Embracing Multimodal Writing Tasks in ESOL Classes
by [Qiandi Liu](#) and [Cyndriel Meimban](#)

The past decade witnessed a rapid transition from print to digital communication. In print texts, meaning is conveyed through linguistic and visual means. In digital texts, meaning-making takes advantage of a hybridization of two or more of the five modes of representation: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial (The New London Group, 1996). Multimodal texts are more engaging and effective, yet they present challenges to interpret and produce. With multimodal digital communication gaining increasing popularity, teachers are faced with the task of helping students develop multiliteracy for academic, professional, and social writing purposes.

Nonetheless, due to different educational backgrounds and familiarities with new communication technologies, not all teachers feel confident and comfortable in implementing multimodal writing tasks in their classes. Our goal in this article is to help teachers gain a deeper understanding of the nature, benefits, required skills, and challenges in incorporating pedagogical multimodal writing tasks in English language classrooms. We also demonstrate, through three examples, how to transform traditional text-based writing prompts into multimodal writing tasks.

Defining Pedagogical Multimodal Writing Tasks

Pedagogical multimodal writing is commonly defined as tasks requiring learners to create multimedia digital products that integrate a variety of semiotic resources (Balaman, 2018). We argue that this definition is limited because it focuses exclusively on the productive end and overlooks the receptive dimension of such tasks. When students are asked to produce multimodal texts, they are typically provided with multimodal prompts. Interpreting and synthesizing materials from multiple modes and sources constitutes a crucial step toward the completion of a multimodal writing assignment. We, therefore, propose an expanded definition that includes both the receptive (input) and productive (output) ends of pedagogical multimodal writing tasks.

Multimodal writing prompts can be a combination of
- linguistic (written texts),
- audio (e.g., songs, podcasts, audiobooks),
- visual (e.g., photographs, comics, diagrams, figures), or
- audiovisual (e.g., videos, videorecorded lectures, movies) input.

Multimodal output can take a variety of forms. It can be
- visual (e.g., posters, brochures, storyboards, infographics, blogs, newsletters, graphic novels),
- audio (e.g., voice recordings, podcasts, oral presentations), or
- audiovisual (e.g., animation, book trailers, music videos, interactive stories, vlogs, and short films).

Benefits of Multimodal Writing Tasks

Compared with traditional writing assignments, multimodal writing tasks have several advantages. First, they are more authentic because they reflect the recent shift toward digital, multimodal communication in the world. Second, they accommodate the needs of different learner types (e.g., visual, aural, verbal, and kinesthetic). Third, they encourage deeper task engagement as learners must interact closely with multimodal information to gain a thorough understanding of an issue before they can discover new ideas or propose innovative solutions (Sadik, 2008). Finally, digital multimodal texts can be easily shared, reviewed by teachers and peers, and published online to reach a larger audience, which motivates learners to produce higher quality work (Yoon, 2012). Second language learners also develop linguistic competence (Balaman, 2018) and critical problem-solving skills (Yang & Wu, 2012) in the process.

Knowledge and Skills Required for Multimodal Writing Tasks

The design and development of multimodal texts are complex and demand an orchestration of multimodal literacy knowledge and skills, including the following:

1. **Rhetorical competence:** Students should have rhetorical competence in analyzing a writing prompt so they can identify the intended audience and the purpose of writing.
2. **Multiliteracy skills:** Students should understand how meaning is constructed through individual communication modes and how the hybridization of multiple modes synergistically conveys the intended information (Jewitt, 2009). Lacking such knowledge can lead to a superficial mixture of multiple modes that is detrimental rather than facilitative in reaching communicative goals.
3. **Technical skills:** Students should know how to use word processing software (e.g., Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Publisher) to create printable posters, brochures, and newsletters. They should also be skillful in using online writing platforms (e.g., Google Docs, Edublogs, Wix, WordPress, and Google Sites) to create digital texts. Moreover, they should be able to create images and record audio and videos using smartphones or professional devices and software (e.g., Photobooth, Voice Recorder Pro). Additionally, basic skills in editing and formatting multimodal files are necessary for enhancing the overall effectiveness of communication.

Challenges in Multimodal Writing Tasks

Although the younger generations are known for being tech-savvy, they use electronic devices mainly for social purposes, including texting, social media, gaming, dating, and news (Kalogeropoulos, 2019). They generally lack the digital literacy skills required for academic

tasks. Moreover, even though students are exposed to multimodal texts daily, they may not have acquired the essential knowledge and skills in creating them. It is teachers' responsibility to help them develop such competence to successfully interpret and construct multimodal meaning. Through situated practice, students become "active designers" of social futures (The New London Group, 1996, p. 64).

Teachers play a vital role in multimodal writing projects. They must be familiar with how different communication modes create meaning, separately and in tandem with each other. In addition, they should be able to help students make informed decisions on choosing the most effective combination of modes in a specific communicative context. This necessitates proper training to help teachers gain expertise in these areas before they can impart such knowledge and skills to students.

In the following section, we demonstrate, through three examples, how teachers can easily transform traditional writing prompts into multimodal tasks.

Three Multimodal ESOL Writing Tasks

1. Silent Film

In this task, a short silent film (e.g., Disney Pixar's *Mouse for Sale*) is used as the visual writing prompt. The video challenges students to utilize their imaginations and stretch their vocabulary reservoirs to write a story. Teachers may choose to highlight a specific grammar point (e.g., "write using simple present tense") or writing skill (e.g., "use sensory descriptions").

This prompt can be used for both young and adult English language learners. Young learners can be asked to script the film followed by a postwriting acting-it-out task. Adults can be required to complete a hybrid narrative-descriptive-summary writing that combines narrating the story with personal reflections on its meaning. Because the stimulus itself is wordless, the plot and characterization are open to numerous interpretations. There is no right or wrong answer as long as the student writer can use visual evidence from the film to support their writing. It is fascinating to see what themes different students take away from the silent film and explore in their writing.

2. Beyond-the-Essay Task

Traditional writing tasks offer a limited platform that fails to show students the impacts of writing beyond the immediate context of classrooms. Pedagogical writing tasks must not take place in a vacuum; instead, they should reflect multifaceted reality and make substantive connections to the larger stage in the real world. This Beyond-the-Essay task offers such an opportunity.

In this task, students are asked to produce a podcast or YouTube video that accompanies an essay assignment. In addition to submitting an argumentative essay in support of abolishing grades at school, students can be asked to create a YouTube video showing them interviewing students and teachers who agree and disagree with the essay's argument.

The audiovisual production serves as the reinforcement of a student's ideas in an essay and a synthesis of other perspectives. It can be easily uploaded on a student's or the whole class's YouTube channel to share with a larger audience. The fact that their videos can be viewed by anyone on the internet and commented on by critics and supporters alike is likely to incentivize students to be more engaged in the task and produce higher quality work.

3. Revising-Reflecting-Recording (3Rs)

Traditional process-oriented writing requires students to reflect on their writing, revise for content, and edit for accuracy. Occasionally, students are asked to write a companion piece to explain how they get from Point A (prewriting) to Z (printing/publishing). This metawriting activity comes in several forms (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014), two of which are as follows:

a. *Explanative Letter*: A short reflective memo or cover letter is attached to the final draft, explaining how the student writer chose to apply (or not) instructor and/or peer feedback.
b. *Editing Log*: This log serves as an inventory of errors and corresponding corrections, further helping students notice patterns and avoid fossilization.

These tasks require students to write again about writing. With the writings alone, teachers can rarely tap into the thinking processes which prompt students to make certain decisions in revising.

An alternative is a 3Rs task, which requires students to record an audio reflection after completing a multidraft essay assignment. The recording serves the dual purpose of a "palate cleanser" (activating a different language domain—speaking) and a new angle to illuminate the nuances of individual writing processes. A single audio recording can be 1–2 minutes long. Students can be given a brainstorming worksheet to frame and deepen their reflection. The recordings can be used by instructors to analyze students' revising processes, decisions, and strategies to give them better revision advice and guidance.

These tasks can be adapted for different learner groups or instructional contexts. We hope that this paper inspires English language teachers to transform conventional writing assignments into multimodal projects to better help students develop multimodal literacy skills.

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