Enhancing Communicative Competencies and Media Literacy in Sri Lankan University System

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ABSTRACT

Using a skills-based approach, this study investigates the Communicative Competencies (CC) and Media Literacy of lecturers in two multi-ethnic Universities in Western Province, Sri Lanka. A focus group method was used in the study. The findings revealed that: (1) lecturers have an appropriate level of access to media and information technologies; (2) lecturers have little understanding of media and information technology principles and theories; (3) lecturers lack basic knowledge and technology proficiency to evaluate and critically analyse media; and (4) content creation is limited. Various cultural, structural, organizational, and technological constraints limit CC and Media Literacy. It has suggested that the University administrations recognize the importance of CC and Media Literacy education and provide CC and Media Literacy to lecturers and students for them to co-create independent life-long learning.

Keywords: Communicative Competencies, Media literacy, Media education, Universities

INTRODUCTION

In order to minimize the digital divide, knowledge disparity, income gaps, and the developmental divide between western and eastern countries, developing Communicative Competencies (CC) among students, lecturers, and individuals has been prioritized. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Education has emphasized the importance of CC and Media Literacy education in building a knowledge society, encouraging life-long learning, and incorporating ICTs into the curriculum after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The educational technology became a prominent policy which had three essential components (Marín & Castaneda, 2023). Those three components are information technology awareness and attitude (importance of information technology, applications, evaluation and reflection, and life-long learning); knowledge and skills (basic information technology knowledge and skills); and application and innovation (teaching design and implementation, integration of technology into the curriculum, provisioning education and support for students, applying technology to evaluate students and the teaching process, social responsibility, and research and development).

The present study investigates CC and Media Literacy in multi-ethnic urban two Universities in Western Province, Sri Lanka, using a skills-based approach to media literacy. This research looks at how lecturers' access, comprehend, evaluate, and create media information for communication and pedagogical purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information literacy is defined as sets of abilities to identify an information need, access, evaluate, understand, and apply the needed information and recognize it as a prerequisite for independent and life-long learning, participation, social inclusion, and acquisition and creation of new knowledge, critical thinking, decision-making, and dealing with challenges in the networked society (Croucher et al., 2022). According to (Campbell & Park, 2008), information literacy consists of five elements: recognize

information needs; locate and evaluate the quality of information; store and retrieve information; make effective and ethical use of information; and apply information to create and communicate knowledge. Information literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand; it is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society (Power, 2014).

CC and Media Literacy are critical in improving the quality of human life. The goal of CC and Media Literacy is to equip people with knowledge about information systems, the ways to evaluate, use, and communicate the quality content provided by formal or informal media, and critical thinking required for responsible engagement and participation in society (Hayes et al., 2011). CC and Media Literacy plays a leading role in challenging and shaping our thinking and behaviour in the traditional and new media environments (Dharmawardene, 2019), reducing inequalities, promoting tolerance, free expression, intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and democracy.

In 2007, UNESCO proposed the composite concept of media literacy and information literacy as a strategy for unifying the two fields of competencies to include various forms of literacies (Moore, 2008). Following the widespread use of the Internet, digital devices, and mobile platforms to access media content, media literacy, information literacy, media, and information systems have become increasingly interdependent and intertwined. With the convergence of media and information, the lines between the two are becoming increasingly distorted (Barton & Lee, 2013).

Information literacy and media literacy are uniquely paired, inseparable, and interdependent (Dharmawardene & Wijewardene, 2022). Information literacy is considered 'a foundation for competency in media literacy' (Moore, 2008) that empowers individuals to develop the capacity to obtain, understand, evaluate, adapt, generate, store, and present information for problem analysis and decision-making (Hosseini & Kotilainen, 2021). Information literacy involves information gathering, and media literacy involves available media resources (Hosseini & Kotilainen, 2021) and 'the process of exploring, analysing and understanding the nature of mass media' (Aiusheeva, 2023).

CC and Media Literacy is defined as a set of combined competencies (knowledge, skills, attitude) that enables individuals to identify, access, understand, evaluate, use, create, and disseminate information in a variety of contexts in an effective, creative, ethical, and critical manner in order to participate and engage in personal, professional, and societal activities (Lee et al., 2013). CC and Media Literacy encompasses a set of competencies in a media- and information-rich environment in the twenty-first century that fosters equitable access to information and knowledge, freedom of expression, quality education, and life-long learning skills that are essential for effective engagement in all aspects of development (Afrilyasanti & Basthomi, 2023).

Livingstone (2004) proposed a four-component model for CC and Media Literacy: access, analysis, evaluation, and creation of content. (De Beukelaer, 2014) defined the competencies and level of proficiency that a person should have in CC and Media Literacy and established the CC and Media Literacy standard, which includes access, understanding, evaluation, creation, and sharing. (Muratova & Valliulina, 2019) developed a five-part model that includes access, use, analysis and comprehension, critical evaluation, creation, and engagement.

These three models are comprised of four major components. They are (1) access, (2) comprehension, (3) evaluation and analysis, and (4) content creation. We draw on the CC and Media Literacy model because of this emphasis on skills. To begin, this model gives an overview of CC and Media Literacy (Jang et al., 2023).

The model's first component is access. It is the ability to find, access, and retrieve information and media

content (Kraut, 2013). Access to and availability of information sources and communication technologies can be greatly influenced by social, economic, political, regional, and technological factors (Tohara, 2021). Those who have easier access to media sources benefit economically, educationally, politically, and culturally (Livingstone, 2004). He discussed how the digital divide reveals inequalities in educational, social, and political opportunities.The model's second component is comprehension. It is the ability to comprehend information technologies and media content (Kraut, 2013), to be well-versed in the norms, values, ideologies, and traditions of ICTs and the media, as well as the benefits and drawbacks. The model's third component is evaluation and analysis.

Evaluation and analysis are the ability to critically evaluate information and media content in order to select trustworthy information (Catts & Lau, 2008). It entails distinguishing between facts and fiction, identifying and challenging various forces, ideologies, and values that shape media content, and assessing the quality of information as well as the functions and operations of information and media providers and institutions (Kraut, 2013). It is the ability to determine fact and measure credibility by examining and analysing the key elements of information provided (5Ws and 1H: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?), the setting, motives, causation, purpose, and the audience, as well as checking for verifiability (Catts & Lau, 2008).

The model's fourth component is content creation. This is the ability to create, use, and monitor information and media content, as well as communicate effectively and ethically with others (Kraut, 2013). This CC and Media Literacy competence necessitates that media users have a thorough understanding and mastery of media theories, principles, and ICT production expertise in order to create, communicate, disseminate, and share information with others, as well as participate in discipline-related activities (Basir et al., 2021).

Lecturers in Asian countries face challenges in the era of new media (Dharmawardene, 2019). CC and Media Literacy have become a priority for evaluating a lecturer's performance. Lecturers are expected to have an extensive range of CC and Media Literacy skills to facilitate their teaching and guide students in navigating the media landscape to help them to harvest the benefits of media technology in Sri Lanka (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2014). Lecturers need to develop CC and Media Literacy approaches that inform, educate, and help lecturers and students better understand and engage with their media world (Godamanna & Jayamaha, 2013). Thus, we askeed the following research question from the lecturers in multi-ethnic two Universities in Western, Sri Lanka:

RQ: How do the University lecturers in Sri Lanka access and create media content to develop their CC and Media Literacy?

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in two Universities in the Western Province in Sri Lanka. The province is the most culturally diverse in Sri Lanka.

Thirty lecturers from the two Universities representing different towns of the country participated in four relatively structured focus groups, each lasting about 60 minutes. The participants taught different subjects, such as Accounting, English, Zoology, Physics, History, and Information Technology, all for more than 15 years, some over 30 years.

The focus group interview questionnaire carried 15 open ended questions that collected information on their practice of using online resources, understanding of analysing them, anility to use appropriately on various occasions and the frequency of creating new material.

RESULTS

The study showed lecturers had adequate level of access to media and information technologies but their knowledge and understanding of how to use such technologies is limited. Lecturers did not show much of an understanding of how to evaluate and analyse information; digital content creation and communication as lecturers lack training.

Access

According to the findings of the focus-group interviews, the majority of lecturers had multiple digital devices at home, such as a smartphone, desktop computer, and laptop. They could also use popular software such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. Their preferred browser was Firefox. Furthermore, their preferred social media platforms were Facebook and WhatsApp.

All lecturers stated that they had Internet access. Lecturers reported that some digital media were used in the two Universities, such as *Smart Boards* and devices that enables data transfer between smartphones, tablets, desktop computers, TVs, and data projectors. With this media technology as a 'teaching aid,' lecturers could show PowerPoint slides, videos, and pictures for subjects such as mathematics, Geography, English, fine arts, biology, physics, history, and Business Mathematics. There were Wi-Fi connections in some classrooms. Some lecturers had access to Wi-Fi on their smartphones and could use electronic resources obtained from the Internet to enrich their teaching.

Lack of access to training is one of the barriers to lecturers' professional development in the use of media and ICT. Trainings were useful to technically prepare lecturers to understand how to operate Smart Boards, but they were not closely relevant to the development of CC and Media Literacy.

Understanding

Understanding the benefits of social media, WhatsApp in particular was limited amongst the lecturers. Some lecturers reported using it as a social networking tool to socialize and connect with colleagues, University administrators, students, and lecturers in both Universities. Lecturers used WhatsApp to regularly contact students. The platform was also used by lecturers to share teaching experiences, resources, and pedagogical innovations with colleagues inside and outside of the University. It served as a forum to discuss teaching issues and exchange information on pedagogical practices. The Sinhalese language lecturer said social media, like WhatsApp, transformed traditional teaching approaches and lecturer–student relationships, in that it provided multiple channels of connecting and networking with students. In addition, lecturers and students could share useful teaching and learning resources.

However, the focus group interviews show that only a few lecturers were technologically savvy. There are digital divides, knowledge disparities, and information gaps among lecturers in these two Universities. Having some knowledge and understanding to use some of the technologies and applications does not mean these lecturers have been equipped with adequate CC and Media Literacy to support students' CC and Media Literacy skills development. Overall, lecturers in these two Universities generally do not understand the key concepts and philosophies underpinning CC and Media Literacy in their pedagogical practices that are bound to traditional textbook-based and lecturer-cantered approach.

The lecturers indicated there was a stratification among university lecturers in terms of accessing, understanding, and using media and information technologies. Younger lecturers (<40 Years) were more technologically savvy than older lecturers. Younger lecturers could use media technologies, including *Smart Boards*, data transfer, and other applications for teaching. The older lecturers were more comfortable

with the chalk and talk approach to teaching.

When asked if the University offered students any training in the use of media and information technology, and media content, the lecturers agreed that the two Universities offered a course called Information Technology, providing students with one hour of teaching per week, training students with basic keyboard and computer skills. However, as the two Universities could not provide enough digital facilities to support students' learning and practice, such training was considered 'ineffective' and 'impractical.'

Evaluation and analysis

It is the ability to critically evaluate and analyse the quality, credibility, sources, ideologies, attitudes, viewpoints, values, biases, prejudices, authority, purposes, and manipulation embedded in information and media content is the third component of CC and Media Literacy (Wilson, 2012). This component is built on the first two components: access and understanding. Evaluation is unlikely without the abilities to access and understand ICTs and media content. CC and Media Literacy knowledge and understanding become a prerequisite for evaluation and analysis which, in turn, enhance knowledge acquisition and understanding, and motivate individuals to further seek access to information. Evaluation and critical analysis require lecturers to have a body of knowledge and understanding of media-related technologies, concepts, and theories to help interpret media texts and contexts.

Content creation

The fourth component of CC and Media Literacy is Content Creation.

It denotes the ability to create media content, knowledge, and creative expression for a specific purpose, as well as communicate and share them with others in an ethical manner (Tommasi et al., 2023). Lecturers are expected to develop this competence in order to produce and use information and knowledge in their pedagogical practices, as well as to assist students in developing their CC and Media Literacy and empowering them to be productive, creative, and innovative.

Students gain knowledge through practice or learning by doing (Moeller et al., 2010, p. 47). The present study found that a few (< 10%) young lecturers developed some basic levels of content creation competence by practice.

This study did not find strong evidence to demonstrate both lecturers and students could use media and information technologies to create new media content and knowledge to share and communicate with others. Lack of competence of content creation is associated with the first three CC and Media Literacy components: access, understanding, and evaluation.

DISCUSSION

CC requires knowledge and ability to access, understand, evaluate and analyse, and create and communicate information (Cheung, 2009). These four CC and Media Literacy are interrelated, with access being the foundational base upon which the other three components are anchored. The results show lecturers were aware of the benefits of media and information technology in teaching and learning and they were keen to acquire CC and Media Literacy to surf the Internet to harvest ICT benefits (Ameen & Gorman, 2009). However, lecturers' CC and Media Literacy and media agencies were affected and constrained by the social and political structure operating at various levels, and these lecturers' behaviour, perceptions, pedagogical practices, and understanding of CC and Media Literacy theories are largely shaped by the social, environmental, and structural factors, according to the theory of structure and agency (Arnold et al., 2017).

Access to media and information technologies is an essential aspect of CC and Media Literacy (Livingstone, 2004; Wilson et al., 2011). The more access to and the more opportunities to use media technologies, the more CC and Media Literacy users develop, and the more benefits they gain. The study has shown that some lecturers had limited access to media and information technology, which contributed to the deficiency of the other three CC and Media Literacy. Accessibility has been a barrier to the development of CC and Media Literacy, stemming from the poor technological infrastructure, outdated media technologies and software, lack of training and opportunities for professional development, and lack of inadequate attention, support, and investments by the University administration and the Government (Yue et al., 2019).

As stated by Potter (2010), media and information literate people are expected to have thinking, basic knowledge, practical skills, attitude, and technology fluency, become aware of the purpose for using and engaging with media and information, and understand the roles, operations, functions, and professional and ethical standards of all forms of media and the conditions under which these functions can be fulfilled (Grizzle et al., 2014). The study has shown some young lecturers were aware of the benefits of ICTs, had some basic knowledge and skills to use media technologies in their teaching, and were motivated to enhance their CC and Media Literacy. It is unrealistic to expect lecturers who are not media- and information-literate to train students to become literate in media and ICTs (Aufderheide, 2018).

Evaluating and critically analysing information and media content is an important part of the CC and Media Literacy process (Kubey, 1997). Evaluation involves critical analysis of information, its sources, values, authorship, relevance, reliability, validity, authenticity, accuracy, currency suitability, suitability for the purpose, and awareness of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, lies, propaganda, and commercialism (Livingstone et al., 2008). Fitzgerald (1999) noted the evaluation component consists of a number of processes: ‘metacognition, goals, personal disposition, signals (which initialize an evaluative episode), deliberation, and decision’. She pointed out that in the process of evaluating CC, many factors should be considered, including environmental, social, cultural, political, and personal factors. Willis and Exley (2018) argued the CC and Media Literacy of evaluation and critical analysis should be fostered in this globalized information age. She urged Universities to provide training to build the skillsets to empower lecturers and students to access, gather, evaluate, analyse, organize, prioritize, and judge the information to meet their learning goals.

In addition to access, comprehension, and evaluation, the ability to create content is an important aspect of CC and Media Literacy (Dhiman, 2021). The ability to create information and media content in a variety of formats, such as video, audio, images, PowerPoint presentations, and weblogs, necessitates the user’s knowledge of concepts, rules, skills, experiences, as well as cognitive and communication processes (Willis & Exley, 2018). However, Sri Lankan teachers prefer to follow traditional pedagogic practices that do not lead to knowledge-building in learners (Dharmawardene, 2021).

The above discussion indicates that CC and Media Literacy are not developed and applied in isolation. Many contextual and structural factors can influence the CC and Media Literacy development of understanding, such as available resources, ICT infrastructures, the current level of literacy among lecturers, students, administrators, and government leaders, technology proficiency, learning conceptualization, theories of teaching and learning, traditional forces, politics, and the educational environment (Bulger & Davison, 2018). The findings also helped to discover that social media literacy skills significantly moderate the relationship between information sharing, status-seeking, trust in social media, and sharing fake news, with the effects/relationships being stronger among those with low social media literacy skills. This result contributes to theory and practice, as highlighted in the study’s conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The study found that, while lecturers were aware of the benefits of CC and Media Literacy education, there was no evidence that media elements were integrated into the courses, with the exception of the occasional use of photos, music, and video clips in class. Traditional teaching methods and rote learning, which emphasize memorization techniques based on repetition, continue to dominate the classroom. Students' primary learning resources are the University-recommended textbooks. Students are viewed as stores for lecturers' and textbooks' knowledge. Developing CC and Media Literacy requires an enabling environment that promotes CC and Media Literacy initiatives reflected in university policies, technological investment strategies, governance and control, perceptions and understandings, and pedagogical concepts.

This study showed lecturers recognized the importance and benefits of CC and Media Literacy. However, they acknowledged many barriers and limitations to CC and Media Literacy. The study suggests two Universities, lecturers, and administrators should work together to enable lecturers to develop their CC and Media Literacy, which in turn will benefit students' CC and Media Literacy.

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