

## Media Literacy in Practice: Insights from Iranian ELT Learners

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### Abstract

One of the significant skills that encourages media use and critical thinking, in particular, in the digital era, is media literacy. The aim of this research is to investigate media literacy awareness and practice of 88 ELT students in Ardabil Azad University. The data were collected using a quantitative methodology with the administration of a 17-item questionnaire. The sample was comprised of 72 women (81.8) and 16 men (18.2) students, and the study compared self-assessment of media literacy competencies, consumption patterns, media trust, and attitude towards introducing media literacy to education. The results showed that 68 percent of the students had been trained in media literacy, and 63 percent believed they were average. The internet and social networks were the primary sources of information to 87 percent of the students, and 44 percent of students spent 3-5 hours daily on media. The research revealed discrepancies in the degree of trust because 46 percent of the research subjects referred to their information frequently, but 38 percent used sources that had been vetted. Most students (89 percent) strongly supported the idea of enriching media literacy, and 92 percent supported the idea of teaching media literacy in foreign languages. The results indicate that global media literacy practices should be incorporated in Iranian education in order to promote critical thinking.

**Keywords:** Educational Technology; ELT; Media Literacy

### 1. Introduction

In today's fast-changing digital era, the ability to access, analyze, assess, and create media content has evolved into a crucial skill necessary for survival. Media literacy, which can be broadly described as the ability

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to critically engage with media messages and platforms, is increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental skill in the 21st century (Uğurhan et al., 2020). Digital technologies permeate and have a position in every aspect of personal, social, educational, and professional life of each person, and this necessitates equipping and implementing individuals, especially students, with media literacy abilities (Zou'bi, 2021). In the field of English language teaching (ELT), media literacy holds an important role and particular significance for students who are often exposed to English-language media, and it should foster them in both language competency and critical thinking (Montaño, 2021).

This study investigated the media literacy awareness and practices of 88 English Language Teaching (ELT) students at Ardabil Azad University in Iran. With the growing presence of digital media in language education and the wider sociocultural environment, it is vital to understand how future language educators interact with, interpret, and evaluate the media (Siddig, 2020). This study aims to bridge the divide between theoretical conversations about media literacy and the practical realities of how it is perceived, experienced, and valued by students in an ELT setting.

The incorporation of media literacy into educational systems, especially language learning, has been widely explored in international scholarship (Buchatska et al., 2024; El-Henawy, 2019). However, most of the literature focuses on and emphasizes developed contexts, while there is limited research examining how media literacy is understood, interpreted, and practiced in countries such as Iran, where unique digital and socio-political factors present developments and manage challenges and opportunities (Faris & Rahimi, 2016). Although Iranian students are using and gaining access to technology, especially via mobile devices and social media platforms, there is still a shortage of empirical data on how they critically engage and interact with media, assess its reliability, and use it for educational development in their personal lives (Karimi et al., 2021).

This article is important because it addresses several interconnected needs at both local and international scales at different levels. First, it provides empirical evidence and data on relatively under-researched circumstances: the media literacy competencies and abilities of ELT students in Iran. Second, it contributes to and explores insights into how media literacy is practiced, perceived, and integrated into language teaching in the educational field (Dashtestani & Hojatpanah, 2020). Future English teachers are considering not only digital content consumers but also potential and prospective facilitators of media literacy in education. It is crucial to understand their current competencies,

attitudes, and existing skills to shape and design effective curricula and teacher training programs (Share & Mamikonyan, 2020; El-Henawy, 2019; Drajati et al., 2018).

This study is important in three respects. From an academic perspective, it adds to and enriches the body of literature on media literacy by providing and contributing region-specific data and analysis of insights, allowing for comparisons with research studies conducted in other parts of the world. From a Pedagogical view, this study provides important information for curriculum designers, teacher educators, and policymakers about the level of media literacy among ELT students in Iran, and it also supports them in designing more media education strategies and a variety of ways to promote their knowledge. In a Social view, this study also encourages and enhances critical thinking skills, accountability, and credibility in media consumption, and engagement in a digital age that is increasingly related to misinformation, propaganda, and social satisfaction.

This study aims to address a significant gap that indicates a limitation and insufficient data in quantitative research on how Iranian university students perceive their media literacy. Although there are theoretical discussions and discourses in both Iranian and international research, empirical studies using structured instruments and tools remain rare and limited, especially those that focus on language learners and future teachers.

By analyzing the participants' answers to a 17-item questionnaire and exploring its factors, this study filled the gap. The variables were self-evaluation of media literacy, patterns of media consumption, and trust and safety in accessing media resources. This also supports the integration and incorporation of media literacy into formal language instruction.

Furthermore, this study has a view about the aspects of students' behaviors related to media literacy, identifying and analyzing trends that highlight the complexities of digital engagement. For instance, even though 68% of students indicated having some level of media literacy training, a considerable number (63%) still assessed their media literacy skills as "average." Similarly, although the Internet and social media are considered the main and primary information sources for the majority of students (87%), their level of trust and safety in these sources remains inconsistent. Approximately 46% of participants regularly verified and checked the reliability of their sources, yet only 38% used and relied on verified platforms, highlighting a potential weakness and vulnerability, and the necessity for more and deeper comprehensive critical literacy education.

Another notable discovery is that students who participated and integrated media literacy into the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum showed strong support. Therefore, a remarkable 92% of the respondents have shown collaboration and support, which demonstrates an increased awareness of the importance of media literacy within language education. This attitude aligns with a global trend of educational shift toward integrating real-world skills, such as critical thinking, media literacy navigation, and intercultural understanding or awareness, into language learning instruction. The strong students' feedback interprets and demonstrates their willingness and readiness, and can also be considered for curriculum development. With these findings, this study may follow some research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness and understanding based on media literacy and the self-evaluated skills in ELT students at Ardabil Azad University?
2. How do students check and assess the reliability of sources for using media?
3. How much do ELT students support the integration of media literacy within the language-learning curriculum?
4. What implications do students' media behaviors and perspectives hold for the future of media literacy in the Iranian ELT environment?

By considering these questions, the study not only presents a view of media literacy practices among a particular group but also provides wider insights into how media literacy can be effectively integrated and incorporated into language instruction. It emphasizes the importance of connecting curriculum development and designing it with students' real-life experiences in digital environments and equipping future teachers to guide, manage, and educate others to effectively deal with a media sector that is complicated, fast-paced, and filled with misinformation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Background to the Theoretical and Conceptual Views of Media Literacies***

The new media literacies theory was started in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Donald J. Leu and his colleagues, who emphasized the impact of the internet and digital technologies on literacy. Because of this theory, various studies have been conducted. This theory provides a view to understand the nature of digital technologies in literacy, and prepares individuals to develop in the digital world.

Montano (2020) explored the concept of media literacy in teaching English in a foreign language environment. The research was conducted

on the upper-intermediate syllabus at the Language Institute of Bogotá University. A media literacy workshop was conducted for pedagogical intervention. It was found that EFL students were from heterogeneous and multilevel groups in media literacy practices. The results of this study demonstrated that students improved their oral interaction skills and learned a variety of tactics to discuss messages from various media outlets, express their personal viewpoints, and gather further information to support their conclusions.

Rasi et al. (2020) researched to understand how to promote media literacy among older people. Between 2005 and 2019, a systematic review published 40 empirical studies on media literacy development. The findings revealed that interventions aimed at fostering media literacy in older adults need more development and creative enrichment in terms of content, aims, providers, and pedagogical approaches.

Luan et al. (2020) noted that the rise of new media technologies has allowed people not only to consume, but also to create, produce, distribute, and assess media content. Although the main concerns of research have focused on the conceptualization of new media literacy development, a limited number of studies have explored the role of EFL learners' new media literacy. This quantitative study aims to validate an instrument for Chinese students to emphasize the role of media literacy in education and measure it. To further investigate this, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to uncover the relationships among various indicators of ENML. All five proposed models were found to be acceptable, and each met the criteria.

Hazaea and his colleagues (2020) argued that with the importance and significance shift to remote learning due to the spread of COVID-19 and the initiation of communication technology, developing digital online media literacy has brought attention to English EFL students. Media literacy empowers EFL learners to access, analyze, evaluate, and create digital online content. This study examines the competencies in DOML among preparatory year students at Saudi University. It also investigates whether gender contributes to any differences. The results showed that the participants were competent in DOML ( $m=3.73$ ) and that there were no significant differences between sexes. This outcome suggests that participants were ready to adjust to an emergency remote learning scenario.

Bilotserkovets et al. (2021) emphasized how students developed media literacy skills under the conditions of total and emergent distance learning during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected from 138 first-year students studying English as a foreign

language (EFL). In the experimental group, the media literacy of the participants was developed through a variety of projects and by creating social media content. Pedagogical observation, psychological techniques, and mathematical methods were employed to obtain qualitative results of the participants' progress and to measure and assess the quantitative data of the experiment. The findings demonstrated positive progress in different skills in the experimental group as well as improvement in their English proficiency.

Park and Kim (2021) investigated digital literacy and related fields that have received interest from scholars and practitioners for more than 20 years; nonetheless, academic communities need to systematically review how these fields have developed. This study explores the evolution of research inquiries in digital literacy and related concepts, with a particular focus on educational fields. This study employs a scientometric approach to examine keywords, co-authorship, and cited publications in digital literacy. The findings indicate that digital literacy has a multidisciplinary nature, and different fields such as literacy, ICT, the Internet, computer skill proficiency, science, nursing, health, and language education are integrated and unified. Research participants included a range from primary students to professionals, and the co-authorship patterns were influenced by countries in America and Europe. To shed light on these findings, using customized digital literacy curricula and technology is critical for learners of different ages to nurture digital literacy according to their learning aims. They need to cultivate an understanding of the social impact of exploiting technology and computational thinking.

Lehoteska et al. (2022) investigated and contributed to the literature on the value of Virtual Exchanges (VEs) in the field of technology-mediated language learning. Specifically, the study indicates findings from a pilot test involving EFL learners in Slovakia and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Michigan, USA, who participated in a 10-week international virtual exchange focused on media literacy. Learners in both countries collaborated and worked together on a project that was expected to develop and administer a survey on media literacy in their institutions, provide feedback on their international peers' survey designs, and present their results. Learners also engaged and worked to raise their awareness of misinformation through a media literacy campaign conducted on social media platforms. To guide language educators interested in implementing VEs, researchers have also addressed the technological tools that enhance the VE program and discussed several pedagogical issues that are important to consider in VEs for language learners.

According to Cho et al. (2022), growing concerns about the negative impacts and harmful effects of social media have shifted the public focus to media literacy as a possible solution. This study presents an innovative theoretical and conceptual framework for approaching social media literacy. Current conceptions of media literacy are frequently based on mass media, emphasizing the analysis of typical content and its evaluation through common and shared values. Unlike traditional approaches rooted in mass media, SoMeLit focuses on the user's self in social media, which is in a dynamic interaction with their choices of messages and social connections. Therefore, the focus of analysis in SoMeLit is one's selections and values that influence and are influenced by the construction of one's reality on social media, and the evolving characteristics or features of social media platforms shape and define how individuals construct the boundaries and their perception of reality within these digital platforms.

Wuyckens et al. (2023) conducted a systematic meta-review of the scientific literature and discussed the concepts of information literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy. While carrying out a cross-analysis of how literature reviews specifically address these three concepts, this article identifies and articulates a critical analysis of the main findings from the reviewed texts regarding the conceptual landscape that they cover. The study highlights confusion between the constitutive dimensions of literacies, recurrent difficulties in establishing theoretical articulations between contributions, and operationalization problems in observing and assessing these literacies.

Afrilyasanti and colleagues (2023) note that the global expansion in Internet accessibility and the rise of digital media are compatible with students' characteristics as Generation Z, who mainly engage and interact with the world through mobile applications. Because of these students' characteristics or traits and the rapid spread of digital media and information, there is a clear need for critical media literacy (CML) in education, along with the implementation of digital-based and student-centered learning approaches such as online discussion forums (ODFs). Building on this need for CML instruction and student-centered digital learning, the researchers conducted an exploratory study, which aims to better understand students' perceptions of ODF for their CML learning within EFL classes. Some factors affecting students' participation, facilitating students' CML learning in an EFL context, enhancing students' engagement, and performance in ODF. The study involved 250 EFL students from secondary schools in Indonesia who were learning English through courses that integrated critical media literacy CML into

the curriculum. The research revealed significant conclusions regarding the key factors that need to be considered while having ODF in CML learning within the EFL context and the facilitating roles of teachers in ODF. Although various studies have revealed the importance of this topic, this study can improve the literature.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The research participants consist of 88 English Language Teaching undergraduate students from Ardabil Azad University, where females represent 81.8% (72 students) and males constitute 18.2% (16 students) of the total population. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, as they were directly relevant to the study's focus on media literacy in language education. Study participants chose to join voluntarily while remaining unidentified so they could provide truthful self-evaluations without personal or professional bias. The study participants who studied languages were chosen because they used digital technologies both inside and outside of their academic work. The participant cohort held significant importance because ELT students need to work regularly with digital platforms and online materials for research purposes which directly affects their academic results.

#### **3.2. Instrument**

The research instrument consisted of a structured 17-item questionnaire. It was designed to evaluate participants' media literacy awareness, their habits of media consumption, their trust in media sources, and their opinions about media literacy education. Multiple-choice questions together with Likert-scale items were included in the questionnaire which provided a complete understanding of participants' media literacy practices. The questionnaire included multiple-choice sections to measure media consumption patterns and trust in media sources and Likert-type items for media literacy competency self-assessment. In the first part, questions 1-6 are for analyzing their "Media Literacy Awareness & Consumption Habits" for example, question 5 asks: "*What social networks and messengers do you typically use?*", in the second part, questions 7-10 evaluate their "Media Trust, Selection, and Challenges" such as question 10: "*Do you take any measures when encountering elements of disinformation, propaganda, or hate speech?*", and at last, questions 11-17 are for understanding "Educational Influence & Future Learning Needs" for instance, question 17 explores: "*What way*



*of mastering or improving knowledge and skills in the field of media literacy do you consider the most appropriate? ”.*

### **3.3. Procedure**

An online survey served as the data collection method to ensure all students had access while reducing outside effects on their answers. Students using the online format completed the questionnaire at their convenience, thus minimizing potential biases that usually occur in controlled classroom settings. The study's emphasis on digital media literacy prompted researchers to use an online survey as their preferred method since it matched the research targets of digital content usage assessment. The researchers processed the survey responses with quantitative analysis techniques that displayed descriptive statistics about media literacy competencies and consumption behaviors, together with trust levels and educational perspectives through mean scores and standard deviations, and minimum and maximum value points.

## **4. Results**

The research data is organized into three primary subsections. These include: (1) media literacy comprehension and media usage patterns, (2) media trust and content selection tendencies, and (3) educational opinions about the implementation of media literacy. Descriptive statistics were analyzed from the survey results through mean scores and standard deviations, together with minimum and maximum values, to show significant patterns.

Results show that students who underwent some sort of media literacy training make up 68% of the total, while their self-reported media literacy levels average at 3.10 with a standard deviation of 0.95. The majority of these students use digital media as their main information source, and they spend most of their time on the internet and social network platforms. Media trust levels present contradictory results because students use verified sources only 38% of the time, but they verify information they encounter 46% of the time.

Students demonstrate strong support for the integration of media literacy into foreign language education (92%) and express high interest (89%) in participating in further training programs. Students prefer online courses over structured university courses and reading handbooks for their learning activities because they want flexible academic formats.

Table presentations in subsequent sections detail student responses regarding their understanding of media, along with their media usage habits and trust perceptions, and their thoughts on media education.

#### **4.1. Media Literacy Awareness and Consumption Habits**

The research analyzed students' background experience with media literacy education, together with their confidence levels regarding media literacy skills and their main information sources and media usage behaviors.

##### **4.1.1. Exposure to Media Literacy Education**

Among the surveyed students 68% received formal media literacy education, but 32% did not participate in any such structured programs. The data indicate that educational settings are moderately engaged in promoting media literacy education for their English language teaching students.

##### **4.1.2. Self-Assessed Media Literacy Competency**

The participants assessed their media literacy competence using a 5-point rating system, which spanned from "No Knowledge" to "High Competency." The average media literacy understanding of students is perceived at an average level according to their rated responses, which showed a mean score of 3.10 (SD = 0.95).

##### **4.1.3. Media Consumption Patterns**

Respondents selected the internet and social networks as their main information sources for daily news updates since they made up 87% of the total respondents. Television consumption remained low at 9% while newspaper and radio use occurred only occasionally.

##### **4.1.4. Time Spent on Media Daily**

The students manifested different degrees of involvement with digital platforms for learning. The majority of students (44%) maintained daily media consumption within 3–5 hours, yet another substantial number (21%) spent between 6–10 hours, whereas (13%) had constant media connectivity.

##### **4.1.5. Preferred Social Media Platforms**

The study participants chose the digital platforms that they used the most often. The top three platforms were:

- Instagram (78%)
- Telegram (74%)
- WhatsApp (66%)

The research demonstrates that students actively use social networks and messengers as their primary information sources which affects their digital content interaction.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive statistics for the first questions of the questionnaire: Media Literacy Awareness & Consumption Habits*

Question	Min	Max	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. Have you taken a media literacy course?	1	3	1.68	0.74
2. How do you assess your media literacy level?	1	5	3.10	0.95
3. What sources of information do you prefer?	1	4	3.87	1.02
4. How much time do you spend on media daily?	1	4	2.44	1.01
5. What social networks and messengers do you use?	1	9	5.12	2.34
6. What do you use media and digital devices for?	1	4	2.96	1.08

## **4.2. Media Trust, Selection, and Challenges**

### **4.2.1. Trust in Media Sources**

The research examined how students perceive media credibility by assessing their practices toward verified sources and their habit of information verification before they accept facts. Students who did not confirm their sources expressed different levels of doubt about media sources, although they did not regularly validate information from multiple platforms.

### **4.2.2. Media Selection Habits**

The students were questioned about their standard process for content selection.

- 63% actively search for content themselves
- 19% rely on platform recommendations

Family members and friends, educators, together with platform suggestions, form the information selection method for 14% of students.

The research supports active student control over media content since students demonstrate independence in selecting their digital media rather than following passive recommendation systems.

### **4.2.3. Responses to Disinformation and Misinformation**

The study revealed that 42% of students do not act regarding misinformation, while 32% occasionally report false content, and 16% actively monitor and report misinformation. Educational programs about media literacy need to teach specific techniques that help people recognize and manage misinformation effectively.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for questions 7-10: Media Trust, Selection & Challenges

Question	Min	Max	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
7. How do you choose content?	1	4	2.83	1.01
8. Do you trust media sources?	1	4	2.46	1.10
9. Has your media consumption changed since recent events?	1	4	2.71	1.02
10. Do you take measures against misinformation?	1	6	3.14	1.32

### 4.3. Educational Influence and Future Learning Needs

#### 4.3.1. Institutional Role in Media Literacy

A majority of students (58%) agreed their university instructors promoted digital literacy yet 26% disagreed and 16% were unsure about this aspect. The research data shows that some professors support media literacy initiatives yet institutions need to improve their consistent participation in these programs.

#### 4.3.2. Attitudes Toward Media Literacy Training

The survey revealed overwhelming university student support (92%) for media literacy education in foreign language learning alongside (89%) their enthusiasm for training programs that enhance their digital literacy understanding.

#### 4.3.3. Preferred Learning Methods

Students indicated that online courses and university programs together with reading handbooks represented their top choices for developing their media literacy abilities.

- Online Courses (55%)
- University Programs (43%)
- Reading Handbooks (31%)

The data shows that flexible digital-first media literacy instruction methods might provide the most suitable approach to meet student educational requirements.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for questions 11-17: Educational Influence & Future Learning Needs

Question	Min	Max	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
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11. Do university educators encourage media literacy?	1	3	2.14	0.78
12. Do you need to improve your media literacy?	1	4	3.82	1.12
13. Should media literacy be included in specialist training?	1	4	3.91	0.98
14. Should media literacy be integrated into foreign language learning?	1	4	4.02	0.94
15. Are you interested in media literacy training?	1	3	2.76	0.92
16. Can global media literacy practices help critical thinking in Iran?	1	3	2.88	1.04
17. Preferred ways to improve media literacy?	1	7	3.42	1.34

The study findings show that students exhibit average media literacy skills combined with heavy usage of social networks for information access, while their trust in digital sources shows conflicting results. Most students strongly desire better media literacy skills, and they prefer online courses and university-led training as their preferred learning methods. The current media literacy structure needs further improvement, even though institutions provide support. Future development of educational programs will become essential.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this research present subtle understandings of the media literacy awareness and practices of ELT students at Ardabil Azad University that can be aligned with and expanded the existing literature: the average self-assessed competency score of 3.10 (SD = 0.95) despite 68% of participants having been taught media literacy indicates that exposure does not help learners acquire media literacy skills without specific pedagogical interventions, as observed by Montaña (2020). The fact that the students consider digital platforms as the main sources of information (Instagram (78%), Telegram (74%), and WhatsApp (66%)) is likely to reflect the findings of Afrilyasanti et al.(2023), who proposed that critical media literacy (CML) should be applied by Gen Z students who are enrolled in a mobile-based setting, yet the difference between the number of students who verify information (46%) and consult sources that have proven information (38%) implies an underlying gap in the application of the concept of media literacy. The fact that 42 percent of students do not take action when faced with misinformation is a crucial warning sign, and projects the implementation of media literacy into ELT lesson plans as an important factor, as demonstrated by Hazaea et al.

(2020), who argued that digital verifications and media literacy may be used to integrate media literacy in language teaching via the virtual interface. Institutional backing is not uniform, with only 58% of students recognizing educator encouragement, which again agrees with Rasi et al.(2020), as they reported that good media literacy work cannot be done in the absence of content, dedicated providers, and pedagogical creativity. The fact that only 55% and 43% of students indicated institutional support of online courses and university programs respectively, is yet another confirmation that Park and Kim (2021) are right, as they stated that successful implementation of media literacy entails not only content but also engaged providers and innovation on the whole, the research confirms that Iranian students of ELT are aware and interested in media literacy, but their practices are still not integrated. These findings justify the importance of organized, theory-based interventions to bridge the gap between conceptual knowledge and practical skills.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research is an empirical contribution to a lowly researched setting of media literacy in ELT students in Iran, which demonstrates moderate competency levels, high levels of digital participation, and uneven levels of trust in media sources. Although most students use social media to access information, they do not have strong skills to verify information and address misinformation, and this is a notable digital responsibility gap. The high level of student endorsement of the concept of incorporating media literacy into language education, coupled with their preference for more flexible forms of learning, imposes a clear directive among curriculum designers and teacher educators. Institutions should not treat media literacy as an occasional support, but integrate it into their curriculum because, in the future, future teachers will need to learn how to operate and teach in a complicated digital world. In order to overcome these challenges, universities are advised to introduce systematic media literacy courses that include both theoretical education and practical lessons in verification, ethical media usage and critical thinking. Using international examples and adjusting them to the specifics of the Iranian sociopolitical and online environment will enable ELT students to transform into media users and agents of media literacy in their future classes.

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