

# **Beyond the foreign language classroom: Informal English literacy practices of teenagers living in Greece**

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## **Abstract**

Given the multi-faceted value of out-of-school literacy practices and the growing prominence of the English language both in educational and informal settings in Greece, this paper aims to examine the informal English literacy practices of 14-16-year-old teenagers living in a southeastern town in Greece. More specifically, adopting a social view of literacy, I employed mixed methodological techniques (i.e., in-depth interviews, questionnaires) to explore the nature and functions of their literacy practices, the role of new technologies and the possible relationships between in- and out-of-school literacy.

Drawing on research findings, the paper will argue that teenagers in Greece engage – often unconsciously – in various types of everyday English literacy practices. Overall, a major finding refers to teenagers' engagement in English literacy practices which involve the use of new technologies and, particularly, their more interactive applications (e.g., online chatting). The complex nature of the interface between foreign language literacy and technology in teenagers' out-of-school literacy lives will be discussed.

**Keywords:** foreign language literacy, informal literacy practices, English as a Foreign Language, new technologies and FL practices

## **1. Introduction**

Undoubtedly, English plays an important role in the lives of young people in Greece, both in education and in their everyday lives. English is the most popular foreign language taught at schools and private language institutes (i.e., *frontistiria*) and therefore, officially, learning English literacy takes place in formal classroom contexts. In addition to the educational context, however, teenagers also encounter –and acquire– English literacy in different out-of-school contexts.

However, despite the fact that the examination of school-based foreign language literacy has recently attracted the attention of many literacy scholars, relatively few researchers have attempted this type of study in the area of out-of-school foreign language literacy. What is more, in the few published studies that have actually handled issues related to out-of-school second/foreign language literacy practices, the focus has been mainly either on adolescents' literacy practices in monolingual English-speaking

contexts (e.g., Knobel 1999, Moje 2000, Schultz 2002) or on immigrants' second language literacy practices in bilingual contexts (e.g., Lam 2000, Rubinstein-Avila 2001). As a result, teenagers' out-of-school foreign language literacy practices have not been fully and systematically investigated in Greece or abroad.

In this context, building on a similar extensive research project organized by the Centre for the Greek Language, the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens which aimed to investigate Greek adolescents' out-of-school digital literacy practices, I employed mixed methodological techniques to investigate the informal English literacy practices of 14-16-year-old teenagers living in a southeastern town in Greece and focused on exploring the extent and the nature of their literacy practices, the functions and purposes of these practices, the role of new technologies, and, finally, the possible relationships between in- and out-of-school literacy practices.

In the present paper the focus will be on presenting the English literacy practices of teenagers with a special emphasis on those involving the use of new technologies. It will be argued that English literacy practices and the use of digital technologies are closely interwoven in the everyday lives of Greek teenagers and, more specifically, that the use of digital technologies influences or shapes teenagers' out-of-school English literacy to a great extent.

## **2. Theoretical Resources**

The concept of literacy used here draws on recent work by ethnographic literacy researchers (The New Literacy Studies) who have adopted a socially-based perspective of literacy and have sought to study literacy in its context of occurrence (see e.g., Baynham and Prinsloo 2001, Gee 1996, Street 1995). Challenging the cognitively based view of literacy, as a set of technical coding and decoding skills that an individual possesses independently of the contexts in which it occurs and the uses to which it is put, researchers building on the ethnographic tradition of documenting literacy have emphasized the importance of investigating the ways literacy is used in the historical, economic, political and socio-cultural contexts in which individuals operate (McKay 1993). Informed by these understandings, literacy is understood in this paper not merely as an abstract set of reading and writing skills but as a social practice which is embedded in the activities of everyday life and underpinned by peoples' attitudes, concerns and values.

Drawing on studies in first language literacy, second/foreign language literacy has also been traditionally associated to the terms ‘reading’ and ‘writing’, which have been considered universal skills, in the sense that once they have been attained they can be applied to almost any situation. In line with scholars who reject this cognitive-based perspective of second/foreign language literacy, as described in numerous studies in the field (see e.g., Alderson 1984, Carrell 1991, Grabe 1991), this paper adopts a socially-based conceptualization of foreign language literacy.

This perspective argues that the division of language learning into separate skills (e.g., writing, reading), or components (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) to be mastered is unsatisfactory, because it pays insufficient attention to their interaction and tends to exclude contextual factors, that is, how people in different communities produce and use texts in different ways (e.g., Kern 2000, McKay 1993). Put simply, if the aim of second/foreign language instruction is to enable students to communicate effectively in a range of contexts and situations, there is a clear need to see literacy in broader terms than just the skills of reading and writing. Kern (2000: 5) illustrates this point by stating that: “Treating speaking, listening, reading, writing and culture as separate ‘skills’ has led to limited, overly-compartmentalized goals described in terms of discrete behaviors or pieces of knowledge, rather than in terms of integrative abilities”. In contrast, then, to the conventional view of second/foreign language literacy as a universal process of inscribing and decoding words, foreign language literacy is seen here as a dynamic set of interdependent linguistic, social and cognitive processes that vary with situational and cultural contexts (Kern 2000).

Finally, this paper also draws on the work of researchers who have focused their attention on the study of out-of-school literacy practices arguing that the study of these practices is equally important in providing a comprehensive account of teenagers’ overall literacy practices for many reasons. First, current studies (e.g., Resnick 2000) documenting the literacy practices at home and school have demonstrated that many teenagers’ literacy practices at home are rather different from the ones at school. These findings have encouraged researchers to question whether teenagers’ poor educational attainment could be attributed to these mismatches between school and out-of-school literacy practices, while at the same time they have led to interesting studies on literacy practices in out-of-school contexts (e.g., Knobel 1999, Schultz 2002). Another reason for highlighting out-of-school literacy practices is that schools cannot serve as the only source of literacy competence because often they are too isolated from the way written

texts are used in everyday life (Martin-Jones and Bhatt 1998). In a similar vein, McKay (1993: xiii) contends that a classroom “is only one of several forces affecting individual literacy”. Given, then, that teenagers engage in a wide range of literacy activities beyond the classroom boundaries, it is essential to examine these activities in detail in order to obtain a global view of their literacy practices as a whole.

### 3. Method

The study on which this paper is based was conducted in home and school settings from September to October 2006. Generally, participants were Greek adolescent learners of English as a foreign language living with their families in Corinth, a town located in southeastern Greece. All participants selected attended private (Aristotle *Gymnasium*<sup>1</sup>-*Lyceum*<sup>2</sup>) and state schools (1<sup>st</sup> Technical school, 1<sup>st</sup> *Gymnasium*) in Corinth and represented different levels of academic achievement and different socioeconomic backgrounds. Research data came from in-depth interviews conducted with six participants (Efi, Stella, Rena, Dimos, Spiros and Aris<sup>3</sup>) in home settings, field notes taken after interviews and informal conversations during home visits and detailed questionnaires distributed and completed by 95 teenagers in the schools that the interviewees attended. The analysis of quantitative data drew on descriptive and inferential statistics calculated using the data analysis package S.P.S.S. V.13; qualitative data analysis, on the other hand, included the transcription of interview material and field notes, the codification of transcribed material and, finally, the processing of coded data in search for emerging patterns.

### 4. Research Findings

My guiding principle in this paper is to uncover and analyze the texture of Greek teenagers’ daily literacy practices in English by describing what teenagers actually do with English in informal contexts and considering the ways in which their literacy shapes and is shaped by these contexts. More specifically, I deal with participants’ most prominent out-of-school English literacy practices occurring in diverse literacy environments (e.g., print, online) and involving the use of diverse literacy media (e.g., screen media, print media).

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<sup>1</sup> The junior high school

<sup>2</sup> The senior high school

<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms

A first interesting finding refers to teenagers' unconscious engagement in English literacy practices. This means that, when asked, teenagers could not clearly identify – at least at the beginning of the interview – the uses to which they put the English language, and hurried to state that they did not really engage in any English literacy practices. As one of the teenagers characteristically said:

“I don't use English that much [in my everyday life]. We just say ‘Hello, how are you?’ with my friends sometimes, and that's it. Where else could someone possibly use it? Only if someone goes on a daily trip, like the one we went on with our school” (Stella, 14).

As can be inferred from this extract, teenagers' conception of out-of-school literacy was rather limited to certain obvious everyday activities, such as talking with friends or tourists, their underlying assumption perhaps being that the use of a foreign language is exclusively school-based. Yet, at later stages of the interview, when asked about their engagement in specific literacy practices, all teenagers described in detail many of their practices confirming thereby that they actually use English in multiple ways in their everyday lives. Actually, common English literacy practices among most of teenagers were song listening, TV and DVD film viewing, ‘light reading’, computer gaming and, finally, online communication.

#### ***4.1 Literacy practices related to popular media***

##### *4.1.1 Music-related practices*

Perhaps the most prominent informal English literacy practices which were found to occur among all teenagers - irrespective of their gender, academic achievement and socioeconomic background - and could be regarded as part of a “universal youth culture” (Morrell 2002: 72) were those related to music. In fact, teenagers expressed their overall preference for listening to English over Greek music and all of them declared themselves to be fans of at least one performer or band singing English lyrics. It should be mentioned, though, that teenagers came in touch with English not only when they listened to their favorite English songs, but also each time they visited international websites (e.g., *Kazaa*, *Limewire*) to download English songs or whenever they engaged in reading, copying or even memorizing English lyrics. What is also worth mentioning is that all these ‘teenage-specific’ practices occurred across diverse literacy spaces, involved the use of diverse media and were mainly designed to bring pleasure in participants' leisure hours.

#### 4.1.2 Print media

Also, important ‘teenage-specific’ practices were those related to English teenage magazines with topics such as music, sports, celebrities etc. As the following table indicates, the majority of teenagers enjoyed ‘light reading’ since they showed a clear preference for English magazines related to their pastime activities and ignored those appealing to adult interests, that is, books with scientific content in English or English newspapers.

**Table 1. English literacy practices related to print media**

	<i>Comics in English</i>	<i>Literary books in English</i>	<i>English newspapers</i>	<i>English magazines related to my interests</i>	<i>Books with scientific content in English</i>	<i>Life-style magazines in English</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>Never</i>	21 22,1 %	21 22,1 %	33 34,7 %	7 7,4 %	27 28,4 %	20 21,1 %	0 0,0 %
<i>Seldom</i>	17 17,9 %	19 20,0 %	8 8,4 %	14 14,7 %	15 15,8 %	10 10,5 %	0 0,0 %
<i>Often</i>	10 10,5 %	8 8,4 %	6 6,3 %	27 28,4 %	5 5,3 %	17 17,9 %	3 3,3 %
<i>Total</i>	48 50,5 %	48 50,5 %	47 49,4 %	48 50,5 %	47 49,5 %	47 49,5 %	3 3,3 %
<i>Missing / NR</i>	47 49,5 %	47 49,5 %	48 50,6 %	47 49,5 %	48 50,5 %	48 50,5 %	92 96,7 %
<i>Total</i>	95 100,0 %	95 100,0 %	95 100,0 %	95 100,0 %	95 100,0 %	95 100,0 %	95 100,0 %

Interestingly enough, a number of teenagers expressed their discomfort about reading English novels justifying their dislike on the grounds of various arguments. The most common argument employed by most participants is that they experienced difficulties in reading English novels due to their length and their difficult vocabulary. As one of the teenagers said: “[I’d rather read them] in Greek, because I would understand them better this way. Because I wouldn’t understand all English words”. (Efi, 15)

#### 4.1.3 TV-related practices

In relation to one of the most popular teenage media in out-of-school settings in Greece, namely the television, the study revealed that almost all teenagers watched English films or series on television in their free time. When asked what he usually watches on TV, a teenager replied:

“I usually watch American TV series. On Saturday, for example, *Friends* are on, yes and some, I mean American films, too. I also like another American series called *One Tree Hill*. It’s on *Star Channel* at half past three and I like it because it is about basketball and stuff like that”. (Spyros, 14)

Taking into account that international programs shown on Greek TV are not dubbed but subtitled, it becomes apparent that teenage audiences watching these programs are aurally exposed to the English language on a daily basis.

#### *4.1.4 DVD-related practices*

According to the findings, a favorite pastime activity for the majority of teenagers was that of DVD film viewing. By watching English movies in their free time all participants had established an important daily contact with the English language which was not restricted to listening to the English dialogues while watching a Greek-captioned film. In particular, there were teenagers who took advantage of the special features offered on DVD and omitted a film’s Greek subtitles or even opted for its English ones. As one of the teenagers reported: “Mainly because I try to practice more, uh, when I watch a film I choose the English subtitles. This way, even if I miss a word, I can read it in the subtitles”. (Aris, 14)

#### *4.2 Online English literacy practices*

Another finding that merits attention is that a significant part of teenagers’ out-of-school English literacy practices involved the use of new technologies or took place in an online environment. This characteristic is vividly reflected in the following words of a teenager in the study: “In general I use it [English], umm, every time I use my computer, watch DVDs or browse the Web, umm, and in some areas related to my interests”.(Rena, 15)

Actually, some of teenagers’ favorite practices were downloading, browsing the Web, gaming and chatting and, finally, e-mailing. More specifically, the following table indicates that the vast majority of teenagers went online on a regular basis to download English songs, films or videos. Visiting English-speaking websites was another popular activity, while according to the same table a number of teenagers also went online to play games, chat in English and to exchange e-mails.





#### *4.2.2 Gaming*

Another technologically-based practice was that of computer gaming, which mainly took place at Internet café settings between teenagers and their friends. Moreover, teenagers had certain favorite games with boys showing a preference for role playing, strategy or sports games and girls being drawn to arcade games. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the vast majority of games played by teenagers were English-speaking. As Dimos characteristically said, “All of them are in English. I haven’t played a Greek game / with a Greek menu in years”.

#### *4.2.3 Online chatting*

One of teenagers’ common practices was that of online chatting in English. This practice mainly occurred in parallel to online gaming meaning that several participants often went online to play games and chat with other players. For example, a teenager in the study, who was an avid computer gamer, when playing some of his favourite Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), which accommodate thousands of players simultaneously and support text-based chat, sometimes chatted online with ‘expert’ players from other countries to be informed about what he had to do to overcome certain difficulties when playing a game. However, his online chatting was not only related to ‘apprenticeship’ purposes. As he stated: “We arrange our strategy, but we also talk about common interests, such as music or books”. Similarly, although none of the participants engaged in instant messaging, some of them entered international chat rooms to have fun with their friends by playing pranks to strangers from other countries. As a teenager said: “We mainly chat in Greek but when we enter chat rooms of New York we chat in English because we chat with foreigners. We usually chat in pairs, because it is more fun. We enjoy fooling them”. (Stella, 14)

### **5. Discussion**

Concerning the impact of new technologies on teenagers’ English literacy practices, it should be said that most teenagers made great use of new technologies in out-of-school contexts. First, new media such as DVDs, computers and all kinds of technological gadgets were very popular among teenagers enabling them to pursue a variety of interests ranging from listening to English music on their computers to watching a non-captioned film on a portable DVD player. Then, participants’ online literacy practices seemed to play an equally significant role in their out-of-school realities. In particular,

the online literacy environment (i.e., the Internet) provided teenagers with a variety of multi-modal texts in English related to their interests, while online literacy practices enabled them to communicate with friends via e-mail, as well as complete strangers via online chat.

Arguably, in light of these findings it becomes apparent that English literacy practices and the use of digital technologies are closely interwoven in the everyday lives of Greek teenagers and, more specifically, that the use of digital technologies influences or shapes teenagers' out-of-school English literacy to a great extent. This interrelation is primarily manifested in the fact that teenagers who make extensive use of new technologies and of their more interactive applications (e.g., online chatting) in their daily lives, appear to engage in significantly more English literacy practices than teenagers who make limited use of or do not have access to technological resources. Overall, then, it seems that the increased use of new technologies amounts to increased exposure to English language stimuli and, by extension, to greater engagement in English literacy practices.

Still, this important finding is rendered much more complex by a critical consideration of issues relating to parental class positioning, family strategies and attitudes, wealth and access to resources. For instance, according to the study, wealthier families with positive attitudes towards new technologies equip teenagers with an array of technological resources which in turn provide them with sustained exposure to the English language and, consequently, the opportunity to engage in a wide range of English literacy practices. On the other hand, access to digital media and their associated English language practices remains rather limited for teenagers who live in low-income homes, perhaps due to the fact that they are not endowed with the same material resources or even the same "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986: 246) with teenagers from upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. To illustrate with some examples, teenagers who attended private schools generally had access to more resources at home, such as computers, satellite TV, portable DVD and MP3 players, and fast Internet connections, to support a variety of English literacy practices. On the contrary, Efi, for example, a Technical school student with limited engagement in English literacy practices, coming from a low-income home, had no access to the Internet or to satellite TV at home and did not even own a computer, although she had repeatedly asked her parents to buy her one.

## **6. Conclusion**

After having addressed some significant characteristics of teenagers' informal English literacy practices, the focus in the last part of this paper will be on some possible directions for future studies. Taking into account that foreign language literacy is a fairly new area of research within the New Literacy Studies, there are obviously various aspects of it that need to be taken further. For example, the study revealed that literacy practices involving the use of new technologies represent a significant part of teenagers' out-of-school literacy practices in English and are becoming deeply embedded in their literacy lives. Undoubtedly, this finding merits further investigation in future studies, albeit in a more in-depth manner. Particularly, it would be of interest to explore teenagers' digital literacy practices in English through detailed observations and analyses of what they actually do with the English language when sitting in front of a screen, especially with English multi-modal texts in online contexts.

In addition, according to research findings, teenagers' engagement in certain English literacy practices depends to a higher or lesser degree on their socioeconomic background. Therefore, future research on the role of parental status and family attitudes towards teenagers' choice of and degree of involvement in literacy practices would probably contribute to our understanding of out-of-school literacy in a foreign language. Perhaps, more interestingly, it would also shed some light on the different concerns, values and attitudes by which English language literacy is underpinned in families from higher and lower socioeconomic classes.

Building on a study investigating the everyday English literacy practices of teenagers living in Greece, the present paper has hopefully shed light on a significant aspect of teenagers' out-of-school literacy and pointed to some interesting directions for further studies in the examination of foreign language literacy. Given the rapidly changing nature of literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the constantly evolving views of what it means to be literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the New London Group (1996: 60) asserts that "the multiplicity of communication channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today call for a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language based approaches". It is suggested that any conclusions which may be derived from this paper should be seen in this light.

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