Chapter 10

Creating Multimodal Texts in the L2 Writing Classroom: A Re-Mediation Activity

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines an ESL writing class at a U.S. university that employed a re-mediation assignment to complement and facilitate the understanding of rhetoric. A re-mediation assignment asks students to transform text-based material into a multimodal form by combining linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modalities. Students are to make use of the affordances and audiences of the new form without losing the core components of the original text. Findings suggest that students demonstrated motivation and engagement with the assignment and writing process, in part, because they were allowed to infuse other abilities (drawing, computer programming, video editing, and storytelling), languages, and cultures into their projects. As multimodal and multimedia digital literacies continue to evolve, digitally mediated projects such as re-mediation are necessary to prepare students to be competent writers in a digitally mediated society.

INTRODUCTION

Although written communication is inherently multimodal, literacy practices have been inadequately viewed as solely textual with the occasional picture in a single context (Palmeri, 2012). However, social literacy practices are now being regarded as increasingly multimodal within both academic and non-academic domains (Street, Pahl, & Rowsell, 2014). Multimodality includes five design modes: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, that converge to form mixed patterns of meaning and communication. What is more, multimodality refers to the inclusion of these five modes, new orthographic and discourse conventions, and the development of new genres through collaboration, remixing, and combining other literacy practices in single written texts (Christiansen & Koelzer, 2016). Specifically, the concept of multiliteracies recognizes this mix and multiple ways in which people communicate in writing and how such communication practices have changed in response to globalization and growth of a more culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse population (New London Group, 1996; Warschauer, 2010).

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With the increase in digital technologies over the last decades, new digital media have further reshaped the notion of social literacy practices and our understanding of multiliteracies (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Warschauer, 2010). And it is our task to include a pedagogy of multiliteracies and multimodality in our classrooms that works pragmatically for the “new economy,” that is, a “literacy pedagogy which promotes a culture of flexibility, creativity, innovation and initiative” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 6). However, as Elola & Oskoz (2017) explain, even though writers, especially L2 learners, appear to be comfortable and immersed in the use of new technologies, “they might not have the competency to exploit all the affordances of those digital tools to assist their learning” (p. 55). Affordances are the action possibilities that the environment (in this case digital media) “provides or furnishes [a writer in this case], either for good or ill” (Gibson, 1986, p. 127). Affordances can only be realized when the individual is aware of the capacity of a digital tool and the tool is engaged by an individual’s needs and the activity s/he is realizing. Affordances of digital technologies do not have value in and of themselves, but rather, an affordance becomes valuable when a digital tool is used for a contextualized and purposeful activity for communication. For example, there is no inherent value in education for the instant message platform Whatsapp; however, when students create a “group” to share information, ask and clarify class content, and provide examples and support, they have exploited the affordances of Whatsapp, which is to send instant messages to a group of people by posting pictures of notes, ask questions, reply to specific comments, and use emoticons for their communication and pragmatic purposes. Elola and Oskoz argue that teachers need to stop assuming their L2 writers and students are “digital natives” who are completely immersed and proficient in the use of digital devices and, instead, explicitly teach the potential of those affordances and how to use them in the most effective way. To not include the explicit teaching of affordances and multimodality while teaching writing ignores the array of converged semiotic resources individuals already use in meaning-making outside of classrooms (Street, Pahl, & Rowse, 2014), as well as ignores the fact that students could be using affordances of digital tools to create their writing.

Most studies on digital technologies, however, have focused on academic literacy and digital practices that individuals have transferred from school to other informal contexts such as online social network sites and blogs (Mills, 2010). Because of this focus on context and communities outside academic settings, there is a lack of empirical research on multimodal digital literacy practices in institutional settings, especially for multilingual learners (Mills, 2010; Yi, 2014). Second-language education researchers have focused on either the use of digital technologies in the classroom, or the use of linguistic resources; however, what remains to be done is an investigation into the complexity of intersecting multimodal literacies in the L2 classroom (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Warschauer, 2010). One starting point for this is increased empirical research that focuses on how second-language learners “consume, interpret, and produce multimodal texts” (Yi, 2014, p. 166), which is addressed here by identifying the benefits and challenges faced when using new kinds of multimodal digital literacy practices (specifically a re-mediation assignment) in a first year ESL composition classroom.

BACKGROUND

The advantage of adopting multiliteracies in the language classroom is that they can provide the tools to develop alternative teaching methods that include multilingualism and the use of multimodalities in communication (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Yi, 2014). Teachers can use the potential of digital technologies to give direction to the ways in which multimodal forms produce meaning and facilitate learning, for