still dominate in foreign language classes. Three teachers use slides in classes to show key points of textbooks. Printed materials are mainly used in teaching, especially reading courses. Teachers read the original text sentence by sentence, and translate into Chinese. Lots of vocabularies are explained in Chinese to help students understand. In addition, there is time for exercise. Among these four teachers, only one uses teaching equipment besides textbooks and slides. In spoken English class of Teacher Liu, she uses movie clips for discussion, and organizes group discussion and role play etc, and thus students are more active in classes.

Although teacher Liu uses various activities in classes to make students more integrated in classroom atmosphere, which is also a multi-literacy teaching method to some extent. However, in foreign language classes, most teachers do not use such a method.

### **Interview**

Findings of class observation are further confirmed in interview results. Almost all teachers find that today's foreign language teaching is different from 20 years ago, and realize the role of technologies in learning. Teacher Li says that: "people learn languages in many ways, such as network, I-phone and many training courses, which do not exist 20 years ago. In addition, we are in a more open environment and have more opportunities to communicate with foreigners". However, most teachers in this study do not understand multi-literacy theory and multi-literacy teaching method. Teacher Cui says frankly: "I do not understand multi-literacy teaching method. I know technologies have been integrated with daily life of modern people, but I do not think that it is critical to integrate teaching with technologies and technologies could not help students analyze information in network critically. Maybe I shall think about it."

Thus, it can be seen that although multi-literacy teaching method is now very much concerned, most foreign language teachers in distance schools do not know this method, and traditional teaching methods still dominate.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Through class observation and interview, the author finds that multi-literacy teaching method has not been popularized, and only some teachers use slides without hyperlinks, hypertext or any animation effects. Slides seem to serve as only a blackboard, as it is a basic requirement to use slides in classes in distance open schools and teachers complete tasks passively, instead of activating class atmosphere deliberately or training students' other literacy besides reading and writing. Teacher Li says bluntly that she does not like slides, as it makes no difference.

Besides, no teacher knows about the role of multi-literacy teaching method in teaching, which can be explained from the following two aspects. Firstly, there are two elder teachers who are used to continue teaching styles and methods used when they are still students. Secondly, there was not modern technology when they were students, and thus they had a relatively low level to use technologies. It is difficult for these "digital immigrants" to use multimedia in teaching. Thirdly, multi-literacy teaching method does not focus on technologies and tools, but on rationally integrating technologies into teaching and thus improve students' literacy from many aspects. However, teachers do not understand this well.

Moreover, teaching institutions have not provided appropriate training for teachers in terms of teaching and application of technologies, just as what Teacher Zhang who has just been engaged in this school has said: "I do not know about multi-literacy theory, how to link it with teaching, and its significance in teaching. Maybe I am shortsighted, but I still think that it is enough to help students master formal reading and writing skills. Maybe the school shall organize training to improve teachers' concepts and views". Teacher Li shares the same feeling: "I have been engaged in teaching for nearly 30 years, and the school organizes more conferences than training".

To sum up, teachers in Tianjin Open University do not apply multi-literacy teaching method to foreign language teaching. Teachers are organizers and directors of classroom activities, and thus their concepts and habits would directly affect language learning effects, especially in foreign language teaching. The author conducts a qualitative research to explore the understanding of foreign language teachers in Tianjin Open University about multi-literacy teaching method. According to results of class observation and interview, teachers do not understand multi-literacy teaching method, which might be explained by their learning experience and lack of training.

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