



Multimodal Composition and Language Empowerment: Lessons from a Multilingual Classroom

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Abstract: Identifying multimodal writing skills of multilingual students and channeling such skills for the purpose of meaningful pedagogy remains a challenge in our composition classes. This study analyzes multimodal projects by two multilingual students in a composition class to offer some strategies that cater to the needs of multilingual students across colleges and universities. Through multimodal writing, multilingual students do not only explore their cultural, transnational, and language identities, but also showcase digital writing skills to succeed both academically and professionally across diverse contexts.

Keywords: multimodal writing, student agency, multilingual composition, freshman writing, multicultural identities

Introduction

While multilingual students offer an insightful perspective regarding their experiences of learning through multimodal writing, we do little to promote their experiences via multilingual and multimodal composition in academic writing courses. The purpose of this study is to explore a diverse and multimodal approach to writing adopted by multilingual students in freshman writing classes to see how they co-construct meaning by articulating their voice in audio essays for the class. This intro to composition course is targeted mostly to multilingual students who are mostly adept at channeling their diverse language

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learning and cultural practices for the enhancement of their academic skills. Discussion of students' engagement in a digital project for the class also offers a deeper analysis of both challenges and opportunities that most of the multilingual students face when learning and using English across diverse contexts.

In this essay, I present research based on two of my multilingual students' (Shen and Ming, pseudonyms chosen for confidentiality) multimodal composition from Intro to Composition class, which primarily consists of multilingual students. This idea becomes quite significant in the context of multimodal writing, where students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds can not only explore their language, cultural, and transnational identities but also use their digital writing skills for a meaningful purpose. Application of multimodal writing skills also becomes inevitable for their academic success and career development after they graduate college in the context of digitized and globalized workplaces. Identifying multimodal writing skills of multilingual students and channeling such skills for the purpose of meaningful pedagogy remains a challenge in our composition classes, so this study is targeted to composition scholars and teachers in the field to offer an intriguing perspective on teaching of multimodal writing through an analysis of audio essay assignment in my class.

Digital Media and Student Composition

Digital media platforms offer students unique rhetorical opportunities to foster their home language and cultural practices in a way to communicate with larger academic communities for a mutual learning and exchange of meaningful ideas in the class. Use of digital media also provides multilingual students agency over their creation, helping them overcome the academic boundaries set by traditional alphabetic writing. As Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) rightly observe, students today feel more comfortable navigating academic contexts and exchanging "texts composed of still and moving images, animations, sounds, words, and colors" (p. 2).

As writing instructors, it is incumbent upon us to promote and recognize multimodalities in the classroom so as to help bridge the gaps between their prior academic institutions and current universities or colleges. We can do so by providing students an exposure to diverse academic and writing practices so as to help them foster their multilingual and multimodal resources as agentive rhetorical attunement (Leonard, 2014). Prescribing the core reading and writing activities that are based on traditional alphabetic modes alone would benefit only certain students that have been exposed to such practices before their arrival to colleges and universities.

However, for multilingual students, those same academic practices may be mostly dependent on their diverse contextual and cultural experiences. Therefore, as I argue throughout this essay, providing multilingual students with alternative multimodal assignments for composition would offer them fair opportunities to utilize their creative

potential with a critical perspective. For example, while Western rhetorical patterns may benefit students who have been well informed and trained in those systems in the West, the same patterns may well alienate multilingual students whose communication practices may be deeply influenced by their home cultures.

In my analysis of student composition in this essay, I use multimodal projects composed by two multilingual students. Both Shen and Ming were freshman students from China, who had two years of high school experience in the U.S. before they joined the university. However, mostly comfortable in their original language cultures, they felt alienated from the class when they had to work on formal printed writing assignments. Both of the students in this study believed that multimodal assignments would allow them more choice and agency in their composition. Ming writes in her post-assignment reflection that while “the article (written essay assignment) can only display text,” the multimodal project “can display text, picture, sound, and even special effects, which is not available in the former.” She further adds: “The efficiency of picture comprehension is so advantageous that people tend to read pictures.”

I selected both Shen and Ming for this study not only because of their disposition to multilingual and multimodal repertoires but also because of their reticent nature in class participation. Also, in addition to their individual literacy narrative multimodal projects, they collaborated on another video essay assignment for their final project. A few similarities and more differences in their approaches to multimodal assignments further make the study more intriguing.



([Audio essay project by Ming](#))

For this multimodal literacy assignment in my Intro to Composition class, I asked students to use a digital platform (Adobe Spark) and create a literacy narrative by writing, recording, and editing an audio

essay. They could either mix music or environmental soundtracks as soft layers along with their voice recording. In creating a compelling narrative, students got an opportunity to explore their experiences of facing issues of identity, cultural dislocation, and racial stereotypes based on the readings for the semester. Both Shen and Ming used Adobe Spark to host their projects. I found this digital platform to be quite useful and rhetorically suitable to help students create a multimodal narrative. Audio composition provides multilingual students unique agency, as they feel that with an integration of images or other relevant multimodal artifacts in their own voice recording through such digital

platforms, they can communicate more confidently and effectively to their primary audience, i.e., their classmates and the instructor in their writing class.

Moreover, irrespective of their places of origin, web-based multimodal composition platforms such as Adobe Express can be readily available to all the students so they can feel engaged in the composition process, allowing them more space and agency over their academic work. Not only in writing, but also in reading and languaging activities in writing classes, multilingual students who enjoy the benefit of multimodal theme sets as supportive reading tools perform much better compared to those provided only with traditional alphabetic readings.

For example, in his comparative study between a control group of international students in a writing class that only received alphabetic readings, and another group that received additional supportive multimodal theme sets with audio and video resources, Ruefman (2015) found that the latter group of international students performed much better, even surpassing the performance of native speakers of English students in class. Moreover, increased engagement of students is another motivation for instructors to implement multimodal composing projects in multilingual classrooms. With the help of modal affordances and digital tools at their hands, multilingual students create better projects that are more meaningful and assertive to enhance their agency.

Alternative Modality and Student Agency

Students in multilingual classrooms bring in diverse resources not only based on their languages but also based on cultural and rhetorical practices that can be shared with other students to enrich their experiences if we properly channel such resources through writing activities in first year composition classrooms. In today's networked and globalized learning systems in the world, students experiment with diverse ways of navigating to reading and writing practices. Among such practices, digital multimodal projects become effective means to help multilingual students navigate their ways to academic success. Since language can never function as a static means of communication, multilingual students' engagement in multimodal writing offers them opportunities to engage in language use as an evolving, fluid system of signification that helps them create meaning contextually and culturally. Doing so also helps multilingual students converge vernacular practices with academic discourses, thereby helping us mitigate tensions that arise due to existing literacy and cultural inequities among students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

For example, a history professor's effort to adapt Ling, an undergrad student from Taiwan, to the discourse of American history, fails because of a lack of alternative modalities to work on her home culture literacies, for Ling more comfortably resorts to the history and culture of China when responding to the assignments (Leki, 1995, p. 242). Similarly, in Leki's (1995) research, Yang, a graduate student from China, takes much

less advantage of peer interaction. Although Yang's reluctance to show his work to his classmates and to review theirs seems to be for the purpose of saving time, such perception may be guided not only by his feeling of shyness in a different academic culture but also by his fear of being judged. One of the problems Prior (1991) relates with non-native English speaker students' low grades in his study is concerned with these students' "limited patterns of participation" (p. 305) in interaction with their peers and the instructor. This can be a useful insight to look at why Ding's (2008) non-native English speaker students make less use of social apprenticeship opportunities than her native English speaker students. Although Ding's study further suggests the fact that multilingual students' cultural, linguistic, and comprehension-related inhibitions in the beginning semesters of their U.S. education keep them from maximizing their learning experiences in colleges and universities (p. 41), it does not offer the ways to encourage these students to overcome such inhibitions and increase their participation in peer learning.

It was especially intriguing to see more reticent students in my class creating projects that were so illuminating and insightful. My hunch in the beginning of this writing was that students felt more secure having to create an audio recording that would only be shared with either a small group of peers or with the instructor. Unlike their usual class discussions, where they feel uncomfortable, mainly because of their lack of confidence in language competence, and secondarily because they remain more sensitive about being judged by their peers in a classroom setting, multilingual students become more creative with multimodal assignments.



[\(Audio essay project by Shen\)](#)

For example, Shen, who mostly remained silent and hidden in class, created a project about her visit to a new country and learning new cultures and language skills that shaped her growth as a student seeking opportunities for higher studies in a U.S. college. Had it been only for a traditional "formal" paper, she probably would not have been motivated to bring in such rich resources of visiting a new place and learning about diverse languages and cultural values of the people in a different country with the same vigor and aural effect that she could demonstrate through her audio composition.

When they enter college classrooms, students bring with them multiple repertoires of communication, and they become more invested in the process of writing when they

get to explore prior digital skills like making videos, podcasts or even blogs for academic purposes, allowing them to make meaningful connections to their lives and cultural experiences. With a freedom to combine sounds, images, visuals, and texts, students meaningfully promote their cultural and social capital by expressing identities in empowering ways not usually afforded with written texts (Anderson et al., 2017). Inviting multilingual students to work on multimodal projects also encourages them to explore their interests, produce multivocal texts, and foster a mutual learning environment, by allowing equitable opportunities to exchange knowledge and share ideas with peers from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. According to Anderson et al. (2017), students' design of multimodal texts represents the "renegotiation of previously limited possibilities for being and doing in their classroom, despite a systemic lack of opportunity to do so" (p. 106).

In the meantime, the "multifaceted nature of multimodal composing processes allows for flexibility and individuality in how students choose to create their projects" (Smith & Axelrod, 2019, p. 86). In the beginning stage of her composition for audio literacy narrative, Shen wanted to work on her literacy development through elementary school. However, as she started exploring ideas further, she realized that her visit to Japan would provide her a better opportunity to reflect on a more meaningful literacy development. Leonard, in her *College English* article "Multilingual Writing as Rhetorical Attunement," highlights some of the rhetorical practices that multilingual writers utilize in order to suggest that their reading and writing emerge out of a productive multilingual chaos. Offering an account of six multilingual students, Leonard demonstrates how writing across languages and locations in the world is fluid and emergent, and how understanding of such literate practices offers us ways to help our students negotiate meaning across difference. Calling this process of doing rhetoric a rhetorical attunement (229), Leonard studies a range of creative and agentive practices, processes, and communicative moves that multilingual writers use to make meaning through their writing. By the same token, what Ming and Shen engage in and present through their multimodal projects would also become a part of their rhetorical attunement or a conscious choice out of a multilingual chaos in the process of their learning.

As she revealed in her post-assignment reflection, Shen felt more agency talking about her conscious choice to visit Japan and successfully navigate her way to different places, peoples, and cultures without properly learning Japanese. As a reserved and silent student most of the time in class, Shen realized that her only way to be more vocal in her classwork would be through such multimodal projects, where she could openly express her ideas by selecting appropriate modes of communication with her preferred designs. She believed that doing so further empowered her to more successfully transition to U.S. colleges and universities from a Chinese academic context. To Shen, talking about her trip to Kyoto was not simply a project that she wanted to accomplish for a class; it was also an opportunity for "finding part of my identity" because the Japanese

city, Kyoto, is modeled after Xi'an in China, which is her native town. And exploring Kyoto thus became an identity formation project for Shen.

Similarly, Ming wanted to work on the topic of childhood literacy development in China because she found it as a learning opportunity to explore the “value of my childhood education,” not just the “skills.” Ming further reflected that working on this multimodal project helped her identify differences between American culture and Chinese culture in terms of academic values; now that she was in the U.S., she could observe and appreciate academic and cultural values she learned when in China. Shen’s reflection about her working process for the multimodal project further helps us get into the messy nature of digital tools, and it’s this messiness that loosens meaningful ideas out of students’ minds. For Shen, compared to regular printed essays, multimodal composition “changed regular one-dimension words reading to two-dimension reading and listening.” She also is equally mindful of the audience impact a multimodal project can have. For its more effective message delivery to the audience, multimodal composition can further enhance communication by providing them the “information not only by helping them understand the text in recorded form but also by combining the texts with images and music” (Shen’s words).

Conclusion

As indicated by both Ming and Shen through their post-assignment reflection, students also meaningfully create self-learning trajectory and feel ownership over their work based on their experiences of working on these projects. Such multimodal reflections, which could take any forms, including digital or online composition, according to Smith and Dalton (2016), “allow for students to leverage the digital tools they learned in class and offer unique introspective space for students to uncover their collaborative processes and views on their experiences” (Smith & Dalton cited in Smith & Axelrod, 2019, p. 90). Such opportunities also engage multilingual students in a way to comfortably navigate the academic environment by providing them with “low stake opportunity [...] to continue learning the new tools and gain experience with multimodal composing,” serving as “insightful formative assessments for the teacher” (Smith & Axelrod, 2019, p. 90). Reflecting on their working process also allows students to assume ownership of their project, separating it from the experiences of working on simply an objective or technical project, which, in turn, would be considered an autonomous model, hence depriving them of ownership in writing.

In his discussion of the ideological model of literacy, Street (1984) challenges the assumptions of such an autonomous model of literacy that assumes literacy as a technical, objective, neutral, and cognitive entity, and analyzes the contradictions and problems such assumptions lead to. Moreover, access and understanding of these modes are other important factors we need to consider before looking at how technology is used by certain student writers. Technology thus may inadvertently serve only the people who can afford to use computers and also other technological resources; in the meantime, we forget the fact that it helps certain people and marginalizes the others.

Therefore, an autonomous model mostly shapes our understanding of technology and writing, without acknowledging the fact that it is ideological and supports only the select few.

Currently, aural and visual modes have become even more dominant modes of communication, and allowing students an access to such modes based on their interests would prove to be an inclusive pedagogical model we need to promote in our writing classes. Moreover, writing itself is visual, and modes in themselves are shaped by historical, social, cultural changes. In addition, as expressed by Shen in her reflection, “words are not straight enough to show some ideas, photos and images are a better way.” In practice, we need to see the use of technology in writing through an ideological model and acknowledge the fact that writing practice is messy, fluid, and changing, so evaluating writing practices only through an autonomous model creates a biased attitude by implying that writing generally refers to something in printed form.

Use of authorial stance, as framed by Vasudevan et al. (2010) as a framework, helps us understand the agency students enjoy in their creation of multimodal projects. According to Vasudevan et al. (2010), authorial stance would help students leverage their agency by helping them “claim(ing) a presence as an author and narrator of one’s own experiences” (p. 461). By way of extending students’ authorial stance, composing digital multimodal projects further helps them to draw on their “knowledge, experiences, and passions nurtured in their home communities to tell new stories and become more deeply engaged in the academic content of school” (p. 443). For example, both Shen and Ming present with authority their literacy developments in multimodal form, which they consider to be their significant achievements as multilingual writers. As agentive meaning makers, both of these students have emerged as effective communicators to their audiences through the multimodal structures they use for the purpose of academic writing.

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