Integrating Multimodality into First-Year Composition: Exploring Issues of L2 Writing Teachers' Agency

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Abstract: Including multimodal literacy into second language (L2) writing courses presents unique opportunities as well as daunting challenges for both multilingual writers and their teachers. Previous studies focused heavily on writing teachers' concerns (e.g., Yi & Choi, 2015). This study, however, proposes to move the conversation one step forward by looking at the "bright side" of teaching multimodal literacy. In this empirical study, we ask the guiding question "How do novice L2 writing teachers achieve agency in the process of integrating multimodal literacy?" The study was conducted over an academic year in the first-year composition (FYC) setting. Data included multiple semi-

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structured interviews and teaching documents. The findings suggest that the participants have actively challenged the assumptions of literacy, sought opportunities for professional development, bridged teaching and their daily literacy activities, and negotiated with existing policies and dominant discourses. Their agency is deeply rooted in the past experiences with multimodal literacy and mediated by their future aspiration to become literacy scholars. The study also highlights teachers' reflective practices and positive emotional responses. The article concludes with implications for future teacher development.

Introduction

In the field of composition, there has long been a call to re-envision language and literacy, develop new models of writing, and move beyond modal hierarchies (Yancey, 2009). The argument is based on the assumption that language is but one valid way of representation and meaning-making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and that modes and media are also crucial elements in knowledge construction (Kress, 2003). The fact that students today are engaged in increasingly complex and dynamic multimodal communication has sparked fervent advocacy for a new curriculum that will support students' critical consumption and production of multimodal texts (Wyosocki et al., 2019; Yancey, 2004, 2009).

Similar arguments are echoed in the field of second language (L2) writing, as Belcher (2017) elegantly summarized in a disciplinary dialogue in the *Journal of Second Language Writing* that "writing pedagogy should be viewed as facilitating composing, that is, creating and communicating meaning, with the added benefit of a large semiotic toolkit, taking advantage of the full panoply of color and sound, still and moving images available" (p. 81). As testified by more and more empirical work in recent years, the affordances of incorporating multimodal design into the writing classroom are varied and diverse (e.g., Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Hafner, 2014; Li & Storch, 2017; Unsworth & Mills, 2020). As the field begins to understand L2 literacy pedagogy in a new light, teachers' experience with teaching multimodal literacy has been brought to the spotlight. Existing studies revealed that many teachers have positive attitudes toward multimodality but are susceptible to various constraints—such as time pressure, lack of institutional support, and exam-oriented culture—that may impede effective teaching (Yi, 2014; Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016; Yi & Choi, 2015). However, little is known about how L2 teachers take the initiative and mobilize resources to teach multimodal writing. Drawing on a model of teacher agency proposed by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), the study analyzes the role of agency in two novice L2 writing instructors as they built their knowledge around the concept, established semiotic repertoires for teaching, reflected critically upon teaching

practices, and negotiated institutional policies and academic discourses. We also hope to shed light on how teacher agency can be fostered and promoted through professional development.

Multimodal Literacy in Second Language Writing Pedagogy

Entering an age of digital technologies and multimedia communication, many scholars have advocated for a new conceptualization of literacy, language, and texts in both research and pedagogy (New London Group, 1996). Underpinning such a paradigm shift is the growing consensus among writing and literacy scholars that communication is essentially multimodal, with language being but only one valid mode (Early et al., 2015; Kress, 2003). As Jewitt (2006) pointed out, multimodality "starts from the position that all modes have been shaped through their social use into semiotic resources" (p. 3). In this paper, we use the term *multimodal literacy* to refer to "meaning-making that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to and producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts" (Walsh, 2010, p. 213).

The field of second language writing, which has traditionally privileged the linguistic mode of communication, has also taken up the call to expand its understanding of literacy (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Yi et al., 2020). The *Journal of Second Language Writing* recently dedicated two special issues to the discussion of writing pedagogy in a new era, with one focusing on the issues of computer-mediated communication (2017) and the other on multimodal composition in the multilingual learning and teaching context (2020).

The past decade has also witnessed a burgeoning number of studies on multimodal L2 writing, with a strong emphasis on innovative pedagogical practices (Elola & Oskoz, 2017). Multimodal genres found in L2 writing classrooms range from digital stories (Oskoz & Elola, 2016) to dramas (Darvin, 2015) and art exhibitions (Stille & Prasad, 2015). The findings of studies from L2 writing classrooms have shown the benefits of integrating multimodal literacy into existing curricula. In general, the use of multimodal texts serve to support collaborative authorship (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Strobl, 2014), promote audience awareness (Hafner, 2014; Li & Storch, 2017), expand students' literacy repertoires and means of expression (Angay-Crowder et al., 2016; Unsworth & Mills, 2020), enhance students' autonomy (Hafner & Miller, 2011), help students explore discoursal identities (Hafner, 2014; Yi, 2014), increase learning motivation (Jiang & Luk, 2016), engage students in culturally and socially meaningful work (Darvin, 2015; Stille & Prasad, 2015), and foster critical and academic literacy (Yi, 2014).

The Teachers' Perspective: Writing Teachers' Beliefs, Practices, and Experience

Studies exploring L2 writing teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences related to multimodal composition have tended to paint a rather gloomy picture. Studies have shown that some teachers demonstrate a deeply entrenched traditionalism, while others constantly struggle with the feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and ambivalence, which may hinder effective teaching (Choi & Yi, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019). Also frequently mentioned by L2 teachers is the concern that students' engagement with multimodal texts might deprive them of the opportunities to use the language effectively and to develop traditional academic literacy (Yi & Choi, 2015). The pressure to focus on language development also poses a challenge to teachers who work in exam-oriented institutional cultures that still privileges written language over other modes of communication (Jiang et al., 2019; Ryu, 2015; Yi & Choi, 2015). In other words, these studies have underlined teachers' unpreparedness, reluctance, and concerns in incorporating multimodal literacy into the classroom (e.g., Choi & Yi, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019).

In contrast, some studies have shown that L2 writing teachers are willing to learn the latest technologies and to keep up with the digital era (Adra, 2015; Ryu, 2015; Yi & Choi, 2015), and that they have come to appreciate the affordances of multimodal composition, including expanded learning opportunities. For example, teacher participants in Choi and Yi's study (2016) believed that including multimodality could help students develop a more nuanced understanding of content knowledge and promote them cognitive and affective engagements. To help L2 writing teachers develop the ability to incorporate multimodal composition effectively and productively, it is important to further explore how teachers overcome various challenges by mobilizing resources and seeking opportunities for professional development. This study, therefore, intends to explore this process through the lens of *teacher agency*.

Theoretical Framework of Teacher Agency

Drawing upon pragmatism and phenomenology, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defined *agency* as:

> the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (p. 970)

This widely cited definition foregrounds the individual's ability to change his/her orientation and respond to a problematic situation (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Building upon Emirbayer and Mische's definition (1998), Biesta and Tedder (2006) proposed an

ecological view that conceptualizes agency as something the individuals achieve through their constant interaction with different aspects of the social context. In other words, agency is "something that people do or, more precisely, something they achieve" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3), rather than a static set of personal capacities possessed by the individuals. In theorizing teacher agency, Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) drew upon the notion of agency being a temporally constructed process that is "informed by the past, oriented toward the future, and 'acted out' in the present" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3). Represented in a temporal continuum, the model consists of three key dimensions: *iterational* (the past), *projective* (the future), and *practical-evaluative* (the present) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Priestley et al.'s Model of Teacher Agency* (2015)
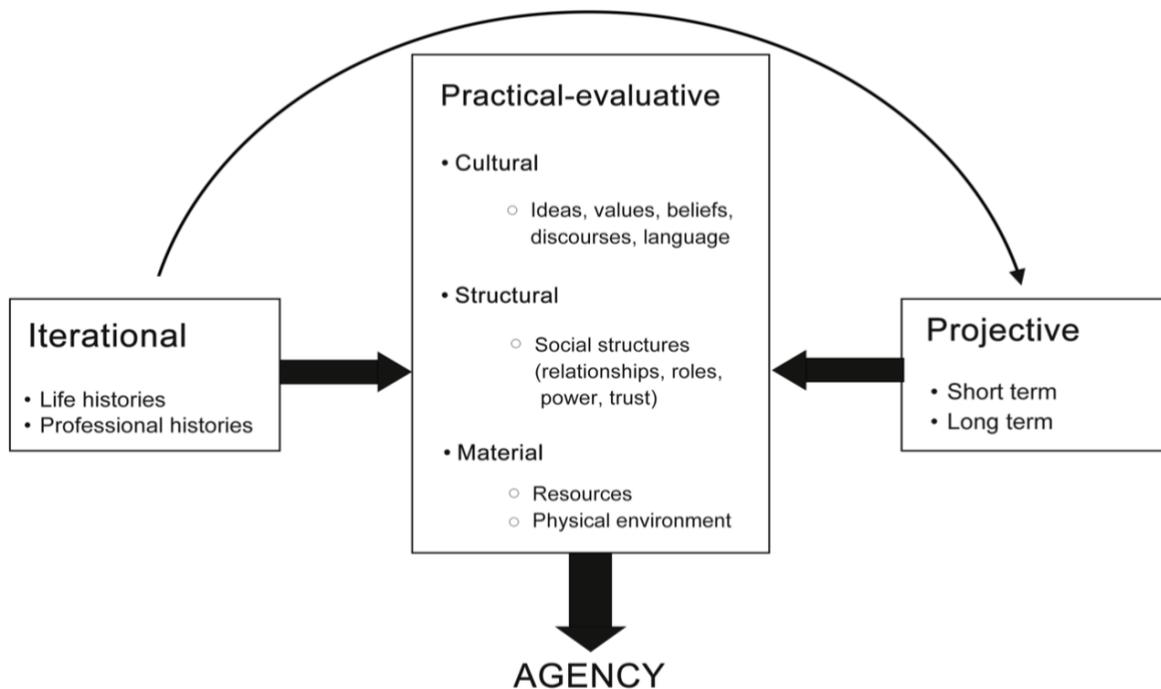
This model highlights the individuals' ability to "recognize, appropriate, and refashion past patterns of behaviors and experience as they seek to maneuver among repertoires in dealing with present dilemmas and engage in expectation maintenance in their orientations to the future" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 4). In other words, teachers' expertise, beliefs, and values are rooted in past experiences (the *iterational* dimension) but are simultaneously filtered through their personal judgment and reflection. The *projective* dimension of agency is linked to the career-related aspiration in both long and short terms. Teachers may be motivated to form expansive projections about their future development. Finally, agency can be acted out through the *practical-evaluative*

dimension, which entails "the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 6). The dual nature of this dimension suggests that it is important to understand both teachers' cognition and behaviors. In the current study, we will use *belief* as a broad term to cover the evaluative aspect that includes constructs such as ideas, values, and judgments. *Practices* in this study refer to actions taken in different stages of teaching, such as collecting and generating teaching materials, designing curricula, carrying out teaching plans, giving feedback, and assessing student's work.

Existing studies of writing teacher agency have centered around how this concept intersects with the development of professional identities, knowledge, and expertise (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2018; Jensen, 2019; Steadman et al., 2018). Oftentimes, agency is claimed when teachers make deliberate pedagogical decisions, react to prevailing discourses, and construct dialogues with colleagues and students. Other times, it is manifested in strategic inaction (Jensen, 2019).

Building on the existing understanding of teacher agency, this study focuses specifically on the complex issues of teaching multimodal literacy in L2 first-year composition (FYC). We ask the guiding question: How do L2 writing teachers achieve agency in the process of teaching multimodal literacy in first-year composition? This study intends to examine teacher agency as it is rooted in experience (the iterational aspect), projected in future aspiration (the projective aspect), and manifested in current beliefs and practices (the practical-evaluative aspect). More specifically, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. How do past experiences contribute to the exercise of teacher agency in teaching multimodal literacy?
2. How do future projections motivate the participants to claim agency in teaching multimodal literacy?
3. How is teacher agency manifested in the beliefs toward multimodal literacy and practices of teaching it?

Method

Context

The study was conducted at a large public university in the Southwestern United States. The institution has one of the largest international populations in the country. Housed in the English department, the writing program provides first-year composition courses as part of the general education for both native speakers of English (ENG 101 and 102) and multilingual students (ENG 107 and 108). In addition, stretched FYC

courses (WAC 101 and 107) are offered to allow students more time to complete the course (Glau, 1996, 2007). An advanced writing course (ENG 105) condenses the two-semester long FYC course into one.

Following the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*, the writing program sets its pedagogical goals around rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, writing process, and conventions. According to the *Mission Statement*, students are expected to develop the ability to "synthesize and analyze multiple points of view, articulate and support one's own position regarding various issues, and adjust writing to multiple audiences, purposes, and conventions" ("Mission Statement," n.d.). Although "multimodal writing" is not listed as a component of FYC curriculum, the writing program explicitly voiced its support to the use of technology in a "Statement of Technological Values," affirming its commitment to "employ evolving forms of new media to enhance learning, facilitate meaningful dialogue, promote critical thinking, and encourage collaboration" ("Statement on Technological Values," 2019).

At the time when the study was initiated in Fall 2019, 1,075 students were enrolled in 62 sections of first-year composition for multilingual writers. Twenty-five teachers were teaching the three L2 writing courses (WAC 107, ENG 107, and ENG 108); about one-third of them were graduate teaching assistants (TAs). The graduate students who are awarded teaching assistantships are assigned to teach mainstream writing courses for the first year of service, during which time they are also required to take a one-year-long teacher preparation course (TA Practicum). First-time teachers of ENG 107 and ENG 108 are required to take another one-semester practicum (Teaching L2 Writing Practicum), so as to be better equipped with the knowledge of and expertise in teaching L2 writing.

Participants

Participants of the study were identified using the purposive sampling method (Robinson, 2014). We looked for novice L2 writing teachers who have put forth the effort to integrate multimodal literacy in the FYC curriculum. We also took into consideration the participants' availability and their willingness to share experiences. Two L2 writing instructors, whose demographic information is listed in Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms), agreed to participate. We intentionally selected two participants who share some similarities in terms of gender, age, and research background, in hopes of providing a more in-depth description of this particular subgroup (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Participants*

Name	Gender	Year	First language	Program
Anna	F	2nd	English	Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies (Ph.D.)
Emily	F	2nd	Mandarin	Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies (Ph.D.)

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from two sources: semi-structured interviews and teaching materials. With each participant, we have conducted four interviews over two semesters. We interviewed each one of them before, during, and after one writing project in Fall 2019. The purpose of conducting multiple interviews was to closely examine their beliefs and to document their teaching practices as the project unfolded. At the beginning of Spring 2020, we conducted the final interview to understand the participants' plans for the coming semester and to identify any possible changes in beliefs or behaviors. Each interview took around 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent from participants.

To triangulate the data, we also asked the participants to provide their teaching documents. Documents in this study refer to a range of written, visual, digital materials used to facilitate the teaching process, such as syllabus, daily plans, PowerPoint slides, and rubrics. Listed in Table 2 are the types of teaching materials collected. To avoid confusion, we will name the writing project conducted in the fall semester "Project 1" and the other one "Project 2."

Table 2. *Information on Teaching Materials*

Name	Type of teaching materials	Time of collection
	Project 1 description	Fall 2019
	Project 1 daily plan	Fall 2019
Anna	Project 1 PowerPoint slides	Fall 2019
	Project 2 description	Spring 2020
	Project 2 daily plan	Spring 2020
	Project 1 description	Fall 2019
	Project 1 PowerPoint slides	Fall 2019
Emily	Project 2 description	Spring 2020
	Project 2 daily plan	Spring 2020

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in MAXQDA, a professional qualitative data analysis software. Data analysis was informed and guided by Priestley et al.'s (2015) model. During the first round of coding, we took a descriptive approach, paying attention to how the participants talked about their experience, their current beliefs and teaching practices, and their future aspirations (Saldaña, 2016). The second cycle of coding aimed to derive thematic patterns of the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative dimensions of teacher agency. We have also cross-compared the two cases to identify common features (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). This was followed by another round of selective coding during which we marked instances, examples, and quotes that best demonstrate the participants' agentive role in teaching multimodal writing.

Findings

Anna

Anna is a native English speaker in her late twenties. She received both her BA and MA in English in the United States and has had extensive TESOL experiences. She had taught in two Chinese universities for a total of three years before returning to the U.S. for her Ph.D. degree. Although her research interest does not align perfectly with multimodal literacy, she has invested in developing teaching expertise through graduate coursework and interaction with other faculty members. Anna's agency is enacted through the development of content pedagogical knowledge, strategic lesson planning, and conscious negotiation with the existing policies.

From a language teacher to a writing teacher. Anna first began teaching English at a Chinese university when she had just received her bachelor's degree. The university where she attended the summer camp as an exchange student offered her an instructor position. The sudden transition of identity was a "weird and jarring experience" (Anna, 4th interview), because a few months ago she was still sitting on the other side of the classroom. During her first job, Anna taught a wide range of courses, among which the writing courses had received the highest evaluation and best feedback from students. However, she received very little teacher training from the institution. The courses, sections, and even textbooks were prescribed by the program and assigned to her with little room for negotiation. The writing courses, in particular, were designed to familiarize students with a number of genres valued by standardized tests. In her case, it was the national Test for English Majors (TEM). Therefore, a large part of those courses was geared toward correcting grammatical and mechanical errors, which was the expectation of students and possibly the demand of the English department. From the second year of her service, Anna started to take the initiative to incorporate genres, texts, and writing tasks of her own choice into the curriculum. For example, she assigned readings of short stories and excerpts from scholarly work. Well received by her students, these changes inspired Anna to explore how to prepare students for writings beyond exams and how to become a better writing teacher, which partially led to her pursuit of a doctoral degree in the current program.

Looking back at her three years of teaching experience in China, Anna summarized that her professional identity had shifted away from a language teacher:

> I think one significant thing that's changed between then and now is that I was very much focused on those writing classes as a way to increase language proficiency… whereas coming here working with Dr. X, kind of reimagined it as focusing on ideas first, and then rhetorical awareness and letting language issues be addressed as they come up. (Anna, 4th interview)

Alongside her trajectory of identity development is the growing knowledge of multimodal literacy. Anna said that the one-year TA Practicum was the first formal and systematic training she has ever received as an in-service teacher. Although she had implicitly known the use of different media and semiotic resources in composition, it was in the TA Practicum that she first came across the term *multimodal writing*. In the TA Practicum, writing was introduced as an encompassing term that employs a wide range of modes of communication. Related concepts, such as *digital literacy* and *multiliteracies*, were also introduced and discussed in two other courses ("Theories of Literacy" and "Teaching Literacy for Action and Change") that Anna took during her first year. In the third semester, she took the course "Multimodal Analysis," which focused heavily on theories of visual communication and analytical methods.

Apart from completing the coursework, Anna also attended workshops and conferences arranged by the Writing Program and other institutions. Assimilating into the community allows her to develop not only the content knowledge of multimodality but also practical and pedagogical knowledge. For example, in teaching students to use technologies that she does not excel at, Anna has formed a learning community by inviting students with technological expertise to co-teach the lesson. Anna said that she has learned this teaching method through talking to Emily and other graduate teaching assistants. Finally, Anna has also acknowledged the power of the circulating academic discourses, saying that:

> It [multimodal writing] is just one of those things that you kind of learn through osmosis, just get a sense of where the boundaries are and how it's defined, how it's related to other fields of inquiry, things like that. And it's definitely a buzzword that is coming up more and more in studies. (Anna, 1st interview)

In short, Anna's experience is typical in the sense that her development of expertise was informed by multiple sources. More specifically in her case, the scholarship in multimodal literacy and second language writing has served as significant contributing source of information.

Teaching multimodal literacy: Connecting the dots. Informed by the disciplinary discourses and professional development, Anna has developed a sophisticated understanding of multimodal writing and its pedagogical goals. For her, incorporating multimodality into the writing classroom means far more than just allowing space for different types of communication. Rather, it serves to empower students and help them make sense of the world, since "everything around us is trying to tell us a story" (Anna, 1st interview). In addition, Anna also explained that the pedagogy of multimodal literacy is tied to grand educational goals such as achieving social equality and promoting students' agency: "It [multimodal writing] is a big kind of concept, as far as it relates to more opportunities for student equity and agency and access in the classroom, especially

when they [students] have more non-academically valued literacy that they bring into school" (Anna, 1st interview). The idea of fostering students' agency and granting them access to meaning-making and self-expression is something that Anna is "really big on" and considers investigating in her future research (Anna, 1st interview).

We have observed that Anna was very strategic in lesson planning. In her first project, students were asked to respond to one of the five texts chosen by the teacher. The texts ranged from a *Washington Post* article to a speech on YouTube, all of which can be considered as multimodal. Although the end-product was a written textual analysis, students were encouraged to analyze both the "textual and non-textual elements" (Anna, Project 1 description). In Project 2, students were given the freedom to design an infographic as an alternative way of data presentation. Her reason for scaffolding the process in such a way is that "to overwhelm students with this kind of theoretical terminology [in ENG 107] might be a little too much," but the teacher "can still introduce the concept so that they [students] are aware of these things and how they're working, and then later have the terms to talk about them" (Anna, 1st interview).

In helping students to develop such awareness, Anna drew their attention to non-textual elements through explicit discussions. For instance, when talking about ways of incorporating sources, she showed students an illustration from one of the designated articles as an example of "quoting images" (see Figure 2). The idea was to help students understand how meaning-making can be afforded in an alternative way, as she explained later in the interview:

> For the example of Martin Luther King Junior, um, that I gave as a quoted image, that article is talking about how we take him out of context, and the image is just him with photoshop background around him, right? So that is literally the image of him out of the original historical context of that photograph, which helped them [students] make those connections. (Anna, 2nd interview)

Such conversations also happened, perhaps more frequently, during the one-on-one conferences, where the teacher can provide more "customized" instruction and feedback. One interesting example was Anna's discussion with her students about the innovative design of a website that promotes gender equality.[1] Anna directed the student's attention to the affordances and the design, focusing on how the interactive features can have an impact on the audience:

> And this website is also really cool because there's one section where it says, "what does this mean for your country?" where you can select statistics and data that you want to compare. So, it gives the user the ability to select the data that is most relevant for them. So, we talked about how is that helpful at engaging your audience in a different way than if you were to just present all of the statistics side

by side, the reader or the user has to sift through all of that information, whereas this interactive component makes it much more engaging and much more efficient and immediately accessible to what they're looking at and what they're concerned about. (Anna, 3rd interview)

Figure 2. *Illustration of Martin Luther King Jr. from "The Gentrification of MLK"*

(Note. This illustration appears in an *Essence* article titled *The Gentrification of MLK: How America Intentionally Misrepresents Our Radical Civil Rights Leader*. Retrieved from https://www.essence.com/news/martin-luther-king-jr-gentrified-whitewashed-american-racism/*.)*

Anna said that her conversation with students about this website was encouraging for her as a teacher, because she was excited to see her students willing to push the boundaries of understanding until "it finally clicked for them" (Anna, 3rd interview).

Anna has also demonstrated an interesting pattern of collecting and generating teaching materials. During the process, she took into consideration various factors, such as students' cultural backgrounds, interests, and pedagogical goals. For example, in explaining her choices, Anna said that "I try and find things that I think students will respond to strongly, um, because when we come across texts that can make us feel very angry or make us strongly agree with it, it's usually a little bit easier to write about" (2nd interview). Notably, her selection of teaching materials was informed by the daily and personal encounters with multimodal texts at various sites:

Throughout the year as I'm on the news or social media or different things come up in my daily life or my own course work that I think would be interesting for

students to use, I'll just like save them and then be able to incorporate them later. (Anna, 2nd interview)

Students' works also contributed to her knowledge pool. For example, Anna first saw the aforementioned website on gender equality in a textual analysis written by her students in the Early Start Program.[2] She later decided to incorporate that source into ENG 107 as an example of multimodal design for the following reason:

So, I actually um… based on the information and sources that other students had been interested in. I also drew upon those rather than saying, "ok, I think this might be something that they'd be interested in it." These are what your peers are finding and wanting to talk about. (Anna, 3rd interview)

Lastly, Anna's agency as a writing instructor is reflected in the way she negotiated with the current institutional policies. When asked whether the lack of explicit mentioning of multimodal writing in the *Mission Statement* imposes constraints to her teaching, Anna answered:

I wonder almost if the explicit inclusion of multimodal writing in the Mission Statement is something that we can look at, because I feel like it's something that is spoken about positively, like as a department culture. So, to look at revising the Mission Statement based on the things that most teachers are already doing, rather than adjusting what's working in the classroom so that it falls under the articulated Mission Statement. (Anna, 4th interview)

Anna's comment implies that the lack of program policy does not necessarily create barriers for interested individuals. She believed the policy should be adapted to reflect the emerging and effective pedagogical theories and practices not vice versa.

The findings reveal that Anna's teaching experiences in different contexts and the professional development she received (e.g., TA practicum, graduate courses) have contributed significantly to the way she makes pedagogical decisions. Her interest to research student agency encouraged her to place empowerment at the heart of teaching multimodal writing. In her FYC classes, Anna has taken the initiative to form sophisticated understanding of multimodality, select relevant examples from daily reading, and facilitate discussions about language, media, and rhetoric.

Emily

Emily presents an impressive case where the individual's personal interest, research interest, and teaching philosophy align perfectly with one another. Emily received her ESL education in mainland China where the traditional alphabetical literacy

is favored by the dominant exam-oriented culture. She has completed her master's degree in English Language Learning in the United States. Although growing up in a culture that values traditional academic literacy, Emily does not show any sign of resistance toward multimodality. Instead, she enthusiastically embraces the idea of teaching and researching multimodal literacy. This positive attitude is primarily attributed to her thirteen-year long experience as a fanfiction writer, as well as her growing expertise in literacy studies. Her daily observation, out-of-school literacies, and future research projects have served as potential sites of reflection and teacher agency.

   Where it all starts: Writing fanfictions. Emily has labeled herself, several times in the interviews, as a "digital native," a term used by Prensky (2001) to refer to "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet" (p. 2). The ability to master digital communication and multimodal writing is a salient part of her identity. Her story with multimodal literacy can be traced back to her childhood and adolescence, long before she has a name for the various activities that she actively participated in. What is particularly impressive is her long-standing passion for writing fanfictions starting at the age of 13. It was also through composing fanfictions and joining fandoms that she has developed her multimodal literacy and identity as a creative writer. Lying at the center of her fanfiction writing experience is the concept of *transduction*, defined as "the shift of 'semiotic structures' across modes" (Kress, 2003, p. 36). Emily explained her understanding with an example: "We have people who capture a specific scene in the movie, and then they caption it with new words and new texts" (1st interview). Interestingly, she has developed her writing techniques out of the notion of transduction:

> I learned so much about descriptions and descriptive writing from movies, because in movies, um, you know, the camera moves very slowly. It can explode a moment into a century, right? So, I learned that. I sort of transfer that kind of "camera language" into my writing. (Emily, 1st interview)

In addition, Emily's narrative also reminded us of how meaning-making could be achieved through "a process of complex cognition grounded in bodily experience and feeling" (Miller, 2013, p. 388), also known as *embodied cognition*:

> I always post music together with my writing. I tell my readers "this is the music I listen to when I compose this story." … I use music because I find it to be a very useful tool for me to settle in a certain kind of emotion…. I feel my readers should have access to that too. (1st interview)

Her profound love for digital technologies and multimodality has laid the foundation for her teaching philosophies and identity as a writing teacher of the 21st Century. She firmly claimed that "I can't teach without technology. I can't teach without multimodality" (1st

interview). In developing her teaching expertise, Emily has, of course, gone beyond just pursuing personal interest. During her master studies, she first encountered the concept of *digital literacy* in coursework. She immediately linked the scholarly literature to her previous fanfiction writing experiences and realized that digital literacy has always been "a natural part of [her] life" (Emily, 1st interview). Like Anna, Emily came to know more about multimodality through her Ph.D. coursework. In particular, she mentioned the TA Practicum and the course titled "Composition Studies," where "multimodal composition is the buzzword" (Emily, 1st interview).

Perhaps more noticeable is Emily's investment in her identity as a scholar of digital/multimodal literacy since a fairly early stage. For example, she talked enthusiastically about one of the courses, "Reading and Learning with Print and New Media," that she took as a master student, saying that "this is one of the courses that exerted a very profound influence on me. I know I'm going to do digital literacy; I know I'm going to study it" (1st interview). When asked about her goals in teaching multimodal writing, Emily confirmed once again her professional identity, stating that "I, first of all, identify myself as a multimodal literacy scholar. I think I'm going to publish on that in the future" (1st interview). In the last interview, she briefly mentioned her research plan to investigate L2 writers' multimodal composition and even invited our collaboration. It is clear that the effort to teach multimodal writing is tightly intertwined with her identity as a fandom writer and young literacy scholar.

Achieving agency through innovative teaching. The finding indicates that Emily has attached great importance to multimodal literacy, which "runs through [her] teaching plans" (Emily, 3rd interview). Emily's understanding of multimodal literacy, or literacy in general, is centered around the question of what it can achieve. She explained that

> I'm not saying that I don't care about language, but I care more about what students can do with the language and literacy they acquire, for example, their identity investment in that community. I think that's more important than the language itself. (Emily, 4th interview)

Emily's belief about multimodal literacy can be seen as a result of active negotiation with academic discourses. This is best demonstrated in her changing attitude toward multimodal pedagogy for L2 writers. During the first interview, she showed great uncertainty about whether focusing on non-linguistic elements would compromise students' language development:

> As a language teacher, um, as someone who wants to help multilingual students with their language proficiency, I was wondering if I should prioritize their language and linguistic features. I can come up with so many fancy activities, but I don't

know if that promotes their linguistic development. So, I'm not sure. I struggle with that too. I wrestle with it. (Emily, 1st interview)

In the last interview, she went back again to the debate over linguistic gains, referring particularly to the 2017 special issues of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*:

People who are against multimodal writing mostly argue about whether it actually helps the language proficiency to grow. They don't care about anything other than language, because they believe it is the primary task of a second language writing teacher to promote writing, especially second language writing, development, right? I think what they said makes sense. And that argument once made me question why we teach multimodal writing. I think now I have an answer. I think maybe we focus too much on the end rather than the means because writing is not the end. Writing is the means that we do things. (4th interview)

The change of attitude was partially attributed to Emily's observation of L2 students' literacy activities. She reasoned that when students are engaged in multimodal practices, such as watching a tutorial or documentary, they are at the same time learning how language is used in a specific context and how conventions are followed in different communities. These, she believed, should be the ultimate goal of language and literacy education.

Emily's effort to make the writing classroom an authentic composing site was indeed a salient feature of her teaching. Underlying this approach is her firm belief that students should not feel "what they learn in the classroom is not relevant to what they are actually doing outside of the school" (Emily, 1st interview). The belief is enacted by incorporating digital multimodal texts that are embedded in a real-world situation. Like Anna, a lot of Emily's teaching inspiration also came from her daily life, which, according to her, is "always multimodal" (4th interview). She identified herself as being "very observant of the surroundings" (3rd interview).

For Emily, teaching multimodal writing comes hand in hand with her effort "to re-examine [her] life through the lens of rhetorical theories" (4th interview). An interesting example was found in the first lesson of Project 1 where she explained how contexts could shape the meaning of a message (Emily, PowerPoint 1). The picture she used to demonstrate this point was taken at the university's fitness center (see Figure 3). She explained that the meaning of the words "You're going to make it…," "Don't stop now!" and "YOU are a force to be reckoned with!" are deprived once they are taken out of their original context—the staircases in the gym (Emily, 2nd interview). This is only one of many examples that show her attempt to increase students' rhetorical awareness through the use of authentic materials found in the adjacent physical or digital settings, which she argued that her "students can relate to very well" (Emily, 3rd interview). She has also

displayed a strong sense of pride and ownership when sharing her teaching materials: "I love the examples that I collected and I think my students enjoy [them] too" (Emily, 3rd interview).

Figure 3. *Example of Emily's Teaching Materials*

Similar to Anna, Emily also managed to scaffold the learning process by first broadening students' understanding of texts, introducing the idea of multimodality, and then having students compose multimodal texts later. For instance, in the first project, she used a Burger King commercial to explain the idea of risk-taking in different rhetorical situations and encouraged students to make full use of modal affordances in their writing. In Project 2, she planned to allow students to present their data in forms of webinars, where the visual information is accompanied by oral explanation. Additionally, she said that the final products would be published on YouTube to get feedback from real audiences.

It is clear that Emily, who grows up with different kinds of literacy practices, is an enthusiastic advocate for the pedagogy of multimodal writing. Her agency of teaching multimodal writing is deeply rooted in her personal experiences and research background, and at the same time oriented toward potential research projects in the future. Her agency is enacted through critical negotiation with conflicting viewpoints, frequent reflection upon daily encounters of multimodal texts, and careful selection of meaningful teaching materials.

Discussion

Our analysis has demonstrated how agency can be achieved and enacted in an environment that favors the integration of multimodal writing. Both participants have actively sought opportunities to know more about multimodality and multimodal writing, challenged the traditional view of what counts as literacy, situated the renewed understanding of literacy into a larger pedagogical agenda, and negotiated their way through points of contention. Such findings stand in sharp contrast to Jensen's (2019) claim that "Entrenched notions of writing and new teachers' perceived lack of agency may be the two reasons that the teaching of writing does not fully reflect twenty-first-century affordances" (p. 299). In fact, this study shows that new teachers can be agentive individuals and that teacher agency plays an important part in writing education.

However, it is important to note that these participants' agency and investment in teaching multimodal literacy are deeply rooted in their unique personal experiences and evolving identities. The fact that both of them are in the Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies program means that they are probably exposed to more academic discussions of this issue. Moreover, their identities as young scholars in the field of literacy also encouraged them to contemplate the goals and means of teaching multimodal writing. These findings have underlined the important role played by subject matter knowledge and pedagogical expertise in achieving teacher agency (Jiang et al., 2019; Leijen et al., 2014). What we do not know enough, however, is the extent to which graduate teaching assistants with other research backgrounds, such as literature and applied linguistics, are equally motivated to invest in teaching multimodal writing. Future studies can be conducted among a more diverse group of teachers to examine how disciplinary identities and expertise can interact with pedagogical approaches to multimodality.

Second, this study has highlighted the power of dominant academic discourses. Both participants have mentioned that multimodality was a "buzzword" in the field, which drew their attention to the concept in the first place. They have later developed a more sophisticated and solid understanding by taking courses, reading scholarly articles, attending conferences and workshops and so on. In these cases, the "buzzword" seemed to have ignited the participants' interest and had a positive impact on their professional development. However, one should also remember that the discourses around multimodal literacy can be constructed and perceived very differently at different institutions. As shown in the literature (e.g., Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2012; Shipka, 2011), there is a tendency, in the field at large, to simplify the concept of multimodality, flatten out the nuances of different modes, and equate teaching multimodal literacy with the use of digital technologies. Such discourses are likely to result in reductive practices that focus only on the instrumental aspect of teaching (Biesta et al., 2015).

Third, this study shows that the teachers have attempted to bridge students' in- and out-of-school literacies, which they considered the primary goal of teaching multimodal literacy, by using authentic texts that the teachers encounter in real life. There

seems to be a reciprocal relationship between teachers' efforts to help students understand multimodality and their own advancement in such understanding. On the one hand, a wide range of texts has been introduced into the classroom to broaden students' perception of literacy and help them make sense of the world using different semiotic resources. This, in turn, has allowed teachers the opportunity to examine their assumptions about literacy and communication. It is through such reflective practices that our participants become what Hatano and Inagaki (1984) called "adaptive experts" who "not only perform procedural skills efficiently but also understand the meaning of the skills and nature of their object" (p. 28). The elements of teacher agency were also manifested in the process of selecting teaching materials. In choosing appropriate texts for teaching, teachers have gone through a series of decision-making to determine whether the text illustrates modal affordances, whether it aligns with the goals of teaching multimodal writing, whether it is accessible to students coming from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds, whether it is engaging, interesting, and relatable, and how it can be used effectively to achieve learning outcomes. Teaching multimodal literacy seems to have opened up space for teachers to reexamine their assumptions about students, literacy education, teaching, and learning,

Last but not least, the study sheds light on the emotional and affective issues involved in teaching multimodal literacy. Both participants talked positively about their teaching experience, saying that they were happy to see students developing a renewed understanding of writing and making progress along the way. Their experiences are in sharp contrast to the feelings of resistance and uncertainty found in previous studies (e.g., Choi & Yi, 2016; Yi, 2014). One of the motivating aspects of teaching multimodal writing, we suspect, is that participants could connect teaching with their own research agenda and personal literacy activities. The study did not include teachers who are less enthusiastic and knowledgeable about multimodal pedagogy. Future studies could delve into how novice teachers experience and cope with negative feelings when the academic conventions are disrupted.

Conclusion

The study examines issues of teacher agency in teaching multimodal literacy by linking the participants' past experiences, future projections, and current beliefs and practices. We have found that our participants have had rich experiences with multimodal literacy both in and outside of the academic context and developed theoretical and practical knowledge in different ways.

We would like to acknowledge that the study is limited in several ways. The purpose of the study is to provide a detailed and rich description and offer insights into teacher agency rather than drawing generalized patterns. To truly understand the degree to which teachers achieve agency in teaching multimodal literacy, more studies need to

be conducted in a variety of institutional and cultural contexts. Moreover, including class observations and students' writings could probably help us better envision how teaching instructions are delivered and received. Lastly, our study of teacher agency is relatively confined to a certain stage of the participants' career. Future research could investigate how teacher agency intersects with teachers' professional development and identity construction over a longer period (Sabatino & Blevins, 2018).

Based on the findings and discussion, we would like to make the following suggestions to the design of teacher preparation. First, professional development could help teachers make connections between teaching multimodal literacy and other aspects of their academic and personal life. Although studies revealed that multimodal texts permeate academic communication (Archer, 2010; Lim & Polio, 2020; Reid & Pettiway, 2016), it is likely that many teachers do not see how those writing contexts share similar traits with FYC. In fact, the difficulty to draw connections was also experienced by many students who were required to compose multimodally (Shepherd, 2018). To help students understand how developing multimodal literacy contributes to their future success, teachers should be prepared to understand the connections and articulate their expectations.

Second, this study suggests that, to help teachers navigate through the "buzzword" discourses, teacher preparation should attend to how teaching multimodal literacy is framed. As demonstrated in the case of the Digital Media and Composition (DMAC) summer institute (Alexander & Williams, 2015; McGrath & Guglielmo, 2015), framing it as intellectual work helps the trainees "not only to gain greater facility with the tools of digital composing but also grapple with the theories and issues that inform and complicate pedagogies and practices" (McGrath & Guglielmo, 2015, p. 47). This study also highlights the necessity for teachers to move beyond considering multimodal pedagogy as "something in trend." Professional development, therefore, needs to create spaces where teachers can discuss how multimodality theories are translated into practice.

Last but not least, teacher education should attend to teachers' emotional and affective responses and take into consideration how different educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds might interact with teachers' perception of multimodal literacy. To date, the emotional issues of teaching multimodal literacy are rarely discussed in either research or teacher education (Meixner et al., 2019). Therefore, future professional development might want to address these issues by allowing enough time and space for novice teachers to experience negative emotions and at the same time providing moral support and guidance.

Notes

[1] The Website "Growing Economies Through Gender Parity" can be accessed through https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-global-economy/.

[2] The Early Start is a two-week summer program that helps first-year students to transition into their college life.

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