



## **Special Issue on Multimodal Composition in Multilingual Contexts**

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### **Editorial: Introduction to the special issue on multimodal composition in multilingual contexts**

Despite having a short history, multimodal composition, has gained research and pedagogical momentum over the last 20 years. Since first introduced by the New London Group (1996), the notion of multimodality has subverted the traditional definition of

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rhetoric and composition. The unlimited possibilities for meaning-making brought by multimodal resources such as images, sounds, and space are not only acknowledged but also deemed an indispensable part of composition in the contemporary era. Thus, recognizing the radical changes in digital landscapes, forms of communications as well as the crucial role of the extra-linguistic resources, scholars in the field have called for the way to understand and incorporate multimodality in the teaching and practice of composition (Archer & Breuer, 2015; Fraiberg, 2010; Selfe, 2009; Tardy, 2005). The advent of digital media and technology has helped multimodality become a sustained practice of every writing classroom today (Lim & Polio, 2020). To put in other words, multimodal composition is not an option anymore, but it has become an obvious aspect of all types of writing pedagogies today.

Unlike in mainstream composition, multimodal composition has not received as much research attention in multilingual writing as is necessary. In 2015, *TESOL Quarterly* published a special issue on *Multimodality: Out from the Margins of English Language Teaching*, but this issue did not focus exclusively on composition issues. In 2017, *Journal of Second Language Writing (JSLW)* published a *Disciplinary Discussion* and the notable L2 writing scholars expressed their concerns for not having as much research focus from L2 writing scholars on multimodal composition as needed, and stressed bringing more attention to it. One of the discussants of this disciplinary discussion, Diane D. Belcher (2017) mentioned, “L2 writing does not appear to be either leading the way or in sync with the writing studies field, namely, multimodal composing and digital design” (p. 80). Three years later, *JSLW* published a special issue on *Multimodal Composing in Multilingual Learning and Teaching Contexts*, which contained three research articles focused particularly on various issues of multilingual writers’ multimodal writing practices, such as metalanguage, attitude and emotions, and assignments in higher education. However, we believe there are a myriad of other urgent issues, including but not limited to identity, empowerment, anti-racist pedagogies, social justice, and potential benefits and challenges of incorporating multimodality into the multilingual contexts, and they need our immediate attention.

We are pleased to present this special issue dedicated to *Multimodal Composition in Multilingual Contexts*; it focuses on unraveling the multimodal meaning-making practices at the intersection of composition, technologies, and multilingualism. Multilingualism is closely connected to multimodality in many ways. When multilingual writers engage in a writing process, they are often challenged by English Only linguistic mode although utilizing other modes (e.g., audio, video, aural) empowers these writers. As Laura Gonzales and Janine Butler (2020) put it: “[M]ultimodal activities and assignments can create productive composition spaces for students who communicate through Spanish, American Sign Language, and/or other modes” (para. 19). In that sense, the multimodal approach is advocated as a means of addressing the deficit positioning of multilingual writers. This viewpoint foregrounds multilingual writers’ unique cross-cultural

and linguistic insights to be valuable resources in their complex social semiotic repertoires. As Steven Fraiberg (2010) points out:

Incorporating our students' multilingualism into the classroom could help move them from deficit positions by (re)locating them as experts in their own language with knowledge and experience that they can share and contribute to the class. This shift also means moving beyond the linguistic signs and attending to the ways that all semiotic modes coordinate literate activity and are dialogic in their own right. (p. 111)

On the other hand, with the advancement of information and communication technologies and the increasing recognition of the importance of multimodality, scholars also call for the need to enhance multilingual students' *multimodal communicative competence* (Royce, 2002) where learners are taught to critically and intentionally manipulate and interpret various modes of resources for the production, distribution, and reception of multimodal texts. Almost two decades ago, Kress (2000) pointed out that through technologies, it is no longer possible to make sense of a text without also attending to its multimodal features as meanings now are often made through a complex web of text, audio, video, images, and other semiotic modes. The notion of multimodal composition thus represents an acknowledgement that "writing is a web of interlocking social, material, and semiotic relationships and practices" (Fraiberg, 2010, p. 105). With this fundamental understanding, it is therefore necessary to explore the practices and pedagogies for engaging writers in negotiating a complex array of multimodal resources for meaning-making practices. With the growing diversity in students' cultural and linguistic identities, it is also crucial to help students unpack the ideologies, positioning and ethical implications carried by the multimodal texts (Choi & Yi, 2016; Fraiberg, 2010; Jewitt et al., 2010; Kress, 2010, 2015; Royce, 2002).

As we were producing this special issue, the world happened to be going through the unsettling time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented impact of pandemic on the practices of teaching and learning has made the need of this special issue even more urgent. The pandemic situation has illuminated the gaps in multimodal composition research as well as the opportunities for it to flourish. With all things in our universities moving online or becoming hybrid, the use of technology is no longer optional for us, but indispensable. Since a lot of us are pushed into this new format of teaching suddenly and rather underprepared, practitioners need more guidance and encouragement on how to incorporate emerging technologies for teaching writing, especially as it comes to engaging or producing multimodal digital texts. They also need to understand how meanings are being designed in both digital and non-digital texts within the local and global contexts. On the other hand, with all things moving online, the opportunity for multimodal meaning-making in both official and unofficial learning space has also been

intensified. Scholars generally agree that modern technologies have tremendously impacted the production, mediation, and dissemination of texts (Chun et al., 2016; Kress, 2015). Technology tools such as Wikipedia, Google Doc or social media platforms not only bring in new powerful ways of writing and composing but they also contest the traditional sense of authoring and ownership (Alexander, 2008; King, 2015). With this current shift in education, the use of these tools in composition classes is going to be a norm going forward, thereby affording us all opportunity for more multimodal meaning-making practices.

### **Major themes emerging from this special issue**

Primary goal of this special issue is to uncover the opportunities, challenges, and possibilities of multimodal composition in various multilingual teaching contexts. As such, this issue emphasizes re-imagining writing pedagogies in multilingual writing contexts in view of emerging digital tools and multimodal composing practices.

#### ***Multimodal norm in writing***

Not only because of the COVID-19 situation we are undergoing, but the 21<sup>st</sup> century societies have already witnessed the advancement in digital media and technologies, and researchers and faculty are already re-thinking the traditional notion of writing. When writers want to meet the demands of the multimodal world, they encounter various modes in different platforms and contexts, whether it is an augmented reality (AR) mobile technology like HP Reveal, visual mode in social media platforms like Instagram, oral mode in any podcast piece, video mode in YouTube. The practices in our changed social contexts require more than the role of a “writer” but that of a designer, composer, and an advocate. This is a strong theme that has emerged in the majority of the articles and pedagogical materials presented in this special issue (see, León & Berti; Reid; Quave & Lewis).

#### ***Multimodality as an anti-racist approach***

Instead of focusing on “writing” alone, antiracist multimodal pedagogy stresses diversifying the way of thinking, writing, designing, making, creating and disseminating meanings. Focusing on “academic writing” in a colorblind manner also serves as the white default (Inoue, 2019). Coloring academic writing using the one-size-fits-all approach privileges white ways of speaking and writing. It is a multimodal approach that provides options for writers to choose their preferred mode, demystifying the composing practices in strictly alphabetic only mode. In that sense, following a multimodal approach in academic writing is also adopting an anti-racist approach, and following anti-racist approach is also embracing social justice model. This is because coming from a different linguistic, cultural, technological, and literacy background, multilingual writers, at times,

are challenged by alphabetic mode of composing, which bars them from choosing their preferred mode of composing. This is another major theme that emerged in this special issue (see, Lee et al.; Reid).

### ***Multimodality for teachers' professional development***

It is highlighted in previous sections as well that multimodal composition pedagogies empower multilingual writers. As the saying goes, everything has its pros and cons, multimodality cannot be taken for granted (Kress, 2000). It is not a panacea for all kinds of teaching challenges either. However, studies have shown that incorporating multimodal composition has a lot of benefits (Allan, 2015; Cimasko & Shin, 2017; Hafner & Ho, 2020; Hafner & Miller, 2011; Kim & Belcher, 2020; Lim, & Polio, 2020; Vasudevan et al., 2010). When a writing teacher adopts a multimodal approach, it not only helps writers but equally benefits teachers who could hone their technological skills. In other words, incorporating multimodality in multilingual writing contexts helps enhance faculty's professional development (see, Tan & Matsuda; Mokko & Pawan). This is another important theme that came out of this special issue.

### ***Non-linearity, agency, and creativity***

Unlike the traditional alphabetic mode of composing that follows one strict linear thesis-driven approach, the enactment of the multimodal approach, with its non-linear feature, provides writing practitioners agency and allows a different set of creativity than we tend to imagine from a traditional paradigm. As writing and technology are not monolithic and static entities, it exists in nonlinear historical, social, political, and economic conditions (Wysocki et al., 2019). Thus, the multimodal approach is also an attempt to honor diversity and bring non-western practice in writing. The meaning-making process does not always follow the pattern we tend to follow in traditional alphabetic mode, rather it is also a process of empowering writers and writing instructors and rethinking the way we've defined creativity (see, Cousins; Lee et al.; Ottman). This is another strong theme that featured in our special issue.

### **Summary of each contribution**

This special issue includes four research articles that underscore the value of multimodality as it benefits both the multilingual writers and instructors. The second part introduces 4 short reports and teaching artifacts that showcase the creative practices of multimodal pedagogy in college writing courses.

**Part I: research articles/papers**

Our special issue comprises two major aspects of multimodality: theoretical and pedagogical. Theoretically, all the articles of this issue collectively advocate for the expansion of multimodal composition in college writing instruction while discussing the issues, challenges, and opportunities of multilingual writers and writing instructors. For instance, in their empirical study, Xiao Tan and Paul Kei Matsuda investigate how novice L2 writing teachers achieve agency in the process of integrating multimodal literacy. Focusing on the first-year composition (FYC) setting, they studied interview data and teaching artifacts. The findings of the study shed light on the multilingual writing teachers' challenges, opportunities for professional development, daily teaching and literacy activities, and negotiation with existing policies and discourses. The study suggests that multilingual writing teachers' agency is deeply rooted in their previous multimodal literacy experiences and their future aspirations. Similarly, although historically recognized as a "service course" to introduce academic writing to the college writers, Lynn Reid, in her piece, claims that FYC has started envisioning composing through multimodal and multilingual paradigms. Outlining a failed Prezi assignment in a FYC course as an instance to show the potential pitfalls of adopting multimodal approach as granted, Reid notes that adopting multimodality without paying attention to the necessary infrastructure can yield counterproductive results to the multilingual writers. On a larger level, instead of taking multimodality for granted, she stresses on equal attention to other dimensions that play significant roles while adopting multimodal approach, such as the cognitive demands of the given task, institutional support for students, and so on.

Similarly, Emily Yuko Cousins, in her paper, examines non-alphabetic writing systems, unconventional Japanese script and calligraphy practices to investigate assumptions about creativity. Using a translingual framework, Cousins suggests re-thinking the notion of creativity and not privileging any particular forms like the traditional mono-modal alphabetic approach over others. Instead, creativity can conceive both amodal identity of traditional alphabetic writing where cross-language explorations can have important implications for how we approach multimodality in our increasingly diverse and multilingual classrooms. In their paper, Eunjeong Lee, Sara P. Alvarez, and Amy J. Wan present the material conditions of Queens College, a senior college in the CUNY system, and showcase how the incorporation of multimodality can benefit multilingual populations particularly when their meaning-making potentials are challenged by the linguistic mode in their composing process. They argue that working to build a multimodal-multilingual approach is a move toward providing linguistic justice to minority student population.

**Part II: Short reports and teaching artifacts**

Pedagogically, all the teaching artifacts and reports bring the vivid cases of multimodal initiatives enacted in multilingual classroom contexts. Targeting first-year

composition (FYC), Rebecca Ottman, in her teaching artifact, shows a case that embracing multimodality in writing across situated contexts can attune multilingual students' writing ability. In doing so, multilingual writers can combine a myriad of unique perspectives and experiences in the second language (i.e., English), enhancing their rhetorical sensibility in their writing process. Utilizing Leonard's (2014) notion of rhetorical attunement, Ottman develops a multimodal exercise for multilingual writers that aims to help students attune their rhetorical skills and be prepared to handle unfamiliar writing contexts and situations. Similarly, another teaching artifact by Kylie E. Quave and Charles Lewis is part of two writing courses (creative writing and writing-intensive course in anthropology) with shared learning objectives of relating Cusco, Peru's history, critical analysis, and deeper understanding of modes of inquiry and representation. It includes sample assignments combining texts, images, digital media, and student sample work. This teaching artifact focuses on the argument that multimodal composition can be one beneficial way to help students understand their experiential learning with cultural immersion and observation in multilingual contexts. On top of this, it also exhibits how a classroom can function as a space to experiment theory and practice and as a "contact zone" for critical reflection and navigation.

The third teaching artifact by Nattaporn Luangpipat presents two major course assignments for ENGL 201: Intermediate Composition course. As this course emphasizes enhancing literacy skills including critical reading and thinking skills, this artifact is also guided by those principles to support evidence effectively by following appropriate writing style and composition convention in multimodal contexts. In this way, introducing multimodal components of composing is one larger goal of this project. Along similar lines, in their brief report, Marédil León and Margherita Berti engage in highly pertinent issues of multimodality, accessibility and language variation in writing classes. Particularly, they discuss the uses, benefits, and limitations of incorporating augmented reality for multimodal teaching in different teaching contexts. While the field of writing studies is heavily invested in innovating teaching pedagogies with new media and technologies, this report adds an additional tool to teach multimodal composition much more effectively.

Lastly, Mika Mokko and Faridah Pawan, in their brief report, share a summary of the outcomes of their longitudinal research that shows the increasing role of online networks for teachers' professional development. They argue that because teachers' knowledge is dialectical, they continuously pursue professional development as part of their professional growth. Overall, the pedagogical cases presented in this special issue help expand the depth and breadth of multimodal composition, multilingual writing instruction, and writing practices, in general.

## Closing Comment

This issue is an invitation to continue our conversation about multimodal composition in various multilingual writing contexts. Our issue has brought together contributions from diverse scholars who have been working in unique teaching contexts. As we have identified various themes from these diverse contributors, multilingual writing contexts transcend the various linguistic and demographic borders.

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