

# Developing pre-service teachers' media literacy through text mediation

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This article provides

- insights into media literacy required for successful Computer Mediated Communication;
- a discussion on tone in social media communication;
- an example of how to develop pre-service teachers' media literacy through text mediation;
- a call for incorporating media literacy in teacher education as well as the EFL classroom.

## 1 Rationale

This article aims to achieve two purposes: presenting the findings of a mediation project and exploring practical implications of these findings for English language teaching. The project was conducted as part of an English language competence course in the Master of Education program at the University of Vienna. The course itself is designed to raise pre-service teachers' genre competence through engaging students with genre analysis, written production and text mediation, with a particular focus on the canonical text genres featured in the standardized Austrian school-leaving exam. In this context, the term 'mediation' refers to adapting content and language so as to transform a text from one source or genre to another in line with genre-specific features and to facilitate sharing of information and knowledge between various audiences (cf. Council of Europe, 2018). In the course, we examined and highlighted linguistic differences in the crafting of tone, register and structure in school-leaving exam text types (such as blogs, reports, emails, as specified by the BMBWF, 2019) as well as other genres relevant to the field of education (e.g. abstracts, proposals). Since the project only focused on a small number of texts, its findings on tone in news articles and tweets cannot be generalized but can nevertheless serve as an impetus for promoting the integration of media literacy in teacher education programs as well as EFL classrooms.

The first aim of this article is the presentation of the findings of our text mediation, for which we transformed news articles on the subject of wildfires in Australia – a topic that took centre stage in global discourse in early 2020 – into a tweet. These two text types seem to be closely connected in that newspaper articles often report current, tragic and controversial events which frequently raise discussions on social media sites such as Twitter. We first analyzed and

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compared the two genres to identify essential features and then use our analysis as a basis for producing our own tweet thread typical of the genre. Our tweet was created through transforming, or ‘mediating’, the content and language from a longer news article.

An analysis and comparison of tone used in articles and tweets is highly relevant for teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the one hand, the article is one of the textual genres tested in the written standardized English school-leaving examination (BMBWF, 2019) and typically requires a certain degree of formality, clarity and objectivity. Tweets, on the other hand, have come to frequently replace traditional sources of information and appear to serve as emotional outlets for Twitter users. The emotional dimension of Twitter has been examined by Cody et al. (2015) using an online hedonometer, which measures happiness in larger text corpora, and applying it to tweets in order to analyze the emotions used to talk about climate change. Cody et al. (2015) found that the overall happiness in tweets containing the word “climate” is less than in all other tweets, resulting mostly from the former’s word choice, which would often reflect a “threat” or “crisis” (p. 15). In line with these results, Ma et al. (2013, p. 1403) highlight the prevalence of topics conveying negative sentiments on Twitter and illustrate further that hashtags play a significant role in establishing a tweet’s sentiment. These findings suggest a strong relationship between tweets and expressing emotions, which is why investigating features of online media such as hashtags plays a vital role when analyzing tone in Computer Mediated Communication (henceforth CMC).

For our project, we focused on different manifestations of tone in each genre by investigating lexis and grammar, as well as typical features of CMC. Tone can be defined as the result of a writer’s stance, knowledge base and relationship to the audience, and depends on the communicative purpose of a text (Arthur, 1997, p. 21). Tone is expressed differently according to the level of formality employed in a text and thus differs in the use of contractions, colloquialisms, sentence length and lexical fields (Royal, 2012, p. 91). The resulting differences in tone found in a newspaper article in contrast to a tweet may provide valuable insights into the use of genre-specific tone. Such information is relevant not only for linguists who aim to gain a more comprehensive understanding of media literacy related to communication in social media, but also for EFL teachers who seek to or are required to integrate media literacy into their teaching.

The second aim of this article thus is to highlight the relevance of media literacy in teacher education, as it is a fundamental concept for teachers educating a future generation accustomed to making extensive use of social media for communicative purposes. Apart from its relevance to the everyday lives of learners, teaching media literacy has multiple benefits, one being the promotion of different ways of student participation in the classroom (Schwarz, 2001, p. 115). Furthermore, it “builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy” (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.); provides “a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms” (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.); and “should lead to critical consciousness and critical autonomy” (Scheibe & Rogow, 2012, p. 21). These essential characteristics are also mentioned in the Austrian school curricula. The latter highlight the ability to understand and critically evaluate media content as an important aspect of media competence. They also indicate that the abilities to communicate within a variety of contexts and think critically and creatively should be developed as part of media education (BMBWF, 2020, p. 244). In brief, media literacy should be incorporated into Austrian classrooms since it fosters critical thinking and evaluating of various forms of messages

produced and received by young people, who are actively engaged in online discourse communities.

In addition, it is important that students are aware of linguistic differences in authentic texts frequently produced in the world outside the classroom by native and non-native speakers of English. This awareness should contribute to the development of the necessary skills to participate effectively in online discourse communities, which are continuously growing and gaining political and social relevance. For example, Lee & Shin (2014) found that the medium Twitter has a crucial impact on engagement as opposed to news articles with relation to political discourse. According to their findings, tweets posted by politicians have a higher potential of influencing readers' opinions than newspaper articles as authors of the former appear more approachable. Due to Twitter's limit of 240 characters per tweet, users are required to adapt their linguistic choices to attract attention to their messages and potentially evoke emotions. This imposed brevity of tweets is also likely to have an impact on tone. With the increasing occurrence of expressing political agendas on social media, it seems ever so vital to prepare learners for the complexity of tone in online discourse as passive as well as active participants, enabling them to engage in this discourse as critical and attentive individuals.

However, the concept of media literacy has been neglected in teacher education programs, official curricula and consequently also in Austrian classrooms. Therefore, to engage with the discourse of media literacy, this article presents a text-based method, i.e. text mediation, of which specific features should be outlined. Ultimately, this study should be a call for integrating media literacy in teacher education, due to the importance of critical genre competence for teachers and learners alike.

## 2 Research questions

In our project, we focused on political and social discourse in news articles in comparison with Twitter entries on the topic of the 2020 Australian bushfires. Our specific research questions, which also reflect the dual purpose of this article, were formulated as follows:

RQ1

How does tone differ in newspaper articles and tweets about the Australian bushfires?

RQ2

How can these findings contribute to media literacy for EFL teachers and linguists?

The first research question is addressed in the following two sections, 3 and 4, while the second research question is discussed in more detail in section 5.

## 3 Project description

For this mediation project, we selected four texts, two news articles and two tweets based on their relevance for the topic, their currency, and their popularity as news outlets in the UK (Reuters Institute, 2020). Each text addresses the topic of early 2020 Australian bushfires. Ensuring coherence regarding content was important to facilitate the subsequent text

mediation, in which we focused on the generic textual conventions and the tone used in these two genres. Prior to our analyses, we identified the audiences and purposes of news articles and tweets. Then, we analyzed the texts with respect to their lexis and grammar, e.g. sentence length and punctuation, to identify the characteristics of tone used in the examples of the respective genres. We also included an analysis of typical features of CMC, such as emojis, nonstandard punctuation, hashtags and visuals, as described by Vandergriff (2013). Based on these analyses, we mediated the content of the newspaper articles to a tweet, adhering to the textual conventions of tweets previously identified in our analysis.

### 3.1 Sampling

The texts under analysis were two news articles, one published on the BBC website and one in the electronic version of *The Guardian*, and two tweets (@takvera, 2019; @wolfe\_sharlene, 2019) about the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire season. These two particular news outlets were chosen because they were the two most consulted sources of news in the UK, according to a recent report on the use of digital news (Reuters Institute, 2020). Moreover, we selected this particular subject matter because, at the time of conducting our analysis in January 2020, the fires represented an urgent topic of common interest due to numerous heated debates taking place in social media about political decisions and environmental issues related to this natural disaster.

### 3.2 Methodology

The procedure started with a text analysis. Since tone can be expressed through word choice and sentence length (Blankenship, 2016), we particularly focused on the types of adjectives, nouns, and verbs used to create emotions. These emotive words were listed in a grid, depending on their expression of fear and sadness in relation to the bushfires and their environmental impact. Then we used an online tool (HighStarApp, 2019) for determining the average sentence length in both genres as exemplified by our chosen texts. Additionally, we analyzed images, videos, and hashtags embedded in the texts as well as emojis in tweets as part of CMC because they can also have a significant influence on tone. For these purposes, we used various online tools, such as *Emojipedia*, which is a collection of short definitions of the feelings expressed by emojis, or Emoji Sentiment Ranking v1.0 by Kralj Novak et al. (2015), which assigns a sentiment score to the different emojis ranging from -1 to +1. The hashtags in the tweets as well as the visuals embedded both in the tweets and the articles were further analyzed with regard to tone and emotions. Hashtags are assumed to serve as expressions of negative emotions among other functions identified by Erz et al. (2018), while the visuals were examined more closely in terms of their portrayal of the circumstances, i.e. animals and people affected by the bushfires. Both the negative emotions expressed through hashtags and the impact of the bushfires depicted in photographs are thus considered a potential factor in creating tone in tweets and news articles. The findings obtained from the analyses of hashtags and photographs were then used for mediating the content of the article to a tweet. The tweet was created by inserting the text and photographs in a Tweet generator (Tweetgen, n.d.), an online tool which imitates the visual appearance of an authentic tweet with the same affordances, such as attaching pictures and inserting hashtags. This online tool also allows the user to set a specific time and date, as well as the number of retweets and likes, realistically presenting the final product of our meditation project.

## 4 Findings

Our analysis has led us to conclude that news articles and tweets use different genre-specific devices to set the tone in the text. While both genres make use of emotive language, thereby appealing to the readers’ emotions like compassion, sentence length and punctuation patterns in the news articles nevertheless convey an informative and neutral tone. Tweets, by contrast, typically contain features of online discourse, such as hashtags, and orthographic errors, which reflect the urgency of producing a message on pressing issues as well as the characteristics of the textual genre, resulting in the overt expression of an emotional tone. Since the message is more closely associated with the author of a tweet than that of an article (cf. Lee & Shin, 2014), the author’s emotions are also more prevalent in the text. The tone in news articles and tweets is also greatly influenced by the imagery inserted in the text, which can either reinforce the emotional tone in tweets or mitigate an otherwise too factual and distanced tone used for reporting on natural disasters such as in news articles. Thus, tweets and articles may evoke similar emotions in readers through the integration of powerful imagery. Although tweets rely more strongly on elements used in CMC, articles seem to adhere to their genre conventions to relate to readers’ emotions, despite presenting observable facts.

### 4.1 Text analysis

The starting point for our text analysis was the investigation of audience and purpose. News articles (issued by the *BBC* and *The Guardian*) typically target an interested and educated readership, whereas tweets are rather directed at a mixed audience. The purpose of both media is providing information; however, tweets, as part of a social media site, are also ascribed the function of “a form of public conversation” (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 790). The users tend to aim at gaining increasingly more ‘followers’ subscribing to their feeds, the continuous stream of postings, who would share other users’ contents for their own ‘followers’ in their feeds. Sharing tweets increases their visibility, potentially leading to a large number of ‘followers’ and ‘likes’, a sign of approval displayed by a heart-shaped icon on Twitter. Therefore, the news articles about the bushfires seem more informative than the tweets on the same topic chosen for this analysis because the tweets have a social aspect, originating in the nature of their purpose for publication.

We found that both the news articles and the tweets attempted to evoke negative and vivid images displaying catastrophic scenes in the minds of readers through heavy use of emotive words and phrases, e.g. “threatening” (BBC, 2019) or “catastrophic” (@takvera, 2019). These lexical elements in the texts consisted mainly of noun phrases, with either pre- or postmodified nouns, and only few verb and adjective phrases. The following table shows a selection of lexical items as examples of emotive language use in the news articles and tweets under analysis.

Table 1: Examples of emotive language use in four different source texts

Emotive words	The Guardian	BBC	EAM Tweet	Wolfe Tweet
<b>Noun phrases</b>	-	-	-	destroyed
	devastating extent of the fires	threatening crisis	extreme heat	horrific fires

	millions of hectares burnt	worst conditions of the season so far	catastrophic fire conditions	hearts broke
	lives lost	catastrophic alerts	#heathealth and #bushfire emergency	koalas burnt to death
	properties destroyed	soaring temperatures		
	long term drought conditions	highest danger rating		
	record temperatures	warning		
	catastrophic fire conditions	massive bushfires		
	widespread devastation	blazes		
<b>Adjective phrases</b>	widespread evacuations	threat		

As Table 1 illustrates, the noun phrases in the texts were mainly used to convey negative meaning and thereby may appeal to the readers’ and users’ emotions. The considerable use of noun phrases in the news articles and tweets suggests that the emotional tone is mainly created through heavily modified nouns in these texts.

Concerning typography and grammar, the tweets also showed a close connection between typographical mistakes and deviations from conventional patterns of punctuation, potentially adding to a sense of urgency in tone. An interesting example taken from one of the tweets is the sentence “high winds forecasting creating catastrophic fire conditions” (@takvera, 2019). Although this sentence seems incomplete, we assume that the majority of readers would understand the user’s attempt to express the severity of the situation and that the tweet is therefore successful. Moreover, this tweet in particular shows several instances of character reduction due to Twitter’s character limit, such as omissions or wrong placements of commas and blank spaces:

“California experienced horrific fires and the world saw and our hearts broke.Australia has catastrophic fire warnings and it will get worse.” (@wolfe\_sharlene, 2019)

While this economization of characters is not present in the two articles, one article shows other unexpected uses of punctuation usually considered more informal. In the BBC article, there are several instances of em-dashes. Em-dashes are typically used to add emphasis and attract more attention than inserted parentheses (Waddingham, 2014, p. 87) and include clarifications (Waddingham, 2014, p. 214). These uses of em-dashes are also reflected in the BBC article, for example:

“Soaring temperatures in South Australia prompted "catastrophic" alerts - the highest danger rating - on Wednesday.” (BBC, 2019)

However, these two examples demonstrate the erroneous insertion of en-dashes used for the purposes of em-dashes. Nevertheless, the tone created by these dashes appears clipped, possibly implying urgency.

The sentence length in each text also seems to be a reflection of the respective medium. The shorter sentences in the tweets provide a clear overview of complex content and also imply haste or incompleteness, resulting in a more emotional tone. By contrast, the varying sentence length in the news articles conveys a more factual, carefully crafted tone, which would adhere to the expected genre conventions.

It was in respect to visuals and multimodal features that we found the most intersections between the two genres. Both newspaper articles and both tweets used imagery in the form of several photographic images, in particular images of wounded animals, animals surrounded by fires, and forests in flames or smoke descending from forests in the distance, creating an overall apocalyptic atmosphere. While the Guardian article mainly included informative images, such as animated maps showing the geographical spread of the bushfires (Evershed & Ball, 2019), the other article also included photographs of firefighters and emotional videos of Australians’ desperate attempts to save the lives of Koalas (BBC, 2019). Similarly, one tweet had an informative map attached to it, which depicts the weather forecast regarding temperatures and wind (@takvera, 2019), while the other tweet incorporated emotional images of people and animals affected by the fire (@wolfe\_sharlene, 2019). The photographs of wild animals and forests wreathed in smoke may evoke more emotions than animated maps attempting to demonstrate the extreme severity of the bushfires through neutral satellite data. Despite the rather contrary levels of formality of articles and tweets, we found that all of the texts under analysis integrate both informative and emotional visual elements, which inevitably contribute to the general tone used in the texts. Thus, as far as visuals are concerned, both the articles and the tweets show a similar tone and convey analogous emotions.

## 4.2 Text mediation

After our thorough analysis, we mediated information from the news articles to a tweet in accordance with genre-specific communicative conventions. In our mediation, we decided to include emojis, although none of the specific articles or tweets we analyzed contained these elements of online discourse. However, during our literature review on tone, the significance of emojis became evident. As Fernández-Gavilanes et al. (2018, p. 76) note, an “emoji often carries the whole emotional weight” of a text. In order to express distress about the catastrophic situation, we thus chose to employ “tired,” “weary”, and “pouty face,” as labelled by *Emojipedia*. To exemplify the intricacy of emoji meanings and sentiments, “weary face 🙄” shall be discussed in more detail. On *Emojipedia*, this specific emoji is described as follows: “May convey various feelings of frustration, sadness, amusement, and affection. Often playful in tone” (“Weary Face Emoji”, n.d.). According to this definition, weary face can be both an expression of anger or resentment and amazement. In order to determine whether positive or negative tone prevails, we consulted the Emoji Sentiment Ranking and found a score of -0.368 (Department of Knowledge Technologies, 2015), implying that the sentiment of weary face rather lies on the negative side. Therefore, it seems appropriate to use this emoji in the context of using computer mediated discourse to discuss the disastrous Australian bushfires. Given

the inherent sentiment represented by their definitions and uses, emojis and tone are closely interlinked.

Furthermore, hashtags are a crucial element of online discourse. According to Erz et al. (2018, p. 48), adding one hashtag to an Instagram post increases its reach by 12.6%. These hyperlinks have the primary function of broadcasting the message and guiding the readers' meaning-making process (Erz et al., 2018, pp. 48–56). To engage with the broadcasting function of hashtags, we decided to mark the general topic with #bushfires and #climatecrisis. Apart from further motivations such as humor or information seeking, the act of venting negative emotions is also a common motive for employing hashtags (Erz et al., 2018, p. 52), which is why we added #codered, the most severe fire danger rating for bushfires and grassfires (Emergency Management Victoria, n.d.), and #Australiaisonfire to our tweet. By using these emotional tags, we explicitly stated the urgency of the situation and set the tone as serious and pressing.

Another element used for creating an emotional tone in the mediated text are effective visuals. The importance of the use of pictures in tweets has been highlighted in our previous analysis; therefore, we also included two photographs in our mediated text. One photograph portrays a ranger rescuing a wounded Koala bear, thereby intending to evoke compassion for the wild animals native to Australia. The second photograph incorporated in the tweet also shows a typical Australian animal endangered by the bushfires coloring the surroundings in orange. These two photographs were chosen to show the urgency and severity of the bushfires, which should also reflect the emotional tone of the tweet.

To conclude our findings, we want to highlight that while news articles might be more closely associated with being formal and factual, our analysis showed a strong overlap between different registers and tones in both news articles and tweets. These findings were not only the result of our project but also allowed us, as pre-service English teachers, to reflect on the possible implementation of similar mediation projects in the EFL classroom with the aim of developing both teachers' and students' media literacy, which is addressed in the next section.

## 5 Implications for teaching media literacy in the EFL classroom

The findings suggest the twofold importance of media literacy concerning textual strategies used for tone in effective communication on social media. Firstly, users need to understand that the choice of tone determines, in large part, the degree of success with which a member of a discourse community can actively participate in a conversation with others and that this choice largely depends on the conventions to which the members adhere in their messages. Secondly, the ability to recognize a certain tone and identify its textual devices is essential for the detection of manipulative, deceiving elements, which are sometimes deliberately used to provoke emotions in readers. Therefore, developing media literacy is an absolute necessity in order for any user, teachers and learners alike, to consume and report on news via social media.

Since many young people are either actively engaged in such discourse communities on social media or passively use it for information retrieval or mere entertainment, it is fundamentally important to sensitize students to tone in online texts. The overall aim should be to equip learners with the skills to analyze a text's intended audience and purpose to enable them to eventually draw conclusions regarding the text's strategies in creating tone. Such a curricular

focus in teacher education programs for pre-service English teachers is critical for teachers who will have to incorporate the skills associated with media literacy into their teaching. Students, and teachers, need to be aware of the strategies used to establish tone in public online discourse to distinguish neutral news reporting from emotionally loaded or purposely misleading phrasing of messages. Introducing media literacy in teacher education would, however, also require teachers, after completing their studies, to frequently update their own knowledge and skills related to analyzing, critically evaluating, and engaging with messages on different platforms due to the dynamic nature of online media as part of lifelong learning.

### Application Box

- Text mediation projects with a similar focus carried out in EFL classrooms can be an effective way to raise students' awareness of different types of tone and to integrate media literacy into EFL classes.
- For this purpose, we propose the following procedure for conducting such projects in an EFL classroom:
  - ✓ Ask students to choose any genre of discourse in social media (e.g. tweets, Instagram posts, comments below Facebook postings) dealing with a topic of curricular relevance.
  - ✓ Guide students to set a focus of interest, such as lexis or use of visuals, and find example texts of the target genre.
  - ✓ Ask students to analyze these texts in relation to their research focus, identifying the genre-specific elements.
  - ✓ Ask students to transform a text of a different genre into the target genre, in line with the characteristic features they previously identified.
  - ✓ Organize a concluding lesson segment in which student groups briefly present their genres and final text mediations.

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