

# Digital Literacies in ELT

## A busy digital world

Morning comes, the alarm goes off and your typical student wakes up and immediately reaches for their smartphone. (Don't judge – most adults do the same!) Lying there, rubbing sleep from their eyes, they quickly check messages, likes and comments on posts they made on social media before going to bed.

Ping! Another text.

Ping! Another photo.

They scroll through their social media feeds, clicking on videos, posts, messages and links as they go. They need to catch up on what everyone is saying and doing. There's so much! They respond with their fast-moving thumbs urgently jabbing at the screen. Or they wonder *how* to respond. Or *if* they should respond. *What did that text really mean? Why did she make that comment? Why did he use that emoji?*

They eat their breakfast, eyes fixed on the screen, scrolling through an endless onslaught of information, clicking, sharing, thinking: *Good! Bad! Boring! Funny! Weird! Annoying! Surprising! Respond? Share? Don't share? How to share? Where to share? How to comment?* Judgements, evaluations, decisions, feelings, thinking, thinking, thinking...

And all of this in just their own mother tongue.

## A busy digital world of English

If the world of work, study and travel is communicating mostly in a global language, our learners will need to be able to apply the above digital thinking skills and express themselves in *English*. Teaching them grammar and vocabulary to pass tests will not be enough to prepare them. To succeed in life outside school our students need to be able to communicate effectively and sensitively in English with others, via emails, messages and comments, on social media and in all manner of correspondence.

Moreover, with [more than half](#) of the top 10 million websites having content in English, we need to develop our students' ability to navigate content fast and critically, being mindful of credible information versus poor, fake versus real. [Recent reports](#) show that one fifth of children believe what Google tells them; in this sense, we can say they are language literate but they are not *digitally* literate.

## Digital literacies

The global pandemic has transformed schools and put education online for good. Technology for teachers and students is no longer an option. We have also learned that students were only so-called 'digital natives' when it came to gaming and social media, but not [necessarily for learning](#).

Of course, most students are already comfortable using a wide range of digital tools, but this doesn't necessarily mean they know how to use these same tools for learning purposes. Tech know-how is not really the issue, therefore. So let's look at a definition of

digital literacy, and notice how closely it captures much of the students' day-to-day, minute-by-minute online habits and behaviour:

*Digital literacies (are) the individual and social skills needed to effectively interpret, manage, share and create meaning in the growing range of digital communication channels.*

Pegrum et al., [Digital Literacies](#) (2013)

With this in mind, as a learner of English, there can be no doubt that you can have perfect grammar and great vocabulary but still not 'effectively interpret, manage, share and create meaning'; still not "effectively" navigate an online world of English'. Something as simple as 'sharing' can be fraught with ambiguity or danger. *Am I sharing something true? Why am I sharing it? Will it offend? Am I prepared for different opinions and reactions to what I share?*

But who is going to teach these skills to young adults? Is it not the case that as teachers and parents we hope for the best and generally assume our students will figure it out, but often discover poor results and negative experiences too late? Wouldn't it be better to guide them more in this as a life skill built into lessons, and at the same time empower them as efficient users of English? As we do this, we will be providing ways to build awareness and practice of digital literacies that will be highly relevant and beneficial in equipping our students for the future. Gavin Dudeney captures this in his [2011 article from the Guardian](#):

*Digging further into the digital literacy skillset, we might identify more social and intercultural literacies. The ubiquity of social networks demands a new range of skills: looking after one's 'digital footprint' is of paramount importance, both professionally and personally. Knowing what to share, and who to share it with, is a vital part of this process; keeping yourself safe and maintaining hierarchical relationships is both challenging and potentially problematic in a wired world. Learning how to interact with other cultures and world-views is now a part of everyone's daily life.*

### Digital literacy examples

The list of interpreting, managing, sharing and creating skills needed in English is endless. Consider, for example, the abilities students must have, and the questions they must ask as part of their digital literacy mindset, as they engage with the world in English, for work or further study:

- ✓ Does my letter or email have the right tone and register for my reader?
- ✓ Do I fully understand what a letter or email to me is saying beyond the actual English words and structures? Can I 'read between the lines'?
- ✓ There are so many websites for my report/research, I need to skim and scan fast and efficiently. I also need to collate the information and make good notes to report back (speaking or writing) without copying any text.
- ✓ Am I reading fake news?
- ✓ Is this blog a credible source of information for my report or research?

- ✓ Does my social media profile look professional, and does it reflect who I am? Will it attract contacts and connections I really want?
- ✓ I'm building my presence on social media but can't use too many words or overlong video. I need to be careful what I say and how I say it, and be aware of the space and time available for my key messages.
- ✓ As I write a social media post or blog, what do I want the reader to do or feel as a result, and how do I use the best English to achieve this?
- ✓ I want to engage with useful contacts on social media for work purposes, but how do I express myself without being too direct?
- ✓ Can I notice and accept that misunderstandings can happen when communicating with other users of English, whether English is their first language or not? Maybe the English sounds rude or aggressive. Is this intentional or an accident of language misuse? Or are my cultural values and opinions different?

### Bringing digital literacies into the classroom

So how can we actively develop digital literacy skills for our learners, without feeling we are moving away from teaching English?

The first step is to believe in and commit to the idea that all teachers have a duty to incorporate digital literacy development throughout a student's school journey. Given how the professional and personal world of teachers, too, has become so digital, it may not be such a dramatic step or change. It could even come naturally to you to create activities or assign work that involves this sort of navigation and thinking in digital spaces and channels every day.

A more proactive approach would be to make a habit of look at the contents' pages of your coursebook as you the plan the week, month or years ahead, and think of ideas that go beyond the reading and listening texts and their accompanying exercises. For example, if you have a unit on travel or holidays, here are some possible approaches to supplement the units, or even replace some of the texts:

- ✓ Ask students to read blogs posts, articles or even short summaries about some places mentioned in the coursebook unit.
- ✓ Practise digital competences by encouraging students to look at how people comment online.
- ✓ Look at how many links are in articles – are they useful? are there are too many? etc.
- ✓ Ask students to write their own blog post or summary about a place or holiday. Getting them to embed links or videos would incorporate digital literacy into that lesson.
- ✓ Another topic that can easily be adapted to include digital literacy is food.
- ✓ Students could search for their favourite food, meal or cakes and share or talk about 'how-to' videos.
- ✓ Students could then make their own videos.
- ✓ To stay closer to the coursebook, pairs or groups could prepare a two-minute PowerPoint presentation of a summary of the text. Or they could present it to camera.
- ✓ An online research project could involve looking at the biology, politics and statistics around vegetarianism and veganism in their country, or in other countries.

Another idea is to have a closed Facebook group, just for you and your students. You could encourage them to share content on agreed weekly topics and ask them to comment (and comment on comments!) with thoughtful and insightful reactions. You would need to create rules about online behaviour but that, too, could be used to teach essential digital skills. There is an assumption among adults about what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable online behaviour, but where will students learn this if not at school? The sad truth is that many parents may not behave well online, as in the physical world, so it is vital that we teach, model and possibly police those values.

Finally, there are so many useful digital tools you can use for digital interaction and exploration. Many of them, such as Quizlet, Kahoot and Mentimeter are already very popular with teachers around the world.

Think of an activity you'd like to do with your students and there is sure to be an app or website for it. Ask *them* to find good tools to use, too! For example, students could research apps for making quizzes, doing surveys, creating an infographic, editing videos and images, checking fake news websites, creating their own gap-fill texts, and so on. The opportunities are endless.



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### **BUSY DIGITAL WORLD**

#### **Smartphone addiction in young people**

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-50593971>
- <https://metro.co.uk/2020/02/19/smartphone-addiction-physically-changes-human-brain-argue-scientists-12261335/>

#### **Digital distraction**

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-08-digital-distraction.html>

#### **Is technology short-changing our attention spans?**

[www.theguardian.com/sbs-on-demand--are-you-addicted-to-technology/2021/apr/23/is-technology-short-changing-our-attention-spans](http://www.theguardian.com/sbs-on-demand--are-you-addicted-to-technology/2021/apr/23/is-technology-short-changing-our-attention-spans)

#### **Life skills which employers *really* want to see from interview candidates**

[www.linkedin.com/business/learning/blog/top-skills-and-courses/the-skills-companies-need-most-in-2019-and-how-to-learn-them?trk=%20ilblog\\_1-9-20\\_skills-companies-need-most\\_learning](http://www.linkedin.com/business/learning/blog/top-skills-and-courses/the-skills-companies-need-most-in-2019-and-how-to-learn-them?trk=%20ilblog_1-9-20_skills-companies-need-most_learning)

### **Key components of Digital Literacy**

[www.webwise.ie/teachers/digital\\_literacy/](http://www.webwise.ie/teachers/digital_literacy/)

### **Digital literacies: What are they and why should we care?**

[www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/digital-literacies-what-are-they-why-should-we-care](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/digital-literacies-what-are-they-why-should-we-care)

### **Digital literacy in the classroom. How important is it?**

<https://resourced.prometheanworld.com/digital-literacy-classroom-important/>

### **Integrating Digital Literacy into English Language Instruction**

[https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/LINCS\\_CLR-2\\_508\\_0.pdf](https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/LINCS_CLR-2_508_0.pdf)

### **Digital Literacy – Why is it Important for Teachers in 2020**

[www.henryharvin.com/blog/digital-literacy-why-is-it-important-for-teachers/amp/](http://www.henryharvin.com/blog/digital-literacy-why-is-it-important-for-teachers/amp/)

### **Digital literacies part 1**

[www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/nicky-hockly-digital-literacies-part-1](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/nicky-hockly-digital-literacies-part-1)

### **Digital literacies part 2**

[www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/nicky-hockly-digital-literacies-part-2](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/nicky-hockly-digital-literacies-part-2)

### **Developing Digital Literacy Skills**

[https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/digital\\_literacy/](https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/digital_literacy/)

### **7 Ways to Teach Digital Literacy**

[www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/edtech-integration/7-ways-teach-digital-literacy/](http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/edtech-integration/7-ways-teach-digital-literacy/)

### **Types and Examples of Digital Literacy that Improve Lives**

<https://techboomers.com/types-of-digital-literacy-that-improves-lives>

## **IDEAS FOR TEACHING DIGITAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM**

### **Teaching Digital Literacy**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiSnuEbA3rU>

### **How to develop digital literacy in our teens**

<https://eltlearningjourneys.com/2021/04/13/how-to-develop-digital-literacy-in-our-teens/>

### **Ten Digital Literacy Resources for Teachers**

[www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/ten-digital-literacy-resources-teachers.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/ten-digital-literacy-resources-teachers.shtml)

### **Good ideas here from a digital literacy teacher**

<https://eltlearningjourneys.com/2021/04/13/how-to-develop-digital-literacy-in-our-teens/>

## **TECH TOOLS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

### **Using Quizlet in the classroom**

- <https://eltplanning.com/2018/04/04/article-for-modern-english-teacher-using-quizlet-in-teen-classes/>
- <https://sandymillin.wordpress.com/2020/11/22/usingquizlet/?ref=eltbuzz>

### **Using Kahoot in the classroom**

- <https://kahoot.com/blog/2017/04/04/language-learning-kahoot-part-3-tips-tricks/>
- <https://yuliyasperoffblog.wordpress.com/2016/09/30/using-kahoot-in-a-language-classroom/>

### **Mentimeter**

- <https://www.mentimeter.com/templates/education/education-language-class>
- <https://sandymillin.wordpress.com/2020/05/11/mentimeter-and-word-clouds/>

### **Edmodo**

<https://reflectiveteachingreflectivelearning.com/2014/02/07/5-ways-of-using-edmodo-with-language-learners-part-1/>

### **Padlet**

<https://www.bookwidgets.com/blog/2017/08/30-creative-ways-to-use-padlet-for-teachers-and-students>

### **Exploring digital literacy through websites in the ESL classroom / Looking for fake news**

- <https://exclusive.multibriefs.com/content/exploring-digital-literacy-through-websites-in-the-esl-classroom/education>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4fRwvHcfr5hYMMItFqvP6qF/help-your-students-spot-false-news>
- <https://teachingkidsnews.com/fakenews/>