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Author

Hellmich, Emily A

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Being Digitally Literate:
Saying "Yes" to TikTok and Google Translate

Emily A. Hellmich

There are a great variety of prescriptions for what French/Francophone departments in the United States should be doing. As an educational and applied linguist, I am drawn to questions of what we should be teaching and, more broadly, what our students should be able to do when they leave our classrooms and programs. I will argue in this essay that one of the key skills that we should strive to foster in our students is *digital literacies*.

Definitions of digital literacy/literacies abound, so I will briefly discuss its theoretical roots and how I am using the term here. Traditional theorizations of literacy are monolithic and focus on the encoding and decoding of written language. The re-theorization of literacy, which began in the 1980s, focuses on the production and interpretation of meaning made using a broad range of semiotic resources.[1] Important in this re-conceptualization is an expansion of the term "text" to include multimodal and digital texts alongside traditional written texts. Additionally important in this re-conceptualization of literacy is the ability to understand and engage with a range of digital tools that contribute to meaning-making. Being digitally literate from this perspective, then, is the ability to produce and interpret digitally mediated texts and to use online tools thoughtfully and critically.

There are several reasons why digital literacies are a necessary goal for French/Francophone studies programs. First, digital skills are now part of our 21st-century common core: Knowing how to use technological tools and to interpret their products is

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[1] Kern, *Language, Technology, and Literacy*; Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*; Lebrun and Lacelle, "L ' Ère Numérique : Un Défi Pour La Didactique Du FLE."

fundamental across professional and personal domains. Second, technology impacts the very foundations of language learning: The French language itself, both written and spoken, is evolving under the influence of digital technology.[2] Take, for instance, the development of text or chat abbreviations and expressions (*mdr* for *mort de rire*) and, in some cases, their migration beyond the walls of texting into other contexts such as email. Finally, technology impacts language and literacy practices—how, when, and for what ends language is used. Consider, for instance, the evolution of communication in the digital age. The interactions we prepared our students for in the past were primarily through traditional mediums (paper-based or face-to-face interactions); however, interactions today are increasingly taking place through digital mediums (SMS, video conferencing, email). In other words, if our goal as French educators is to prepare our students for the kinds of tasks, interactions, and situations they will encounter in their post-university lives—in French/Francophone contexts and more broadly—, we need to incorporate the digital into our pedagogical approach.

I will add to these justifications the similarities between digital literacies skills and the critical analytical skills held dear to many French/Francophone scholars and instructors. Let's take, for instance, the skills required to interpret an Instagram post: A student would need to be able to analyze how images and text are composed (register, formatting, image composition, placement), how their features interact to craft a particular message (clarifying or extending what one mode communicates), what inter- and intra-textualities might be present, etc. Or how about the skills needed to assess if and how to use a machine translation platform: A student would need to assess their linguistic query to find the appropriate tool (is it a grammatical query?

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[2] Chun, Kern, and Smith, "Technology in Language Use, Language Teaching, and Language Learning"; Kern, *Language, Technology, and Literacy*.

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pragmatic? idiomatic?), interpret available metalinguistic information, assess and cross-reference output to make sure it aligns with convention and with the desired meaning, etc. Digital literacies, then, can be a logical extension of many skills already cultivated in French/Francophone programs into the digital realm.

All this said, there are admittedly obstacles to the integration of digital literacies into French/Francophone departments. First, it's important to name that instructors often feel immense pressure to integrate digital technology into their courses.[3] Unfortunately, this pressure to integrate digital tools is often accompanied by inadequate professional development: overwhelmed methodology courses, lack of on-going professional development opportunities, and digital tools that are constantly evolving.[4] There is also danger in framing technology in education as normal or fundamentally good: without thoughtful integration, technology may not support learning goals or, worse still, be detrimental to them.[5] Finally, as alluded to earlier, the place of traditional literature and literacy in French and Francophone studies can also constitute a challenge to a shift toward digital literacies: while there has been debate over the content of French/Francophone Studies departments recently,[6] traditional literature has remained a cornerstone of most programs in the United States.[7] Further, there can be resistance to changing the traditional makeup and emphases of French/Francophone departments, with regard to digital tools and beyond.

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[3] Pilon, "Why Study French ?"
[4] Kessler and Hubbard, "Language Teacher Education and Technology"; Bourns and Melin, "The Foreign Language Methodology Seminar: Benchmarks, Perceptions, and Initiatives."
[5] Selwyn, *Distrusting Educational Technology : Critical Questions for Changing Times*.
[6] Tobin, "French Studies : Plus de Souvenirs Que d ' Avenir ?"; Durand, "A Certain Tendency of French / Francophone Studies in the United States."
[7] Scott, Wilson, and Hughes, "Digital Tasks for Advanced Learners: The Case of La Princesse de Clèves."

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Despite these challenges, I maintain that including digital literacies as a key skill in French/Francophone programs is an important way forward for our profession. To be sure, the above-mentioned challenges need to be addressed: departmental- and field-wide integration of digital literacies will indeed require thoughtful, consistent, and on-demand professional development, not just for graduate students but for current instructors and faculty. An incorporation of digital literacies into French/Francophone program outcomes and classroom learning objectives will also necessitate thoughtful crafting and implementation. And there will be growing pains, as departments and individuals reckon with the societal and disciplinary transformations that are already taking place. But, for all the reasons described above, digital literacies as program and learning objectives realign French/Francophone programs with how language is used today and, therefore, must be prioritized.

It is important to articulate what this digital emphasis would look like, especially in the classroom. Despite my provocative title, I do not advocate that departments swap courses on Molière for courses on Tik Tok influencers. To be sure, the integration of digital literacies into programmatic considerations should eventually lead to a broadening of the range of expertise among French/Francophone department faculty—an increase, for instance, in expertise in contemporary French/Francophone media studies. But since these kinds of changes take time, I will focus more on what can be done in the short term.

With regard to fostering students' ability to interpret and produce digitally-mediated texts, there are multiple ways to proceed. French instructors and faculty can easily incorporate lessons or units on different kinds of digitally mediated genres—emails, online housing ads, online dating profiles, forum threads or messages, online shopping reviews, texting, to name a few. It would not be necessary for an instructor to be fully familiar with these genres but to

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support students in their analysis of the features of the texts. For instance, at the intermediate level, an instructor could start by showing students several examples of professional emails and leading a discussion with the following guiding questions:

- How are these digital texts structured? What do you notice in terms of: spacing, text placement, images or graphics? What does this tell you?

- What kinds of language use do you observe? What forms of address are used? What verb tenses are used? How is capitalization and punctuation used? Are sentences long or short? What adjectives are used, if any? What else do you notice at the language level? What does this tell you?

- What do these features tell you about this genre? How do these features contribute to the overall meaning of the text?

This kind of work could be done across levels—from the beginning language learning courses (e.g., online housing ads) to graduate seminars (e.g., online journals, infographics)— with the questions and language of discussion adjusted to fit the level. For an additional, subsequent activity, instructors could scaffold student production of their own texts in the target genre in French.

Another way to bring in digital literacies into the French/Francophone language classroom is to build bridges between digital texts and more traditional ones. For instance, students studying *La Princesse de Clèves* could create a digital map to accompany the novel, as Virginia Scott and colleagues did.[8] Or ask students to transform the diary of adolescent narrator Doria in *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* into a series of Instagram posts or Tweets, as I have done with my

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[8] Scott, Wilson, and Hughes; Ramey, Scott, and Monchal, "Dispelling Binaries and Fostering Global Citizenship: Changing Conceptions in the Undergraduate French Major at Vanderbilt University."

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students.[9] Such transformations of traditional texts into digital ones offer important lessons in genre, register, intertextuality, and transposition for digital and traditional texts. And they bring digital literacies into the French/Francophone classroom.

With regard to fostering the ability to thoughtfully and critically use online tools that contribute to meaning making, I make a similar confession: Title aside, I do not necessarily advocate a completely open policy with regard to these tools—that is, any tool can be used for any and all class assignments and assessments. However, instructors do need to move away from complete bans or severe restriction of certain online tools in the French classroom for several reasons. First, these kinds of policies are not effective and, in many cases, are detrimental. For instance, my current research on how students use machine translation tools demonstrates that bans inculcate shame and secret usage, which damages instructor-student relationships and reduces possibilities for learning. In addition, asking students to use machine translation at the word-level only ("as a dictionary") leads students to more inaccuracies and ambiguities, as the algorithms that undergird the current machine-learning-based versions of these tools require more input to produce more accurate translations.[10]

Second and in the spirit of this essay, policies that ban or severely restrict machine translation and other online tools do not help students to use online tools thoughtfully, critically, or in ways that can help them to make meaning. To support students in developing this component of digital literacies, instructors should instead foster an understanding of online tools and a discovery of which tools are out there and how to use them. For instance, many students are limited in their knowledge of what online tools exist; this can lead them to rely

[9] Hellmich, "Dresser Un Pont: La Compétence Sémiotique Comme Lien Entre La Littérature et Le Numérique."

[10] Hellmich, "Machine Translation in Foreign Language Writing: Student Use to Guide Pedagogical Practice"; Hellmich and Vinall, "Student Use and Instructor Beliefs: Machine Translation in Language Education."

inappropriately on Google Translate because they do not have other options. At the most basic level, instructors could provide students with a list of online tools that can be used to support French language learning, such as these tools, available at the time of publication: Word Reference (an online dictionary with verb conjugations, discussion forum), Linguee (a dictionary paired with parallel corpora of professionally-translated texts), DeepL (a machine translation platform out of Germany), Bon Patron (an AI-based grammar and spelling checker), Larousse.fr.

More helpful yet is supporting students in their understanding of the advantages and limitations of these online tools in order to use them appropriately. What tools, for instance, are better when looking for idiomatic information? Regional variations? Verb conjugations? Without support from instructors, students lose the opportunity to learn from these resources as well as to add them to their semiotic repertoire, the tools they draw on to communicate and make meaning. One way to support students on this score is to ask them to directly compare how different tools respond to different queries. An instructor at an intermediate level might ask students to compare the results of two tools for the following searches:

Target Word/Phrase	Google Translate	Linguee	Notes
Fly (verb)			
Fly (insect)			
I fly to Rome on Tuesday			
Time flies!			

At more advanced levels, instructors might include other types of language (idiomatic language, regional varieties, literary language, academic written language). With discussion and modeling

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in class, this kind of activity can sensitize students across levels to which tools handle which queries and how to adjust their input for specific tools.

Lastly, instructors need to help students in analyzing tool output—what text is produced by online tools. To successfully use online tools to support meaning making, learners need to be able to critically analyze tool outputs, assessing them for accuracy and alignment with intended meaning. Key skills include being able to assess the metalinguistic information provided (or not) by an online tool or to cross-reference output with additional sources. Here again, instructors can model for students what it looks like to double check the output of one tool with another resource.

In all of these cases, it is not necessary for the instructor to be an avid user of technology or expert in the tools available; rather, instructors are there to act as a facilitator and guide in a collaborative effort to discover how these tools can best serve language learning as well as meaning-making more broadly. This approach will ideally assuage instructor concerns about the rapid change of technological tools and any perceived need to be an expert in said tools.

In conclusion, I have argued in this essay that digital literacies are a necessary next step for our profession. Specifically, French/Francophone departments should:

Short-Term

- Build digital texts into course offerings—both the analysis and production of digital texts

- Cease bans or severe restrictions on machine translation and other online tools

- Teach students to use online tools—what tools to use based on limitations/advantages, what to input into tools, how to analyze tool output

Long-Term

- Incorporate digital literacies into programmatic and course learning goals at all levels

- Fund on-going and on-demand professional development for how to integrate technology into instruction

- Augment departmental expertise and course offerings in French/Francophone media studies

At the writing of this article, the generative AI tool ChatGPT had just been released to an outpouring of awe and concern for its implications across society, including education and, specifically, language education. A focus on digital literacies as it has been defined here does not mean that ChatGPT (or the next mind-bending/mind-numbing) technological tool has to immediately become a centerpiece of French language education; rather, educating students to analyze digitally mediated tools and texts and to use them to their advantage will develop skill sets that can be applied to whatever comes next.

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