Divergence of Everyday Practices and School Policy on Mobile Use: Challenges to Developing EFL Learners' Digital Literacies

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Article Info	Abstract
	Literature has suggested that digital literacies can enhance language learning through appropriate use of mobile technology since today's young learners are immersed in mobile technology. However, to support English language learning through digital literacies in specific contexts, a learning environment with mobile technology should be examined. This paper aimed to report on mobile use for English language learning through digital literacies in Thai school contexts. Empirical evidence was reported from the mixed method research project with 400 Thai EFL learners and a group of teachers and administrators. Results from the quantitative and qualitative analysis showed the divergence of mobile phone use between EFL young learners' everyday life and pedagogical practices and policy at school, affirming that mobile phone use for developing digital literacies at school was not favored for EFL learning on the basis of Web 2.0 components in the research context. This paper argues that a call for the development of digital literacies among Thai EFL learners needs to promote social practices of such literacies. Implications are discussed for future pedagogical practices and policy to promote digital literacies with mobile device use for EFL learning.

Introduction

Today, digital technologies have shaped the ways people work, communicate, and learn, introducing new social and cultural practices with knowledge and skills (Hafner et al., 2015). In educational contexts, digital technologies allow learners to perform digital practices in digital learning environments, helping them to develop knowledge and 21st century skills (Black, 2009). To Black, this helps them get prepared and become efficient global citizen in the future.

To facilitate young learners to learn in digital learning environments, it is necessary to examine their digital literacies in terms of digital knowledge, skills and attitudes in learning with digital technologies. The term digital literacies (DL) has been proposed and defined as not only the abilities to manage digital tools, but also to creatively engage in social practices with such technologies for specific circumstances (Jones & Hafner, 2012). In a practical view of DL in language education, Son (2015) defines the term DL as "the ability to use digital technologies at an adequate level for creation, communication, collaboration, and information search and evaluation in a digital

society. It involves the development of knowledge and skills for using digital devices and tools for specific purposes" (para. 1). Others extend its definition by claiming that digital literacies go beyond cognitive and technical abilities but also mean *social practices* in which digital media users communicate, relate, think, and associate themselves with these devices to other people (Jones & Hafner, 2012).

Different digital technologies may shape different ways of social interactions. Today, digital literacies with mobile devices (e.g. mobile phones) can provide language learners with the interactive and visually appealing learning materials (Abdallah, 2021; Ariffin et al., 2022; Barksdale et al., 2021; Eisenlauer, 2014; Paudel, 2021; Talan & Kalinkara, 2022; Zaid & Shehada, 2022). To develop digital literacies among youngers, it is necessary to understand the interplay between young learners and mobile devices, for example their interactions when using digital tools for communication, and learn. Such an understanding provides researchers (as well as educators) with ways to support particular groups of learners when they are facilitated to use digital tools and develop adequate skills in a local context (Rienties et al., 2012).

Thais are becoming big users of mobile phones with the Internet connection. According to the 2020 national survey report (National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2021), most Thais owned mobile phones (95%) with the Internet connection (91%), while almost all young generation (aged 15-24) owned mobile phones (99%) with the Internet connection (98.4%) and became connected with social media (92%). Yet, the report did not clarify the digital practices specifically for English language learning.

In Thai educational contexts, literature has found challenges in developing digital literacies among learners for example the inadequacy of digital literacies among learners (Thammasaeng et al., 2016), and inadequate learning support from the curriculum (Saechan & Siriwipat, 2018). The lack of digital literacies among learners raises the question of how Thai young learners are equipped with such literacies with available technologies (i.e. mobile devices) and current states of digital literacies among Thai learners especially for English language learning for appropriate support.

As part of the large project of digital literacies in a Thai EFL context, the focus of this paper is to report on Thai young EFL learners' uses of mobile devices for English language learning in relation to digital literacies in school contexts as part of the results from the larger project which investigated the digital literacies among Thai learners.

Literature Review

Digital Literacies in Language Learning

Previous literature indicates that *digital literacies* have been explained differently. Jones and Hafner (2012) assert that people utilize digital technologies in the process of mediation, the process by which they operate tools to mediate their action in the world such as using computer to mediate communication. While many scholars interpret the term digital literacies in their own contexts (Goodfellow, 2010; Jones & Hafner, 2012; Martin, 2008), this study aims to understand the process of mediation by which Thai EFL learners employed the digital technologies in developing their learning skills for English; thus, the definition used in this study is related to

digital literacies in language education.

In the field of language learning, the term 'digital literacies' is defined as the learning practices by which people use digital media to read, write and communicate (Hafner et al., 2015). To these authors, it is by this means that people interact with digital media to develop many skills and social practices in language learning. Because digital media influence and shape the ways people act, express, relate to others, think and manage identities in the world, Jones and Hafner (2012) assert that the word "literacies" should be understood not just as the ability to manage tools, but also to creatively engage in particular social practices, to assume appropriate social identities, and to form or maintain various social relationships.

In educational contexts, Son (2015) and Son et al. (2017) proposed five elements of the term digital literacies or literacies, namely information search and evaluation, creation, communication, collaboration, and online safety. Jones and Hafner (2012) call digital literacies as social practices and exemplify them. They view such literacies as *social phenomenon* (p.12), asserting that the literacies should not only be viewed as cognitive processes of meanings, but also interpersonal and social processes. To them, digital literacies take place from social interaction through technology among social members. These are helpful to understand what are meant by the five components of digital literacies by Son et al. (2017).

Research shows that the use of digital technologies can contribute to learners' engagement and increase motivation (Kolb, 2017; Martinez & Schilling, 2010). The interaction with digital technologies shapes individuals to communicate, learn, and work with the technologies (Meyers et al., 2013). Digital literacies require digital participants to acquire necessary skills, abilities and knowledge of using them with "the norms and practices of appropriate usage" (p. 355). The development of digital literacies should not be managed and provided merely at school contexts or formal learning contexts but also non-academic environments or informal learning contexts where young learners can engage in social and cultural practices to become competent learners or global citizen. Ziemke, an educator, said that digital learning can transform students into agents of change in the global context as they will become educators for success in the global society (Larson & Goodson, 2019).

Digital Literacies and Mobile Technology in Language Learning

Today, emerging digital technologies allow learners to gain learning opportunities through digital literacies. The internet-based communities allow language learners to experience knowledge typically in multilingual and multicultural contexts, thus providing them with opportunities to develop linguistic and cultural competence through engaging in online activities (Godwin-Jones, 2015). Literature has claimed that the advent of digital technologies (e.g. mobile devices) necessitates the implementation of new, blended education forms with digital technologies especially in language education, whereas the low level of young learners' digital literacies obstructed the process of successful implementation (Soltovets et al., 2019).

However, previous studies have shown some challenges in implementing digital literacies in language learning contexts. Tan et al. (2010) reported hesitancy shown by teachers in a secondary school in Singapore when

considering a move to multiliteracies. In the following year, Lotherington and Jenson (2011) also claimed that in second language teaching contexts, teachers have been circumspect to adopt digital literacies in schooling.

According to Lotherington and Jenson (2011), today, the potential of Web 2.0 can create a virtual world in language laboratory that is close to the real one, making learning more flexible, and being able to fulfill more students' needs. Learners now can even have a mobile language lab in the form of a smartphone where they can access a website anywhere at any time. As claimed by Lotherington and Jenson (2011), the mobile language labs gave power to learners to access, select, and produce their own learning resources by capturing and uploading contents. Furthermore, Web 2.0 can afford interaction among multi-users, pushing them towards collaborative learning and thus support two-way communication (Kress, 2006).

To support digital literacies with mobile devices, mobile assisted learning environments can provide contextualized input for language learners with the interactive and visually appealing learning materials, asserted Eisenlauer (2014). This could be achieved with the multimodality potential of mobile assisted language learning. In investigating the effects of multimodality in language learning on learning outcome, Guichon and McLornan (2008) found that learners with their practice of digital literacies improved L2 comprehension when being exposed to texts in the multimodality-based learning environments. Unfortunately, currently the multimodality has been utilized in limited ways for language education (Eisenlauer, 2014).

The Ministry of Education of Thailand has responded to the rapid change of digital revolution, thus urging the implementation of digital learning in education (for example, mobile learning) through which human resource development, workforce preparation to be in line with the market need and curriculum reform (Office of the Education Council, 2017). Despite the increasing and embracement of advanced technologies into education, Thai education especially in language education is still suffering from the appropriate and effective implications of digital technologies for the educational development in digital literacies due to ineffective policy making and management as criticized by Numnonda (2016). Numnonda asserts that Thai youths still lack digital skills which are beyond using digital tools or hardware. The skills are about social and cultural practices of digital tools in appropriate and effective ways in specific contexts and purposes.

In this regard, previous studies have provided useful suggestions for the development of digital literacies. Phuapan et al. (2015) suggested that there should be information sharing among educational institutions to extend the knowledge of digital literacies. Digital literacy development should be introduced into school curricula, so this matter could officially be applied. However, the implementation needs great efforts and time because teachers and learners have to take a different mindset and roles in terms of knowledge construction. This has left a gap of how to develop digital literacies among Thai youths as young learners, especially when they learn English in digital environments.

Method

This mixed method research study aimed to investigate the digital literacies of Thai EFL students in southern

Thailand. 400 secondary school students as EFL learners were selected via stratified random sampling as the participants from 70 Islamic Private Schools in Pattani province, southern Thailand, to complete the questionnaire. They were 296 females (74%) and 104 males (26%). Most of them started learning English at their young age from the kindergarten school (74.25%) while some of them (24.75%) gained first English classes at primary schools. Then, 25 students and 3 school teachers and 2 administrators were selected from simple random sampling to participate in group interviews.

Data were collected in 2019-2020. To establish research quality, validity through the index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) and reliability through Cronbach's alpha (.95) were managed to ensure the quality of the research tools. The project was also conducted under the ethical guidance approved by Center for Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board at Prince of Songkla University (SBSIRB-PSU), No. PSU IRB2019-PSU-L-007, to meet the required ethical principles. The researchers used the descriptive statistics and theme analysis for data analysis.

Results

Availability of Digital Technologies

Several key results were reported regarding mobile device experiences by Thai young EFL learners. A key result showed that mobile devices were not favored and managed at Thai school contexts. Evidence showed that personal computers (PCs) gained most popularity at school (95%) for pedagogical purposes, while mobile devices such as iPads or Tablet (14%) and notebooks (4%) were not favored at school to provide for students' learning. In contrast, notebooks gained popularity at home (49%), followed by PCs (14%), Tablets and iPads (8%).

It is apparent from the results of mobile phone ownership that not all Thai EFL learners had learning opportunities for developing digital literacies with mobile devices. 94% of the responding participants owned mobile phones, while 6% did not. Despite their owning mobile phones, such ownership did not allow for access to digital sources since only 75% of them had mobile phones with the Internet package, allowing them to access the Internet. This suggests that one third of the participants had limited access to the digital knowledge and insufficiently developed digital literacies with their own mobile devices, raising the existing question of inequality in Thai education.

Young Learners' Digital Experience with Social Media through Mobile Phones

Another result showed that the participants became immersed with mobile devices in their daily life and were connected with social media, allowing them to experience digital practices in their everyday life. As the majority of them owned mobile phones, they gained updated about technology from social media mainly (73%), websites (57.5%), friends (52.75%), television (50.75%), while other sources were not reported as main information sources for them such as teachers, family members, books, newspaper, radios, magazines, blogs, and email.

As seen from Figure 1, the results suggest that teachers, family members, and some mainstream media (radio, newspaper, magazines) were not their knowledgeable sources. Surprisingly, blogs and emails as Web 2.0 tools

were not their popular choices for getting updated about digital technologies.
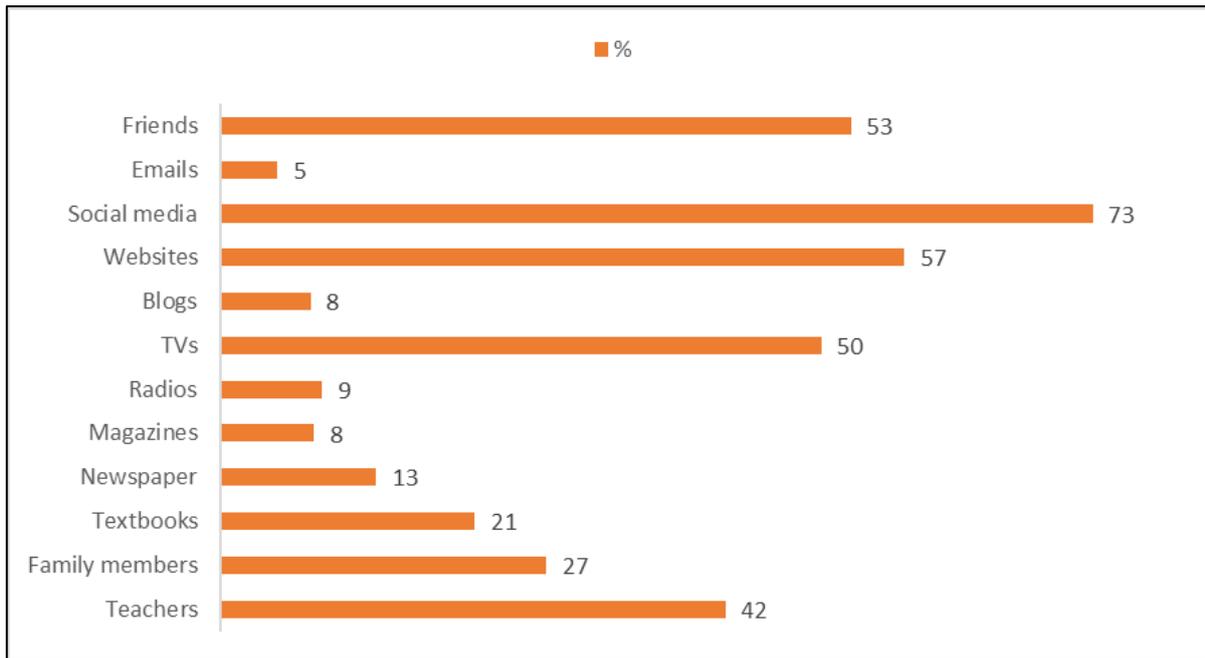
Figure 1. Sources of Information about Digital Technologies (N=400)

Mobile Phone Use: Divergence of Policy and Digital Practice

Interestingly, it was found from the evidence about learners' use of mobile phones at school that 95% of the respondents reported that they were not allowed to bring and use mobile phones at school (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Mobile Phone Use at School (N=400)

In spite of favorable use of mobile devices for learning, the divergence between young learners' daily life and

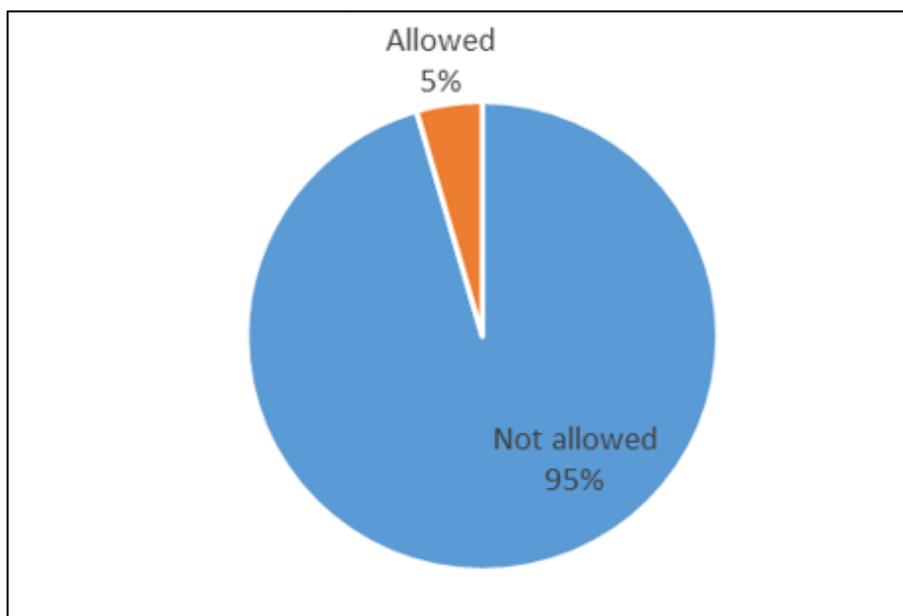digital practice at school in interacting with mobile devices was evident. The use of mobile devices was one of the challenging issues arising in this study. When asked about digital practices with mobile devices, the learners reported challenges of using mobile devices for learning at school. Although mobile devices were preferred by the participants in learning, the digital literacies via the use of mobile devices at school contexts were not favored by school policy and social practices. Some reported on the complete ban of using mobile phones at school:

> *Mobile phone is not allowed. Teachers said it will distract [our] learning. Teachers told us about this rule (Student S1).*
> *Mobile phone use is not allowed at school totally due to our school rule. If found, it will be detained for one month (Student M10).*
> *Mobile phone use is not allowed at school, but [sometimes] we do bring it (Student L6).*

However, some school teachers realized the affordance of mobile phones for students' learning, thus providing flexible solutions to this dilemma by allowing the restricted use of mobile phones for designed classroom activities if a request was made by teachers to have students experience digital practices by searching for digital information and completing some learning designed activities with mobile phones. Some teachers reported on this issue:

> *Our school has a policy that mobile phones are not allowed for students at school because students may use this device inappropriately. But at my school, teachers can allow students to bring and use mobile phones at school for some English learning lessons, and it is allowed when a request is made first (Teacher T2).*
> *We must accept that students nowadays are living with mobile phones, and they always are. So they are learning with mobile devices. Their life is with mobile phones (Teacher T5).*

While some schools disallowed the access and use of mobile phone in the classroom, the use of digital tools or mobile devices especially for developing digital literacies in learning English was favored by the learners and teachers at schools, viewing that mobile devices could benefit learning and could be used to create constructive learning environments for developing digital literacies. With the ban of mobile devices at school, digital practices with mobile devices were limited in terms of creativity and productivity. Many reported as follows:

> *I presented YouTube online but for some unstable situations I used my own mobile phones to show the YouTube clip in the classroom or share my hotspot to students to access the Internet (Teacher T4).*
> *We never recorded teacher's lecture because we don't have mobile phones (Student M9).*

The use of digital tools outside of school was diverse, compared to the one at school. At home and in their everyday life, the use of mobile devices by Thai young learners was creative and supported by their parents:

> *Parents support me to use a mobile phone but sometimes they do [limit us]. But they never stop us [to use mobile phones to learn) (Student M4).*
> *I can use mobile phones freely at home [for learning] (Student S1).*

> *I do search a lot on the Internet when I have homework [with mobile phones]. I need it so that I can avoid making any mistakes in doing homework (Student S4).*

The popularity of mobile phone access was increasing while the possession of personal computers or notebook declined as reported by some participants:

> *I don't have notebook or computers, just mobile phones. I go to an Internet shop to do homework. We submit homework by printing out into paper and submit it later to the teacher (Student M2).*

This was challenging for young learners if they were guided not to use mobile phones for learning but using non-mobile devices or sometimes paper-based for learning. Moreover, the social practice of digital literacies with digital tools at school was limited for some participants such as preferring paper-based over paperless practices to learn English.

Discussion

Regardless of the level of digital literacies and the challenges in the development that the Thai young learners reported, the results showed that the majority of the learners owned and used mobile phones with the Internet package (94%), but the use of mobile phone was prohibited at school (95%). This was validated in the qualitative findings in which many participants reported the restriction of such use in school contexts despite the benefits of mobile use for developing digital literacies for English language learning.

The finding showed that mobile phone use at school was not favored and not supported for language learning although Thai learners preferred to have mobile devices and are ready for autonomous learning with mobile devices (Howlett & Waemusa, 2019). As Korisztek (2021) comments, our life now is connected to digital environments with new emerging media and platforms, which provide new digital space and their distinct use. To him, digital literacy become essential for teachers (as well as learners) in this modern society, especially during the current pandemic situation. He notes, "The interaction between human and machines is very different from the human-to-human kind of interaction that is promoted in communication language classrooms. New technologies require new ways of both thinking and teaching" (Korisztek, 2021para. 4). With mobile phones, new applications are emerging every day to be applicable for pedagogical purposes.

The mobile phone access to and use for language learning was not fully supported and permitted at school in the research context due to some social practices and a school policy which considered mobile phones probably as distracting them from learning in classrooms and as being a means for learners to access inappropriate and dangerous sites on the Internet. The social practice at school is to prohibit the use of mobile devices rather than integrating the devices appropriately into supporting learning with a careful design and management. In contrast to the digital life of Thai young learners who are in attachment with mobile devices, some participants reported that mobile phones were used basically for retrieving digital resources, but the digital tools were not productively and constructively used to access, construct and share knowledge through exercising adequate digital practices

such as multimodality (Hafner, 2014; Kress, 2006).

The results may be a possible cause to explain why new pedagogies for second language contexts on the basis of Web 2.0 components were not fully implemented in the research context as urged by Lotherington and Jenson (2011), an ideal language learning environment where mobile devices can provide flexible learning environments for students to fulfill their learning need. In English language learning, learners are encouraged to communicate in new digital space with digital media. As Jones and Hafner (2012) note, digital media space allows users to interact with others with their digital features in which several users become readers and writers. To them, the roles of teachers and learners in a language activity within digital media become blurred but connected through interactivity through writing and reading at the same time. Although computers can make these activities possible, mobile devices make this kind of interactivity even more possible with young learners' everyday life due to mobility and flexibility.

Conclusion and Implications

The report on Thai EFL learners' use and experience of the digital devices in developing digital literacies for English language learning in this study shed light on the state of digital literacies in Thai school contexts. These quantitative and qualitative findings could contribute to a better understanding of digital literacies in the EFL contexts and have significant pedagogical implications. To promote digital literacies for English language learning, a better understanding of digital literacies should be developed not only by learners but also by teachers and school administrators who can manage and design digital learning environments for their learners with new emerging digital media every day. In this study, a key question for developing digital literacies for language learning is not how to operate mobile devices masterly, but *how to understand* what to do with these digital tools for a careful design of meaningful learning environments for EFL learners.

A clear and deliberate policy is needed for teachers and learners in using mobile phone use at school to promote the development of digital literacies for teachers and learners, especially in English language learning. As Morris and Sarapin (2020) propose, one of the policy options of using mobile phones at an educational institution should be framed collaboratively between students and teachers, but the need should fit the desired situations, namely the course content, the class climate, the teacher style, and the support from the administration. However, their study project was conducted in higher education and might be applied for school level. Mobile phones at school should be envisioned as a collaborative and learning tool between a teacher and learners or among learners to interact for learning English in different and imaginative ways.

New ways of thinking and practices with mobile devices are needed for educational purposes. School policy should support the use of mobile phones at school contexts for academic purposes with careful guidance and support from teachers and school administrators via the use of mobile devices. Those learners without mobile devices need special assistance and support from the government and schools in order to solve the problem of education gaps which still persist in Thailand. This will augment the development of digital literacies instead of hindering it.

During the pandemic situation, as mobile devices, affordable and easy to carry, allow flexible learning space and time, teachers are urged to redesign pre-planned lesson plans for a hybrid mode of learning and teaching, an approach where learner transition is easy and flexible to make between onsite and online modes (Raes et al., 2020; University of Edinburgh, 2021) or fully online instruction. Mobile phones can support this hybrid approach as learners can carry the devices to move around at different locations via mobile-based approach such as mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), a pedagogical approach to enhance language learning and teaching in different skills through implementation of mobile devices (Chinnery, 2006). EFL teachers should be provided with a development plan for promoting digital literacies at school with digital tools, especially how to *integrate* pedagogy with mobile devices.

EFL learners need to get exposed to target language for language acquisition. With digital literacies, those EFL learners who lack physical contacts with native speakers or those speaking English can learn better in meaningful learning environments where teachers can support them. In doing so, teachers need to develop knowledge including digital literacies of how to integrate mobile devices into lessons. We, as teachers, need to explore and recycle new ways of pedagogical practices by the use of digital technologies (Korisztek, 2021).

Acknowledgements

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