ENGAGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH NEW FORMS OF LITERACY

AE TEACHER'S CORNER

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When we discuss literacy, we typically consider students developing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in terms of traditional print texts and face-to-face experiences. A more contemporary definition of literacy asserts that true learning comes from comprehension *and* the ability to apply knowledge, make meaning, or solve problems. Furthermore, the notion of *modal literacies* suggests that each mode or genre of communication (short stories, poetry, drama, memoir, etc.) is a unique literacy to those particular contexts. (This concept is not entirely dissimilar to the broader ideas of financial literacy, information literacy, and visual literacy.)

As a result of these more discrete definitions of literacy, a number of **new literacies** have emerged over the past decade. In this Teacher's Corner, we take a look at several of these new literacies—instant messaging, comics, short-form video, and podcasting—and the potential impact they may have on teaching and learning English and critical thinking skills. These new literacies present opportunities for students to communicate and solve problems in a 21st century global community.
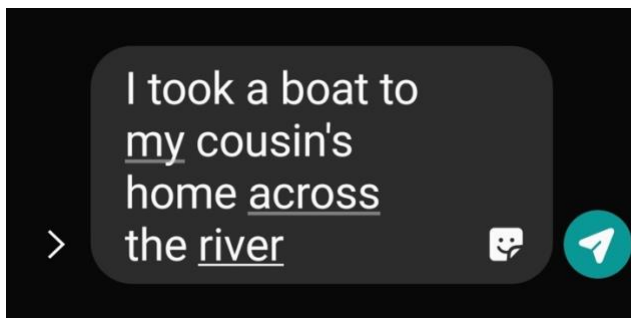
Instant Messaging

Instant messaging consists of short bursts of information and uses abbreviated words and idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. Visuals often play a larger role than words or text. One of the earliest forms of instant messaging, texting, was popularized with the first pocket-sized cellular phones and is still the dominant form of interpersonal communication among youth populations worldwide despite new apps and technologies that have come along since. Other messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter have the ability to use memes (still images with added text) and GIFs (brief animations or moving images), which add further ways to communicate information and ideas. Learning to navigate instant messaging has grown more and more important to English language learners, as these spaces are full of irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole, all forms of figurative language that present difficulties for learners.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF INSTANT MESSAGING THAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW?

Because language is constantly evolving—especially social language—it can be difficult to monitor the vernacular being used in instant messaging at any given time. In this way, students can often provide insights and wisdom into abbreviations that are of the moment. It can be disarming and a little unsettling for some educators when students are comfortable communicating in those new spaces. Yet when it comes to teaching meaningful, effective, clear communication, teachers can provide instruction or guidance to students with regards to texting and instant messaging.
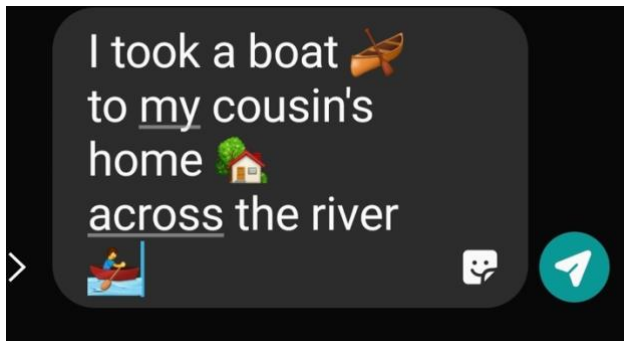
Instant messages make significant use of visual icons, known as emojis, to substitute for words or punctuate an idea. For example, a text saying, "I took a boat to my cousin's home across the river" might translate into the image below:

Or
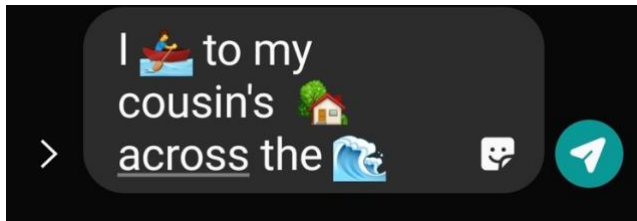
Or

Instant messages are dialogues between two or more individuals. Many individuals keep all of their text messages as an archive of ideas and an artifact of their various relationships. An instant message is no different than a voicemail or sticky note: short, to the point, and disposable.

HOW MIGHT WE CREATE INSTANT MESSAGES AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

One of the benefits of using emojis in the body of a text is that visuals are a common language—an apple looks like an apple, an elephant looks like an elephant—wherever one might go. Considerable work goes into the design of emojis so they are universally understandable. Ask students to list the emojis with which they are most familiar and discuss when they first started reading text messages. Consider creating an emoji word wall and adding new emojis to represent new vocabulary terms and common slang, figurative language, and idioms.

Because instant messages are almost always establishing conversation between two or more people, they are an excellent way for students to practice voice and formal vs. informal language. One activity is to ask students to create a series of text messages between two or more characters. These might be original characters or characters from a book, short story, article, or film the students are studying. Challenge students to make

each character's texting style unique. Which character uses emojis? Which uses GIFs? Who texts in complete sentences, and who texts in abbreviated language? How might our texting style reflect our personalities?

Comics and Graphic Novels

Although some educators may be very familiar with these genres, for many teachers and students, comic books and graphic novels remain a relatively new and unfamiliar opportunity for learning. The combination of words and images aids in comprehension and meaning for language learners while providing creators opportunities to tell stories in unique and powerful ways. Simply put, a comic book is a story told in art: words and images are arranged in a series of panels to convey a plot, with characters, information, themes, etc. A graphic novel is just a longer comic book and is sometimes several comic books that have been bound together as chapters.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF COMICS THAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW?

The answer to this question has been the subject of a great deal of work at American English. Several articles, webinars, and even an original comic book have been devoted to exploring the answer to that question. Those resources are collected in a single space at the American English website for educators around the world to access.

HOW MIGHT WE CREATE COMICS AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

By creating comics, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their English language skills in context without having to rely on the written word to communicate their ideas. When students create comics, teachers can use the visuals to help decode what may be incoherent English and uncover the writer's intent. The visuals present another tool when having a writing conference with students to discuss their composition skills. The visuals to help guide the student and the teacher to better understanding and communication.

The resource Panels and Perspectives: Creating Comics in the EFL Classroom provides several strategies and step-by-step instructions for helping students create comics in the classroom. The guide outlines how creating comics better allows students to compare and contrast ideas, resolve conflicts, and make decisions.
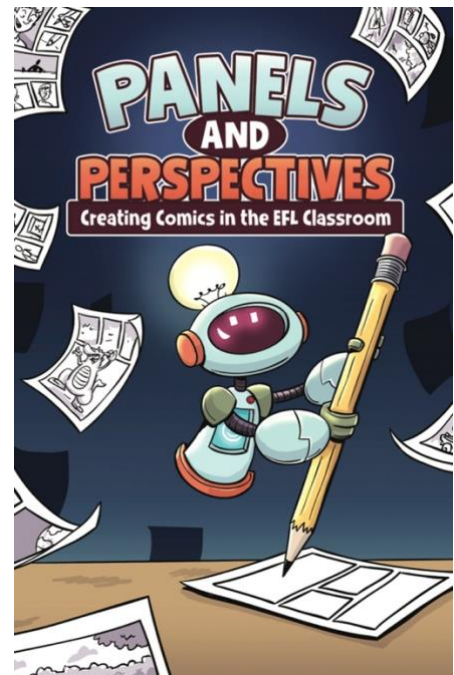
Short-Form Video

Apps such as Instagram and TikTok have popularized the use of short video clips to express peoples' opinions, ideas, and talents as well as build global networks of shared experiences. These videos are typically one to three minutes in length, and often shorter; this short length helps distinguish them from longer video blogs, or "vlogs." (Vlogs also tend to be highly edited which requires greater skill with digital tools.) Unlike traditional filmmakers or broadcasters, short-form video creators' goals go beyond desires to entertain, inform or provoke. They want audiences to interact with their videos, gain inspiration, create responses, and produce videos of their own.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF A SHORT-FORM VIDEO STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW?

Since the vast major short-video creators create their work as a hobby or work only for themselves, there are a limitless number of formats that short-form videos can take. Nevertheless, there are still a few common elements that differentiate short-form videos from other digital video content.

Short-form videos typically start with an enthusiastic greeting from the creator and line or two describing what the video will be about. For example, a creator might say, "Happy Tuesday everyone! Today I'm going to show you five of my favorite things from my home in sixty seconds or less." Short-form videos use a familiar tone as well, addressing the audience directly through the camera. Ask students to consider why short-form video creators would want to address the audience directly. How does that choice impact the relationship between the creator and audience?

Short-form videos are perhaps best known for popularizing pop culture phenomena and trending new or unknown phrases and idioms. Short-form videos often feature creators lip-syncing a well-known pop song, adding their personal style to a dance move, or completing some form of physical or verbal challenge. The last type has become one of the most popular formats, with eating challenges such as "How many super sour gummy candies can you fit in your mouth at once," or balancing challenges such as "How quickly can you stack ten paper cups without tipping them over?"

Ask students to list five challenges they might issue to members of an international community. How might it be useful to see how people from other cultures respond to a challenge? What might we learn about American culture by looking at some of its most popular short-form videos?

HOW MIGHT WE CREATE SHORT-FORM VIDEOS AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

Short-form videos are an efficient and effective way to bring digital storytelling into your students' learning experience. They require less time to produce than traditional short films, they encourage interactivity, and they present numerous opportunities to integrate meaningful language and cultural content.

Students might create a physical, artistic or linguistic challenge and issue it to their classmates through a short-form video. For example, students might challenge their peers to translate a favorite song into American English lyrics and sing it. Consider asking students to watch four or five challenge videos and respond to two of them with videos of their own. In this way, students share a connected experience but without the difficulties posting to social media may cause in your learning environment. Students might make two-minute videos about the start of their days so that students from other locations worldwide might better understand your students' life experiences. Your students might then use a free digital tool such as [Adobe Spark](#), [Instagram](#), or [Canva](#) to apply digital layers of captions, stickers, and filters to that video. Asking students to make intentional choices about the digital layers on their videos—from style to content to arrangement—and then asking them to explain those choices is a powerful way to activate an ongoing literacy mindset of solving problems through applied knowledge.

In groups, students might recreate important moments in the history of their families, communities, or nations with their peers by standing still in the middle of a scene—like if someone said "freeze" while that event was happening. While the group remains frozen in a depiction of that event, the creator moves the camera and narrates what is being depicted. This challenge is similar to the social media mannequin challenge that features people standing perfectly still as the camera moves around. However, the American English version adds cultural understanding and expressive oral language elements to develop critical thinking skills through creativity.

Podcasts

WHAT ARE PODCASTS?

Podcasting has grown from a niche format for news, commentary, and entertainment into an increasingly popular and powerful way to reach a global audience through audio broadcasting. However, rather than relying on radio equipment or even live-streaming audio, podcasts are recorded and then posted online for listening or downloading when it is convenient for the listener. A search for available podcasts on services such as [Stitcher](#), [Spotify](#), or [Apple Podcasts](#) reveals thousands of shows on a tremendous variety of topics
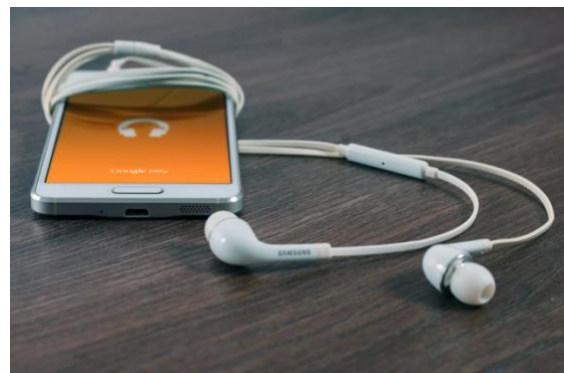
ranging from sports and science to international exchanges and K-Pop music. Anyone can record a podcast and publish it online, giving opportunities for teachers and students to be part of a global community of storytellers, idea-sharers, and information providers.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF A PODCAST THAT STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW?

While every podcast has a unique format to appeal to its particular audience, there are a number of very common features. Familiarizing students with these features can help them listen with more purpose and for deeper comprehension, while also preparing them to produce podcasts of their own.

Podcasts follow a format or structure that organizes ideas and information for the listener. There are a variety of formats. Teachers can guide students through an analysis of any given podcast and help students to make sense of what they are hearing. Try listening to a few podcasts as a class and ask students questions such as: Does this podcast include interviews? If so, are there multiple interviews, or does the podcast focus on just one individual? Does the podcast include stories? Are these stories journalistic pieces of reporting, autobiographical memoirs and recollections, or imaginative works of fiction? Does the podcast include commentary and opinion? If so, are these the opinions of the hosts, the interviewees, or a combination of both? Is the podcast intended to inform or entertain? What evidence leads you to this conclusion?

Podcasts typically have hosts, the main narrators and moderators of the podcast, whose personalities often determine the style and tone of the podcast. Here are some questions to help with identifying the style and tone: Are the hosts very serious or somewhat comical when discussing the topic? Do they use very formal language or is the podcast more conversational? It's common for podcasts to feature two or more co-hosts, with each person bringing a different point of view to the discussion. The chemistry between these various hosts is often what makes a podcast so compelling. Ask students to describe the personality, attitude, or tone of the podcast hosts they are hearing. What language is being used that led the student to that conclusion?

Podcasts typically start with an introduction, setting up the topic for the episode. Often these introductions begin with a brief story or an interesting collection of facts from the hosts. Sometimes these stories and facts are personal to the hosts; very often they are not. These stories and information are supposed to create interest for the listener. Ask students to compare their own life experience to the one included in the introduction. Challenge them to consider the following: if they were to make a podcast about the day they had yesterday, what information would they include during their introduction that would convince a listener to keep listening?

Podcasts often feature music that break up sections of the podcast into manageable chunks and organized ideas. The music provides atmosphere for the podcast and can have a significant impact on the listener. Ask students to choose music of their own they think could be used effectively in place of the music in the podcast and justify their choices.

Consider challenging students to compose an alternative instrumental theme song for the podcast to which they are listening and use details from the content of the podcast to justify their composition.

Podcasts are most always accompanied by show notes and/or a transcript. The show notes typically include an outline of the episode and time stamps indicating key moments or segments in the podcast. They also include links to additional information referenced in the podcast. A transcript accompanies many podcasts, allowing listeners, and students, to follow along with the recording or to review information without listening again and again. Ask students to create their own set of show notes for a podcast based on what they understand to be most important and some additional research into the topic.

HOW MIGHT WE CREATE PODCASTS AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

Creating podcasts provides an excellent way for students to practice all of their traditional literacy skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—in the production of an audio product for an audience. Podcasts do not require expensive equipment—all that is necessary is a way to record student voices. Even the acts of writing a podcast script or conducting interviews in front of a live audience can be rich literacy experiences unto themselves. Posting a podcast can be done using a podcast hosting service such as Anchor or Podbean, but it can also be done with YouTube or just by posting the audio file in a Google Drive, Box, or Dropbox folder and sharing a link with listeners.

Some ideas for podcasts include:

- Students might create "A day in the life of…" podcasts to share the experiences of the people in their communities or even their own experiences.
- Students might research an aspect of American culture of interest to them and create a podcast that shares what they learned. Future episodes could feature deeper inquiry questions.
- Students might structure a conversation or debate around an issue of global importance, such as one of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Future episodes might feature a different SDG or the opinions of listeners.

Here are some podcasts to consider using in the classroom:	
For learners: • **Better at English** • **VOA Learning English** • **Espresso English** • **All Ears English**	**For teachers:** • **TEFL Commute** • **TESOL Pop** • **TEFLology** • **Larry Ferlazzo Classroom Q and A** • **Board Gaming with English**
*Please note, these podcasts are not endorsed by AE.	

WHAT WILL BE THE NEWEST LITERACIES?

H ow might we best prepare our students for new forms of communication in the future? With so much information being shared through video games, video series, reality programming, and music, there are likely even more forms of media waiting to enter our global community. We will better serve our students and our teaching by familiarizing ourselves with the many emerging forms of expression. As the ways that our students communicate evolve, so too will our definitions of literacy.

This article was written by contributing author Dan Ryder for AE Teacher's Corner.

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Join our private Teacher's Corner group here:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/AETeachersCorner/. Please answer all three questions completely. You will not be accepted into the group unless you answer the questions.

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