

Challenging Misinformation in the Online English Language Classroom in the Philippines¹

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Abstract

A growing concern around the world is the spread of misinformation through communication technology. This has contributed to problematic scenarios such as oversimplification of complex issues, resistance to facts and even absence of a middle ground among diverse groups. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only crippled global processes due to the health risks posed among populations, but competition for resources among communities has also continued. In the case of education, teachers have been placed at the frontlines as they have been prompted to radically adjust approaches to teaching and learning since physical interaction with learners has been prohibited. An added complication is the problem of misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 virus and management of the pandemic among different agents of the state. In this piece, we share insights from our experiences in giving lessons on how to deal with misinformation in an online learning environment. Specifically, we argue that incorporating other languages/multimodal resources, structuring arguments, and identifying potential opportunities for engagement are essential in developing critical thinking strategies that can address misinformation spread through the internet.

Resumen

Una preocupación en aumento en todo el mundo es la difusión de información errónea a través de las tecnologías de la comunicación. A nivel mundial, esto ha contribuido a escenarios problemáticos como la simplificación excesiva de temas complejos, la resistencia a los hechos reales e incluso la ausencia de acuerdo entre grupos diversos. Recientemente, la pandemia de COVID-19 no solo ha paralizado los procesos globales a causa de los riesgos existentes para la salud de las personas, sino que también ha generado competencia por entre las comunidades por los recursos disponibles. En el caso de la educación, los docentes han sido posicionados en la primera línea, ya que se les ha requerido ajustar radicalmente los enfoques de enseñanza-aprendizaje debido al distanciamiento social con los alumnos. Una complicación añadida es la desinformación en torno al virus COVID-19 y el manejo de la pandemia entre diferentes agentes del Estado. En este artículo, compartimos ideas sobre nuestra experiencia al enseñar sobre cómo lidiar con la información errónea en un entorno de aprendizaje en línea. Específicamente, argumentamos que incorporar otros lenguajes/recursos multimodales, estructurar argumentos e identificar posibles oportunidades de participación son esenciales para desarrollar estrategias de pensamiento crítico que puedan abordar la información errónea difundida a través de Internet.

Introduction

Recent research has emphasized the importance of critical literacy in developing responsible and engaged citizens capable of instituting genuine change in society (Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2021). As a transformative project, critical literacy recognizes the political aspects of education. Literacy with a critical orientation questions problematic assumptions about the production, circulation, and consumption of texts.

The strength of critical literacy lies in creating conditions of possibility by allowing students to question assumptions about texts, maximizing opportunities for authentic dialogue between learners and teachers and engaging in worthwhile community projects for collective action (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2016; Chen, 2020; Huang, 2012; Mambu, 2011; Valdez, 2020).

However, the emergence of the post-truth era in politics, fake news, conspiracy theories and spin proliferating via social media have posed challenges for educators (Frechette, 2014; Picton & Teravainen, 2017; Farkas & Schou, 2020). Misinformation has created problematic assumptions about people, practices and concepts. Moreover, communication technology has created echo chambers for communities of practice that may hold problematic beliefs about aspects of society (e.g., flat earthers, anti-vaxxers) leading to misunderstanding and even violence.

As an outcome of curricular reform in 2012, the Philippine education system revised its educational program that increased the basic education cycle from 10 to 13 years old to enable Filipino students to learn skills that would be useful to meet local and global standards (Manaog, 2020). Tertiary institutions had to declutter their curricula by offering fewer general education courses. In the case of English language courses,

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previously separate subjects on academic reading and writing and speech communication classes were combined into one course called Purposive Communication (GEPCOMM). According to the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), GEPCOMM aims to “develop students’ communicative competence and enhance their cultural and intercultural awareness through multimodal tasks” (p. 1) that would allow students to participate effectively in an increasingly multicultural society (Commission on Higher Education, 2013). Since the official implementation of the curricular reform in 2018, this subject has become the required English language course for all undergraduate students in the Philippines.

Given the problems of misinformation spread online, this paper reports findings of a classroom project integrating critical digital literacy skills in identifying problematic texts. We further argue that incorporating other languages/multimodal resources, structuring arguments and identifying potential opportunities for engagement are essential in developing critical thinking strategies that can address misinformation spread through the internet.

Teaching Context

In our project, participants of the study were 90 undergraduate students at a private university in Manila, Philippines. These students were from the colleges of Education, Computer Studies and Engineering GEPCOMM in English, where they were given the task of identifying online materials (text or image) that reflected two or more logical fallacies. Participants were asked to identify and explain these fallacies in only five to seven sentences. This activity was a group collaboration in which they chose, discussed, and explained their product. Data were analyzed by identifying common themes based on participants’ ability to show their critical thinking strategies when identifying misinformation in online texts.

Results and Discussion

Languages and multimodal resources as a resource

While the internet has democratized the production and consumption of information through first-hand accounts, narratives and reports from the ground, the absence of proper vetting procedures in verifying information and the wide range of sources available for information open possibilities for misinterpreting facts. The prominence of social media as a platform for the creation and convergence of different groups with similar interests have also resulted in problematic ideas which may have gained traction over the years and have influenced political, scientific, and even economic movements. For instance, the emergence of conspiracy theories, alternative facts, and revisionist histories have contributed greatly to conflicts over these platforms. It is critical to examine the use of language and multimodal resources in constructing informational texts.

While other scholars have identified specific features of misinformation in texts such as credibility of source, relevance and currency of information and contributing contexts, the use of language and multimodal resources are equally important in understanding this problem (Alvermann, 2017; Fajardo, 2016; Goodnight, 2009; Navera et al., 2019; Valdez, 2020). Based on our implementation of the project, there were two notable features that were identified by our students in texts that perpetuate misinformation. First, there are other languages in the texts in question. While direct quotations in other languages are part of even reliable news sources, the indication of other languages in these texts appears to be used to sensationalize information or misinterpret actual statements made by personalities involved in the news source.

To illustrate, in Figure 1, Harry Roque, the Philippine President’s spokesperson addresses criticism on the recent government project which dumped dolomite over Manila Bay costing an estimated Php 389 million (Inquirer, 2020). The criticism focused on the timing of the project considering that this happened during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the example, Roque is quoted using mental health as one of the reasons for pursuing the project. Using Filipino, he argued that it was important for people who visiting Manila Bay appreciate the beauty of dolomite white sand on the shore to help them cope with the mental stress of the pandemic. In this example, two languages (Filipino and English) were used to emphasize a rebuttal of the criticism but, at the same time, veer away from the actual issues the Philippines needed to address.



Figure 1: Sample of students’ perception of use of language (Inquirer, 2020)

Second, the use of multimodal resources in texts which intend to misinform has similar generic characteristics, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. As can be observed in Figure 2, it reflects how PETA advocates for animal rights and welfare. Using a photo of a child smoking tobacco provokes disapproval and, as smoking is compared with eating meat, it implies a strong warning to discourage the audience from eating meat. The first line “You wouldn’t let your child smoke” is emphasized to focus on the organization’s call for people to go vegan. However, the students perceived this as a false analogy between a child smoking and eating meat. Overall, the use of the image of the smoking child, the large fonts that emphasize the message and logo of the organization work together semiotically to encode a message that appears to relate eating meat to smoking.



Figure 2: Sample of students’ perception of false analogy (“Eating meat increases”, 2015)

Structuring of arguments

In our project, one prominent communicative device found in texts that spread misinformation was the use of a problematic argument. With the wide use of social media, information that comes from popular figures in politics and entertainment emphasizes arguments that can stir intense emotions and divisive thinking. These arguments naturalize problematic beliefs about race, sex, class, and religion (to name a few) sometimes leading to stereotypes. In Figure 3, one student chose a meme portraying former US president Donald Trump making a sweeping generalization about Mexican migrants as a source of problems in society (Jacoby, 2016).

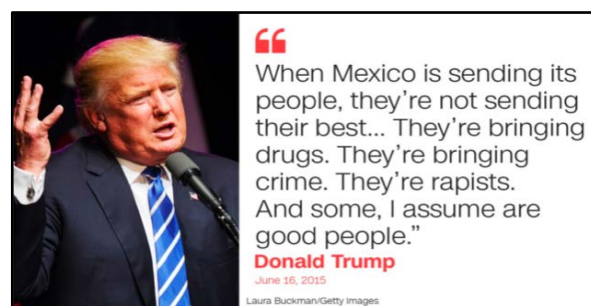


Figure 3: Sample of students’ perception of sweeping generalization (Jacoby, 2016)

Opportunities for Engagement

While misinformation greatly skews important social issues that need to be confronted, there are several areas that students and teachers can explore to strengthen critical thinking skills through active engagement. First, although language and multimodal resources combine to create texts, these are not neutral entities that simply encode messages, but are created with underlying agendas. That is, aspects such as the circumstances, motivations, and intended effects should be interrogated. In our implementation of the project, there was a consensus that many texts that spread misinformation are intended to create or sustain divisions among the public.

Second, since texts and contexts are connected, it is important to see the portrayal of certain groups of people in these texts. For instance, an often-cited point in our discussions with our classes is that privileged and disenfranchised groups are identified in these texts. Specific biases or even stereotypes against disenfranchised groups emerge in these fake news texts. Third, while emotions figure in engaging with issues, it is important to see that a statement in texts be examined in terms of its information value rather than its emotional appeal. Overall, while English language classes may be viewed primarily as sites for learning, they can also be viewed as sites for struggle (Akbari, 2017; Huang, 2012; Pennycook, 2017) where facts and opinions about issues are discussed, negotiated and resolved.

Reflections

Given these original insights gained from our teaching practice, there are several directions teachers may want to pursue. First, while English language classes mainly focus on the development of communication skills in the target language, including other languages in understanding the content of informational texts may help learners appreciate the contexts that shape the creation of these documents. Viewing other languages as a resource opens opportunities for teachers and learners to maximize engagement on issues imparted by these texts. Second, while contexts contribute greatly to the creation and reception of texts, it is also important to monitor the changing dynamics of how students access news.

As mentioned earlier, the internet has afforded individuals the opportunity to access information from a vast array of sources. Understanding our learners' engagements with non-traditional sources of information, which are mainly disseminated via communication technologies, needs to be considered. Third, while effectively dealing with misinformation imparted in texts can be addressed by strengthening comprehension of the structure, content, and language, interrogating assumptions, common sensical beliefs and even motivations in creating these texts need to be part of regular lessons in the English language classroom (Ugalingan et al, 2020). Overall, while an understanding of texts greatly helps to develop an informed citizenry, the demand for collective action also needs to be pursued for positive change.

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