



## **A Social Semiotic Approach to Incorporate Multimodal Literacy in the Foreign Language Class**

Ana Sanchez  
West Chester University<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This research paper explores the potential benefits of including multimodal writing in Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) class within higher education. Drawing upon Kress' social-semiotic theory, the study investigates how the integration of multiple modes, such as text, images, audio, and video, can enhance students' literacy skills in learning SFL. The study focused on analyzing eight students' essays that discussed the advantages and disadvantages of technology in their daily lives. It is noteworthy that the students' Spanish proficiency level was high intermediate, indicating a significant understanding and command of the Spanish language. Multimodal pedagogy can be defined as using multi-modes, i.e., textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual, for communication and meaning making (Kress, 2001). In this context, the mode is defined from a social perspective, which means that the community is the main deciding factor in what is considered a mode (Kress, 2010). Participating students used PowerPoint, e-posters, and they added other elements like voice and images to create their essays. Even though traditional writing continues to be the norm in language learning and teaching, it is important to consider that multimodal writing has always existed, the Old Egyptian script was logographic as well as Chinese characters and other logographic or partially logography languages (Coulmas, 2003). Technology is part of students' lives, they are involved in one way or another with iPhones, iPads, MacBook's, and iBlog's on the internet. Multimodal writing pedagogy is also an inclusive way of teaching

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<sup>2</sup>Anna Sanchez is an Assistant Professor at West Chester University, West Chester, PA, United States.  
Email: ASanchez@wcupa.edu.

writing to students with learning difficulties, since they may find it challenging to communicate using only the linguistic mode.

**Key words:** multimodal, writing, Spanish, foreign, language

## Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the demand for multilingualism has grown exponentially, and the advent of digital technologies and the affordances they offer for combining various modes of communication have new possibilities for language instruction. The main goal of this paper is to investigate the benefits of incorporating multimodal writing in foreign Spanish classes within higher education. Grounded on Kress' social semiotic theory, I evaluated eight students' essays that explored the pros and cons of the use of technology in their lives. Students' daily experiences are saturated with social media, iPhones, and technology, and writing cannot be considered just a language skill to practice grammar and vocabulary anymore (Hubert & Bonzo, 2019). Furthermore, focusing only 'on print in composition classrooms ignores the importance of aurality and other composing modalities for making meaning and understanding the world' (p. 618, Selfe, 2009). Multimodal writing is a way to move away from prescriptivism and give students the freedom to select the high-tech tools that are available in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to express their ideas, and opinions in a way that is in tune with the technology they use daily, inside and outside the classroom. In addition, multimodality equips students with the necessary skills to become global citizens and thrive in the international job market upon graduation.

Kern (2010) has advocated for a student-centered approach that emphasizes meaning as it is constructed in a socio-cultural setting. One of the main advantages of multimodal pedagogy is motivation, which is necessary for the teaching learning process to take place. In addition, multimodal literacy empowers students as they make the choices of what to incorporate in addition to the written word. To compose their essays, students who took part in the study attentively watched video clips, scoured for suitable images, and photographs to strengthen and support their viewpoints. Additionally, using multiple ways to communicate help students with learning challenges express their ideas in ways other than the linguistic mode. As Edwards-Groves (2011) strongly stated "A contemporary focus on writing highlights how technology use also enables new possibilities for creativity – new creativities – in multimodal text construction and meaning making (p. 51).

## Literature Review

Kress' social semiotic approach has paved the way for the emergence of multimodal literacy as a novel and vital area of exploration, particularly in the context of second or foreign language learning. The norm in most institutions of higher education is the use of the linguistic mode only when it comes to teaching writing. Writing has become an important language skill due to technology and social platforms. Writing skills help students reinforce their understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. (Valdez et al., 1992). Other scholars (O' Donnell, 2007) believe that students will transfer the skills in the first language to develop writing skills in

the target language, or that students will develop writing skills after they develop listening speaking and reading skills.

Perez, 2002, said that ‘mass media is assuming the role of educating young people since the discourses appearing in the media are more related to students’ interests and preferences, than those taught in schools” (p. 20). Multimodal pedagogies also involve designing opportunities for students to explore and perform ideas and identities using a range of meaning-making resources (Lim, Towndrow, & Tan, 2021). Along the same line of study, Van Leeuwen, (2006) concluded “Nowadays, multimodal texts, defined as any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic mode” (p. 45), are the type of texts people are more interested in, and show more interaction with.

Social platforms have also been used to learn a language, and some scholars have stated (Thomas, 2017) how “social media has become ideal to enhance language learning”, she further emphasized that “within the peer sharing world means that, as instructors, connecting the dots between the existence, prevalence, and applicability of Spanish in the “real world” is easier than ever before. We can also utilize the realms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) and the lingo (vocabulary, hashtags, and even emojis) most familiar to our students. However, it is fair to say that multimodal writing pedagogy is still in its infant stages in foreign and second language teaching in the United States, and we may need to start incorporating multimodal writing pedagogy in the curriculum to prepare our students to become multiliterate in a globalized world where multiple modes of communication are at our disposal.

### **Analyzing students’ multimodal text**

This project consisted of analyzing multimodal compositions assigned to a Spanish class at the 302 level. Students were asked to draft an essay on the ‘Advantages and Disadvantages of Technology in their daily lives’. Students discussed the positive and negative aspects of technology using various modes of communication and presentation. Students worked hard on the selection of modes since mode has its strengths and limitations, and selecting the most appropriate ones would help effectively convey the intended message and engage the audience. Students worked on the first draft of their compositions for a week and collaborated with peers and the professor prior to giving the draft. They received input and feedback from their classmates and the professor prior to writing the final draft.

After their grades were posted, the professor gave each student a questionnaire, where they expressed their opinions using a multimodal approach in their compositions, and how it helped or not in expressing their viewpoints on the pros and cons of technology in their daily lives. What follows is a discussion of students’ texts and their feedback on if and how the multimodality helped them or not, and their opinion on the advantages and disadvantages of using the internet with all its affordances to produce the kind of text they did. I will translate each student’s main ideas and describe the semiotic choices they made. It is important to mention that most of the students presented their essays in PowerPoint format, only a few used word format.

## Review of students' essays

Students used a multimodal approach grounded on Kress' semiotic theory on the pros and cons of the presence and use of technology in their lives. What follows is a summary of students' thoughts and the semiotic choices afforded by the internet to create their texts.

Technology negatively affects our attention span, and the quality of our relationships due to the constant access to the iPhone. Technology is beneficial to all since it creates a more interconnected world, and it provides opportunities for people to learn more. The video clip below illustrates how addictive the iPhones can be, and how the addiction separates people from their surroundings.

### Cómo nos afectan los móviles



(This video is currently unavailable, please see the main content described in parenthesis) Este video habla sobre nuestra adicción a los móviles y cómo dependemos de los móviles y nos separan de todos. (The videoclip is in Spanish, and it is addressed to a generation that is completely immersed in technology, especially the younger ones. The videoclip sends a message about the dangers of addiction to technology and how younger people sometimes spend the full day chatting, and publishing photos among other things. It tells that 87% of young people, and young adults prefer to communicate via texts, and socializing is almost nonexistent. Users prefer to be connected to the internet instead reading, studying, and doing sports.)

Additionally, the brief video that comes next reinforces the notion that certain relationships formed through the internet tend to be superficial.

### •Las relaciones superficiales



<https://youtu.be/2PRRUtAinJI>

### **“La Tecnología y las Relaciones | ELT”**

En este video, el hombre habla sobre las relaciones superficiales que se están formando por las redes sociales: (This video talks about superficial relationships that come out of social platforms, and how easy it is to become ‘friends’). The pictures that follow are an illustration of how relationships suffer when we are too dependent on technological tools.



Hoy las relaciones románticas están formadas por las aplicaciones. Las parejas no se conocen en el mundo, pero se conocen en línea. No necesitamos ser valientes. Podemos abordar relaciones románticas, desde una pantalla.



Las amistades sufren de la tecnología porque los amigos no charlan, ellos navegan por la red.

### **Benefits of technology**

Technology helped humanity survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Usando las computadoras y las aplicaciones como Zoom, las personas podían conectarse con otros sobre el mundo. Por ejemplo, el año pasado participé en un intercambio con una estudiante de España, quien aprendía inglés. Sin la tecnología, yo nunca hubiera podido mejorar mis habilidades de español y aprender mucha como la cultura de España. (Through computers and other applications such as Zoom, people were able to communicate with other people in the world. Last year I participated

in a pen pal relation with a student from Spain, who was learning English. Without technology, I would not have been able to improve my Spanish skills and learn about the Spanish culture ).

### Tecnología y el coronavirus

Mientras el video explicó los beneficios de la tecnología en mantener una vida semi- normal, le faltó explicar los efectos del uso de la tecnología en las relaciones después de la pandemia.



[https://youtu.be/qmQz\\_iRCRek](https://youtu.be/qmQz_iRCRek)

“Tecnología, la gran aliada en tiempos de coronavirus”

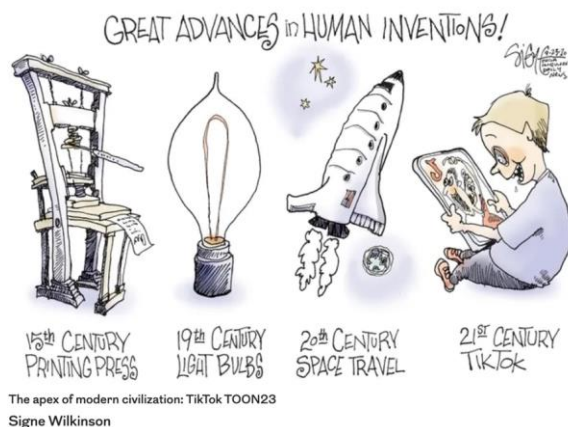
(The student clarifies that the video focuses mostly on the times during the pandemic but not how it has affected relations afterwards).

To conclude, the final statements in the essay reinforce the thesis statement about the advantages and disadvantages of technology and its affordances. While technology can connect us to people all over the world, we are using it dangerously and it does lead us to a healthy lifestyle.

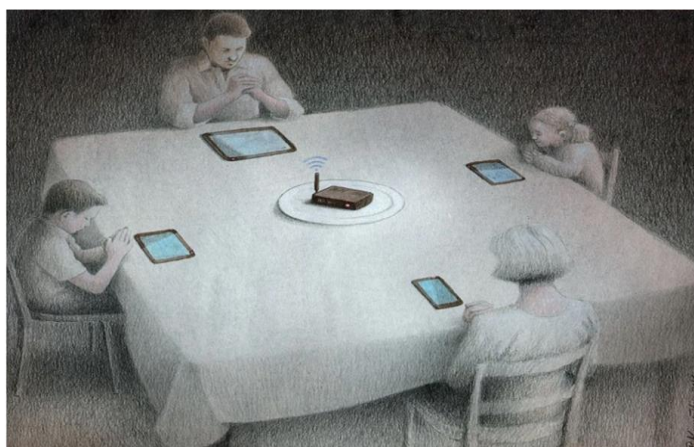
Secondly, another student stated that “Nowadays, our lives engage in technology, everywhere we go, there is technology involved. From a doctor’s visit, buy food, buying a car, everything can be done over the computers or telephone. Technological advances have been developing at gigantic steps, making progress in many areas such as medicine, education and means of communication. Advances in molecular biology have allowed the vaccine for Covid 19, which has allowed us to survive the worst days of the pandemic. Through internet, many aspects of education have improved, especially easy access to learning resources. The entire world has access to the internet and pages like Khan Academy, YouTube, and other platforms to learn and obtain support. Technology has opened doors that were not there before. However, technology is not perfect and has its disadvantages. The picture of ‘Great Advances in Human Inventions’ of Signe Wilkinson, depicts the progression of our society and technology through the years, but we have also seen advances that are not good, especially for the youth.)

The incorporation of the subsequent image supports the premise of the great advances in technology.





One of the disadvantages of using technology include having kids exposed to various online platforms like Tik Tok, YouTube instead of reading books. To illustrate the dependency our society has on technology, the picture of de Pawel Kuczynski, depicts what has become of people and family life, specially those who always depend on technological devices.



The conclusion of this essay is that the use of technology, like everything else, has its advantages and disadvantages.

Following on the previous statements, it has never been easier to communicate with people from all over the world through texting, phone calls, emails, Skype, Face Time, among others. People can now communicate without waiting to receive a response for hours, days, weeks. The images below support the student's argument.



Furthermore, technology has made possible to provide multiple resources for students to learn and succeed in school. Technology was essential during The Covid-19 pandemic, and it helped the world get through the pandemic. The images below provide additional support to the ideas stated previously.



However, technology has also affected people's lives in three fundamental areas which are mentioned next.

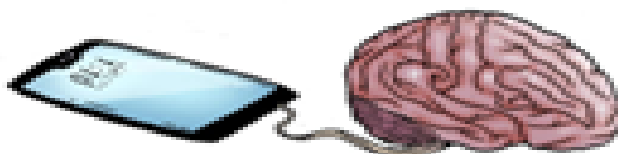
### Addiction

Event though people may be connected through the internet, face-to-face communication and social interaction can lead to feelings of isolation.



### Health problems

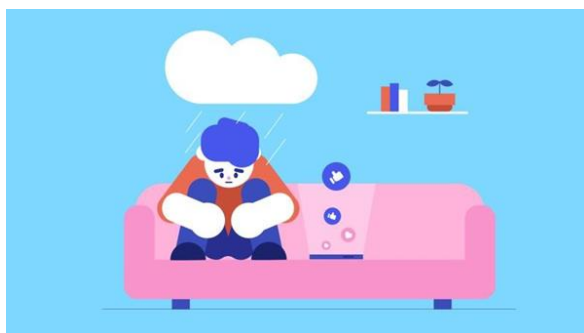
Technology can also cause serious health problems, such as wrist pain, ocular fatigue, blear vision, headaches, mental health problems in young adults. The pictures below further illustrate the student's point of view.





## Isolation

Technology can allow people to communicate through various means except face to face. Therefore, social interaction has been lost, and the most vulnerable are young people. The picture that follows reinforces how isolated young people can feel.



The pros of the technology are introduced with the subsequent semiotic choices:



The advantages of technology are stated by saying that :*Estamos muy conectados gracias a la tecnología.* (We are very connected thanks to technology) *Solo requiere un móvil y algunos segundos para textear o llamar a cualquiera contacto que se tiene.* (All we need is an iPhone and seconds to text any person you want) *En línea se puede interactuar con familia y amigos, o desconocidos y amigos potenciales.* (We can interact online with friends, family, even strangers or future friends) *Con la tecnología, el mundo sobrevivió la soledad causada por la pandemia más grande en historia reciente.* (The world survived the pandemic thanks to the technological advances). *La tecnología también ha cambiado la relación con la salud. Hay muchísimas aplicaciones y servicios que monitorizan nuestra salud.* (There are also many technological tools and aplicaciones to monitor health related issues).

What follows next are images that further support and illustrate the disadvantages of technology.



*En las redes sociales, la mayoría de los usuarios cargan sus mejores momentos y éxitos. Consumir esto contenido por horas cada día puede dañar nuestro amor propio. (On social platforms, users upload and release their best moments and successes, to consume this content for hours can affect people's self-esteem.)*

*Las ventajas fenomenales de la tecnología (Fenomenal Advantages of Technology).* With that title, this student signals the audience that she only sees pros in the use and presence of technology in our daily lives.



One of the main challenges is assisting older individuals in adapting to and embracing technology. Therefore “todos los ancianos necesitan es alguien quien es dispuesto a pasar un tiempo enseñándoles cómo usar las aplicaciones. Si pueden aprender a usar las aplicaciones para su beneficio, pueden recuperar parte de su independencia con un poco de ayuda de las personas. (All elderly people need someone willing to spend time teaching them how to use the apps. If they can learn to use the apps to their own advantage, they can recover their independence, with just a little help from people). The video below is used to illustrate and further support the argument.





In addition to the above stated disadvantage of technology, *“las personas se convierten menos sociable en persona porque ellos siempre están mirando a sus teléfonos.”*

*Muchas personas son adictas a mirando en redes sociales, mensajes de texto, o jugando juegos en su teléfono. Es común ver personas en sus teléfonos a menudo y no vivir en el momento.*

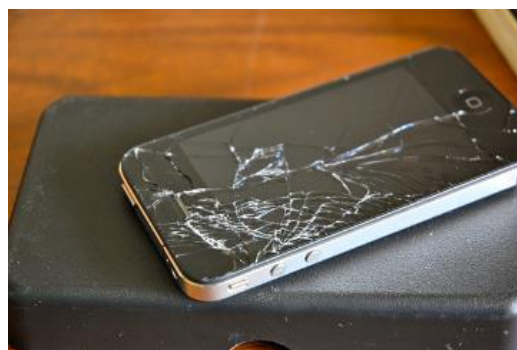
*Es fácil perder los eventos que están pasando a tu alrededor, si tú siempre estás en tu teléfono.*

Other disadvantages of living with technology all around, is that people become less sociable, and become addicted to the internet, social platforms, or they become addicted to play games on their iPhones. People miss important moments because they are always attentive to what is happening on the internet or hooked to their iPhones. The following images are used to reinforce her arguments.



Another disadvantage reported is that *“technology no siempre funciona todo el tiempo. Casi todo usa tecnología ahora, por lo que puede ser difícil y frustrante cuando se rompe. La tecnología es muy cara de arreglar cuando se rompe”* ( technological devices can be broken and the repairs and/or replacements can be expensive).





One of the advantages of technology is the medical advances. Hay muchas más medicinas disponibles para tratar diferentes enfermedades.

*Hay más tecnología y pruebas para ver qué está pasando dentro del cuerpo.*

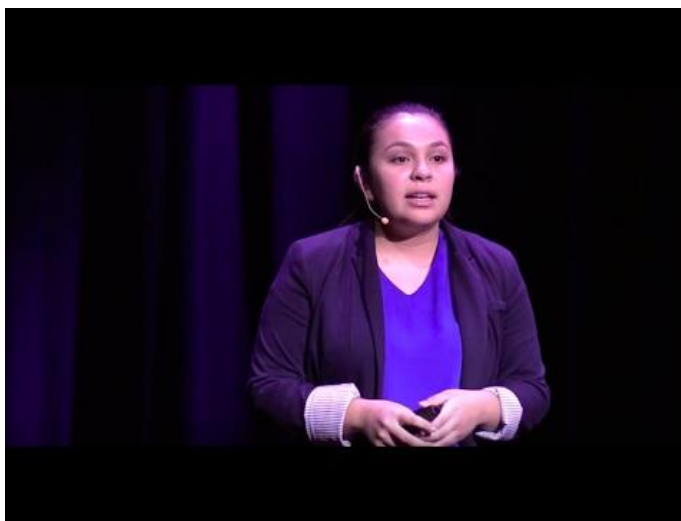
*¡Hay nuevos hallazgos que salen todos los días gracias a la tecnología!* (There are medications available to treat various illnesses. There is more technology and tests to see what is happening in our bodies. (New discoveries are made each day thanks to technology)



Another argument about the use of technology is that there are no disadvantages with the presence of technology and its tools in our daily lives. “*Los beneficios sobrepasan en número los inconvenientes en el reino de la tecnología.* (The benefits of technology outnumbered the disadvantages in the technology kingdom). *La tecnología es beneficiosa para las personas porque ayuda a las personas mantener normalidad cuándo una crisis ocurre, los ancianos pueden mantener parte de sus independencias, y las computadoras permiten que se descubran y comprendan más misterios de nuestra tierra.* (Technology is beneficial for people because it helps them keep normalcy when a crisis occurs, elderly people can be independent, and computers allow researchers to better understand the mysteries of Earth.)

*Hay más y más aplicaciones para ancianos para que vivan una vida independiente, incluso aplicaciones para entrega de provisiones y recordatorios diarios para sus mediciones y tareas diarias. Un inconveniente es la tecnología es más difícil para los ancianos aprender porque no crecieron con esta tecnología y no tienen mucha paciencia para la nueva tecnología. Todos los ancianos necesitan es alguien quien es dispuesto a pasar un tiempo enseñándoles cómo usar las aplicaciones.* (There are applications, apps, for the elderly so they can live independently, even apps to deliver provisions and daily reminders of their medications and daily activities. The

only inconvenience is that technology is more difficult for elders to learn because they didn't grow up with technology, and they don't have enough patience for the new technology. Elderly people need someone willing to spend time teaching them how to use the apps). To substantiate the argument, a video about helping the elderly to learn how to use the apps, and technological tools for their own benefit, so that they can be independent citizens is included in this essay. The video clip is called 'Helping the elderly bridge the digital divide.



<https://youtu.be/rSWbgNAgAE>

*Helping Seniors Cross the Digital Divide | Isabella Martinez | TEDxTemecula*

In the video, Isabella Martinez, talks about his grandmother. She says her grandmother was with her since the day she came home. She explains how she helped her grandmother and taught her how to send emails, use apps and learn the mobile devices to be more independent. The availability to teach seniors is scarce, so she offers a solution for a group of volunteers to better help seniors based on their needs and try to understand them better. The message of the video clip offers so much information about the situation of seniors and how younger people can become the bridge to cross the digital divide.

Also, technology can be extremely addictive, and it diminishes human contact: “*Creo que la tecnología disminuye el contacto humano mucho. La tecnología es extremadamente adictiva. Incluso cuando la gente está con sus amigos y familiares, ellos están usando sus teléfonos y no están interactuando con las personas en la vida real. Muchas personas prefieren simplemente enviar un mensaje de texto a alguien en lugar de hablar en persona o incluso llamar por teléfono.* ( Technology diminishes human contact, and it is extremely addicting. Even when people are with friends and family, they are always using their iPhones instead of interacting with people face to face. People prefer to send a text message to someone instead of talking in person or even call on the phone).





*Creo que es responsabilidad de los padres controlar a sus hijos e implementar reglas sobre el uso de la tecnología. Es importante para tratar de evitar que sus hijos sean adictos a la tecnología. Sin embargo, no creo que los padres deben quitar toda la tecnología de sus hijos. Los niños necesitan estar conectados al mundo hoy y necesitan alguna tecnología, pero no acceso a toda la tecnología todos los días. ( Children need to be connected to technology so they can be connected to the world, however, it is parents' responsibility to control, and implement rules with respect to how and how much time kids spend on the internet).*



*La tecnología ha cambiado la manera que nosotros vivíamos hoy. Para evitar adicción, los padres necesitan ser modelos para seguir para sus hijos y necesitan crear reglas para el uso de tecnología. También, si los padres quieren continuar tradiciones como la cena con toda la familia, ellos tienen que asegurarse que los hijos entienden que los teléfonos no tienen que ir a todos los lugares y descansos son muy importantes para salud física y mental. ( Technology has changed the way we live our lives nowadays. To prevent addiction, parents need to be models their kids can follow, and they need to create rules for the use of technology. Also, if parents want to continue having traditional dinners with the whole family, they need to make sure their kids understand that telephones do not have to go everywhere, and they need to take breaks away from technology to maintain mental and physical health).*

## Student Responses to Multimodal Essay Crafting and Expression of Perspectives

The following section presents a summary of the key points regarding the students' viewpoints on their multimodal texts. The use of diverse modes in composing their text effectively emphasized their opinions, making the composition unique and reflective of their own signature voice. Students worked hard to find the best multimedia affordances to include in their writing so that their opinions were clearly stated and supported. In addition, students valued the use of multiple modes of expression because they provided freedom and ownership. Multimodality placed the power in the hands of students to produce something that represents their creativity and identity. Furthermore, students valued the ability to use their own rules and select modes beyond words to support their arguments. However, some students noted that the process can be overwhelming at times due to the extensive amount of information on the internet and the multiple modes of presenting it.

### Final thoughts

Students used various semiotic modes of communication such as text, images, audio and video to present and support their arguments about the advantages and disadvantages of the use of technology in their lives. The messages students sent were clear, powerful, and depicted the reality of how technology has affected all of us for good or bad. I have to say that I learned from their comments and also from the overall outcomes of the process and final product their essays. Multimodality helps students enhance literacy skills of a foreign language specially at higher levels of language proficiency, since students have the language competence to communicate using more complex language structures, abstract concepts, and they can keep a balance between the use of the target language and other semiotic modes. Furthermore, advanced language learners dig deeper into the culture of the target language, and incorporate videos, interviews and even documentaries in the target language to further support their arguments and enhance their cultural awareness in the themes under discussion.

Students expressed how overwhelmed they felt with the amount of semiotic choices available in the internet, and how hard they worked to listen to videos and examine pictures and visuals among others, and evaluate their credibility and relevance prior to making their choices. The selection process of semiotic modes enhanced students' critical thinking skills as it required evaluation and decision making skills. Further, a multisemiotic approach to enhance literacy skills, increased students' motivation as they felt in control at all times, and moved away from the prescriptivism and strict rubrics used in previous Spanish courses. Besides, multimodal pedagogy is a tool to help students with learning challenges to communicate in another language by using memes, pictures, photos and video clips among others. It is a way to facilitate the teaching learning process by offering multiple ways to present and evaluate their language competence and performance. Finally, we live in a world where multiple modes of communication are available and used in various contexts. A multimodal approach grounded in Kress' social semiotic approach prepares students with skills and competencies that are very significant and valued in the international market we live in. Additionally, it nurtures effective communication, cultural awareness, critical thinking, flexibility, creativity, and empowerment, all of which are crucial for our students to be successful in a globalized world.

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