



## New Users, New Literacies: a Research on Academic Writing

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### Abstract

*The research presented here seeks to study the ways in which digital natives tend to construct academic texts, by analysing the procedures and the web 2.0 tools used by university students in producing their written work. The main purpose of the proposal is to examine the role that web 2.0 tools play in writing and the changes that have come about as a result of the emergence of such tools.*

*To this end, we propose a quantitative and qualitative approach to these texts in order to describe and analyse the resulting product as well as the textual process. This analysis takes as its starting point the main assumptions of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), an innovative research area that refers to the study of writing as a social practice. Within this area, the project is limited to the analysis of digital literacy.*

*The empirical data collected are analysed in varying degrees of depth, with the aim of observing and examining variables such as the selection criteria for reference sources, multimodality, text scaffolding and the concept of authorship.*

*With the analysis of these data, we aim to provide an overview of the younger generation's approach to the written language. This knowledge is essential for designing more practically based didactic actions, leading to in the effective teaching of written language at all levels of education as a practical outcome of the project we are presenting, to be further developed in future work.*

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of what follows is to present a project carried out within the Research Group in Linguistic Mediation (GIML, Group AGAUR SGR2009-680.) of the University of Lleida. This project aims to analyse the role that web 2.0 tools play in writing, and the changes that have taken place as a result of the emergence of such tools, based on the study of the ways in which digital natives tend to construct academic texts.

This article will outline the main features of the project and describe the current state of the research.

### 2. Conceptual framework

The research follows the *New Literacy Studies* (NLS) approach. This research perspective, the fundamentals and developments of which are included in Coiro / Knobel / Lankshear / Leu (2008) [1], proposes a concept of literacy centred about its social component and distanced from the psychological vision of writing first developed in the early 1970s in the work of Emig (1971) [2]. From this new perspective, it is argued that writing practices are socially determined. Our research is therefore interested not in the process of skill acquisition from a psycholinguistic point of view, but rather in the concept of literacy as social practice (Street 1984) [3]. From that point of view, an ethnographic perspective has been incorporated into the study of writing, that seeks to describe and understand the communicative practices of human groups from a global angle, understanding that these discourses are embedded in wider social interactions, situated in the context of time and space and historically shaped by culture, discipline and the organisational structure of the particular ambit (Gee 1991) [4].

For some years the NLS have turned towards the inclusion of ICT in their research paradigm (Nixon, 2003 [5]; Mills, 2010 [6]) and they are concerned with the way in which it influences the construction of discourse. This area is called *Digital Literacy Studies*. From this perspective, certain authors have drawn attention to the changes that have taken place in reading and writing habits among digital natives, as in the case of learning literacy (Lankshear / Knobel, 2008) [7]. Warschauer (2006, 2007) [8] [9], for example, has documented how the purposes of written communication, their genres and the nature of the audience and authorship are changing very rapidly with the introduction of digital tools.



### 3. Research methodology

As mentioned, the study aims to provide an overview of how university students approach the use of web 2.0 tools and how they tend to construct texts. In order to do this, the following objectives have been considered:

1. To document the uses of Web 2.0 tools in the composition of academic texts. Qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (questionnaires) tools are used.
2. To systematise and analyse the corpus collected using the SPSS and ATLAS.ti programs.
3. To describe and analyse the academic practices of digital natives from the analysis of the collected corpus on three levels: a) tools, b) processes c) products.
4. To contrast such production with the respondent's vernacular (or free) uses.

As can be seen, the research approach combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies, with the aim of obtaining data that might explain the object of study from both the objectivity of quantification and from the subjectivity of the respondent's own viewpoint.

As we will see later, the study is currently still at an early stage. The quantitative study is under way. For this a closed questionnaire was drawn up, in which different variables are specified with regard to a variety of elements involved in drafting a text in terms of three main areas: the sources, the process and the text.

### 4. The current state of the research

As mentioned earlier, this research is currently at an early stage. A first version of the questionnaire has been designed and piloted with a small number of respondents. So for this initial analysis a sample of 73 individuals was selected. They were students from the University of Lleida in their third year on the *Teaching in Primary Education* degree. Their mother tongue was mainly Catalan. The questionnaire was deployed in May 2012, within the teaching spaces where the students normally study.

As independent variables, the usual social factors (gender, age, socioeconomic status) were taken into account. Variables related to the linguistic characteristics of the respondents (mother tongue, language(s) usually spoken, etc.) and their level of language proficiency were also considered. This information is considered to be relevant because the questionnaire refers to work produced by the students in three languages: Catalan (the students' first language, mainly), Spanish (the respondents' second language) and English (their foreign language).

One of the items to be observed is whether the same mechanisms are activated in the students' second language as in their native tongue, and also whether similar processes are in play in the foreign language, considering the use of ICT in text writing.

In addition to this information, the first four questions of the multiple-choice questionnaire seek to define the *user profile* of each respondent, *i. e.*, the questions were related to the general use of technology, such as *How often do you use Facebook, Whatsapp...?*, to determine their general relationship to ICT, inside and outside the classroom.

The remaining twenty-five questions deal with various aspects related to the production of written texts. These questions have been structured taking into account the steps involved in structuring a written text independently:

1. information retrieval
2. information selection
3. planning the piece
4. writing the text
5. revising the work.

Within each process, we have considered the following categories:

1. tools
2. procedures
3. criteria.

Thus, the questionnaire was structured as follows:

1. Questions to establish the *social profile* of the respondent
2. Questions to establish his / her overall digital competence: *user profile*
3. Digital competency questions related to the production of texts: *writer profile*

The following is a sample question:

19. When seeking information on the internet, what tools do you use?
- I enter keywords directly into the search engine (*Google, Lycos, Yahoo,...*)
  - I run the search in *Google Scholar / Google Books*
  - I use the *Library Service's metasearch engine / Documentation from the University of Lleida*
  - I use other search engines specific to the subject in question (*Thesauruses, CIDE, Scopus, Scirus,...*)
  - Others \_\_\_\_\_

Image 1. Example of a question from the Questionnaire.

The data have been processed using the program *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) and an initial analysis has been performed, which, though brief, has shed light on some of the aspects that we are seeking to study and has highlighted some of the difficulties involved in collecting data.

To give one example, with regard to general digital competence, *i.e.*, *the user profile*, in the first instance respondents are asked how they behave with regard to various Web 2.0 tools, and how often they use them. The results reveal that the application that is used most frequently is email (87.7%), which is consulted daily, followed by social networks (79.5%). More than half (61.6%) of the respondents say they rarely or never participate in forums, blogs or wikis.

In terms of knowledge of word processing tools and their use, it must be said at the outset that, with regard to dictionaries, nearly half of the respondents exclusively tended to use digital tools (42.5%). It is noteworthy that no respondent considered using only printed dictionaries, but selected this option in combination with one or more digital options. It seems from the data collected that the less well-known the target language, the more paper-based support is preferred over consulting information online. Thus, in the case of the Catalan language, which is the mother tongue of most of the respondents, only 1.4% considered using printed materials in combination with other tools, in the case of Spanish texts paper-based tools were used by 4.1% of the sample and when producing work in English 9.6% of respondents would use printed material.

## 5. The current state of the research

Although, as said before, in light of this pilot study we propose to:

- redefine the questionnaire and its subsequent validation
- establish focus groups to begin the qualitative study
- triangulate the data
- deploy the questionnaire in other settings (other degree courses at the University of Lleida, other Spanish universities, foreign universities).

## References

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