



Multimodal Writing in the English Language Classroom

by [Danning Liang](#)

Digital and information technology has changed our daily communication and literacy practice. We have new forms of messages and ways of communication in this era, commonly mixing different meaning-making resources, such as text, images, audio, and video. Truly, the definition of literacy has moved beyond the traditional concept.

Defining Literacy and Multiliteracies Pedagogy

With this change, multimodality has gradually been considered a part of literacy. Multiliteracies, then, is one perspective to better interpret literacy. To better understand this shift, we can look at the New London Group's (1996) suggestion: "One of the key ideas informing the notion of multiliteracies is the increasing complexity and interrelationship of different modes of meaning" (p. 78). Literacy is no longer restricted to reading and writing page-bound written text; it now involves diverse communication practices that engage multiple modes.

With this extended definition of literacy, for effective communication, we need to consider the requirements of workplaces and daily life where multimodality is commonly applied—this means that our literacy education also needs to move beyond the traditional terms. Multiliteracies pedagogy can respond to the new demands of literacy education, and embracing multimodal composition is one way to encourage multiliteracies pedagogy.

Incorporating Multimodal Composition in the English Writing Classroom

As a brief definition, multimodal composition is composition that purposefully adopts multiple modes to create meaning. Available modes of communication include linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial modes. Finished multimodal products involve texts that "exceed the alphabetical and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound" (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 1).

Though multimodal composition is often discussed in the composition field, it is receiving growing attention in second language writing studies. Research has indicated that multimodal composition can be beneficial to English language learners. There are several reasons to embrace multimodal composition in writing classrooms. Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) suggest that students need to be experienced and skilled in reading and composing multimodal texts to successfully

communicate within digital communication networks. They also suggest that changing literacy practices should be reflected in changes in literacy education.

In addition, with multimodal composition, students' cognitive domains and practical writing skills show positive impacts. Multimodal composition helps motivate students in their writing and engages them in the writing process (e.g., Zenkov et al., 2014). It also encourages students to express identity and present creativity (e.g., Alexander et al., 2012), and to have a sense of ownership and agency as writers. Additionally, multimodal composition assists students with the development of their rhetorical knowledge and writing skills (e.g., Kim & Belcher, 2020), which includes students' enhanced knowledge and skills to address various rhetorical situations; understanding writing to audiences with a purpose; paying attention to rhetorical principles of communication; and reflection on exigence, arrangement, and rhetorical appeals.

Multimodal Writing: 2 Activities and 2 Assignments

To facilitate the benefits of multimodal composition for English language learners, instructors can incorporate multimodal composition in writing classrooms to help learners to (1) motivate them to write in English, (2) be familiar with and engage in the writing process (i.e., plan, write, revise, edit, publish), (3) pay attention to rhetorical principles, and (4) practice multiliteracies skills. The following are some sample activities and assignments in writing classrooms.

Activity 1: Icebreaker Jamboard

Purpose

This activity is designed to help students understand the concept of using modes for meaning making: Meaning can not only be delivered through written text, but also through other modes. The activity can be an icebreaker at the beginning of the semester, allowing students to know more about each other. It can also be used as a warm-up activity at the beginning of lessons.

[Google Jamboard](#) is a useful online tool that allows students to work online collaboratively and simultaneously. For in-person classrooms, instructors can instead prepare markers for students to draw on whiteboards or posters.

Procedure

1. Ask students icebreaker questions, such as their majors, habits, or career plans.
2. Students then find pictures or draw doodles to answer the questions and add these pictures or drawings to their Jamboard.
3. Students share their answers in class. (Figure 1 shows a sample product of answers on what students did during winter break.)



Figure 1. Sample product of “Icebreaker Jamboard.”

Activity 2: Your Writerly Identity

Purpose

This activity is designed for students to reflect on their literacy experience, explore their writerly identity, and practice multimodal composition. The activity can be used as a low-stakes in-class writing activity or a homework assignment. For this activity, you will need access to an online meme generator.

This activity is designed for intermediate and advanced level students who have experience and practice with English writing. You can adapt the procedure and questions to accommodate this activity for lower level students. You may need to prepare students prior to this activity by teaching them about metaphors and about memes.

Procedure

1. Explain to students that they will complete four writing tasks, including completing sentences, developing a metaphor, answering questions, and creating a meme.
2. Have students first complete two sentences that help them to start thinking about who they are writers:
 - a. As a writer, I am _____.
 - b. As a writer, I want to _____.
3. Then, ask students to develop and write down a metaphor to reflect on themselves as writers and their relationship with writing.
4. After that, have students answer these two questions:
 - a. What are the strengths of your writing?

- b. What do you think is the biggest challenge when it comes to writing?
5. Have students create a meme to describe how they feel about writing. (Figure 2 shows an example meme.)

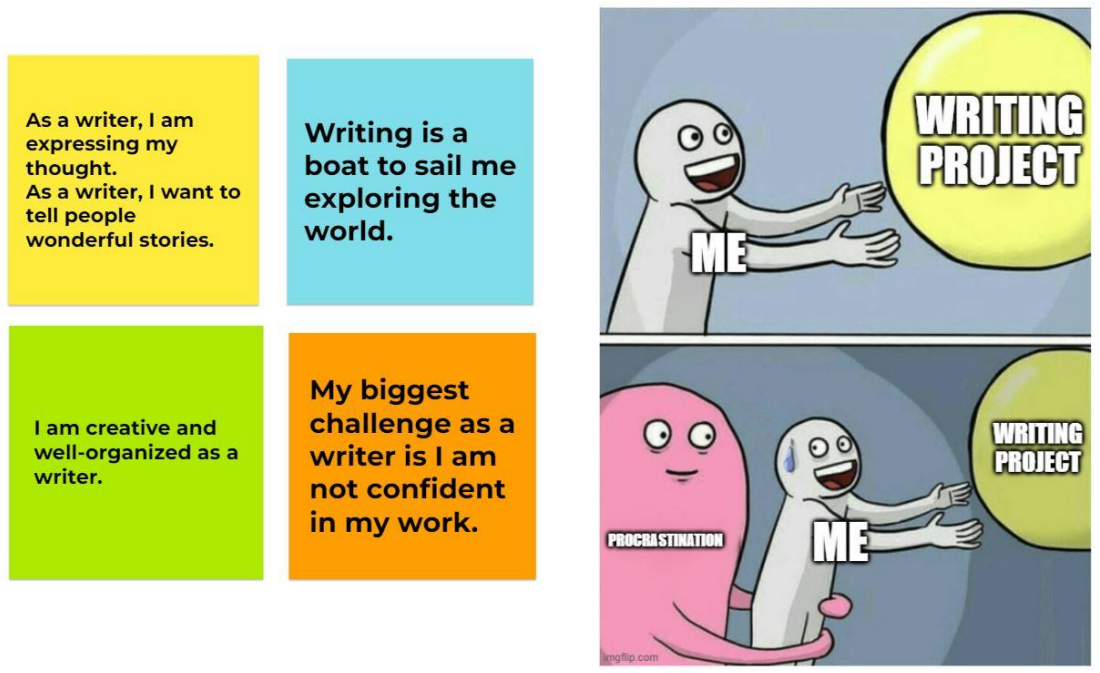


Figure 2. Sample meme from “Your Writerly Identity.”

Assignment 1: What Do You “Meme?”

Purpose

This assignment aims to help students become familiar with their writing process, analyze rhetorical situations, reflect on their rhetorical choices, practice multimodal composition, and deepen their understanding toward multimodal composition. This assignment is for advanced level students who have background knowledge of meme creation, the writing process, and rhetorical situations.

For this assignment, students will complete two writing tasks: They will create a meme and they will write a reflection.

Tasks

1. Students will create a meme to reflect their experience of or perceptions on a topic of interest. You can provide topics for the students to choose from, such as taking final exams, recently watched TV shows, and being on a holiday. You may also ask students questions to help them brainstorm their meme ideas. For example: What would your life be like without a cell phone? How does it feel if it’s the first day of school after summer break?

2. Students reflect on their meme writing process and rhetorical choices. Use the following writing prompts, or come up with your own:

In your reflection, please include your answers to the following questions.

- a. What are the target/potential audiences, purposes, and rhetorical appeals (pathos, ethos, and/or logos) of your meme?
- b. What was the design process of the meme? What are the steps you took to create the meme?
- c. What are the affordances (different strengths and weaknesses to communicate meanings) of the meme and the use of different modes? How will the meme help you effectively make arguments/meanings and communicate with your readers?

Assignment 2: Multimodal Brochure

Purpose

This assignment is designed to help students to practice multimodal composition using online digital tools; analyze rhetorical situations that include audience, purpose, and rhetorical appeals; and pay attention to their rhetorical choices.

For this assignment, students will create a three-fold brochure with multiple modes.

Tasks

Students will create a three-fold brochure with multiple modes. Tell students they can use written texts, pictures, figures, tables, colors, video, or anything else that suits their purposes. They can use an online brochure design tool, such as [Canva](#), [Venngage](#), or [VistaCreate](#). Students are encouraged to select their own topics to create the brochure, but if they would like direction, provide them with suggestions (e.g., tips on English language learning, a travel guide, a genre comparison).

Conclusion

Multimodal composition provides additional learning opportunities for English language learners in writing classrooms and prepares them with multiliteracies skills to succeed in society. These multimodal activities and assignments are some of the many ways that instructors can incorporate multiliteracies in the classroom. By working on these activities and assignments, students have opportunities to learn about and understand multimodal composition as well as to practice multimodal composition.

Resources

Online Meme Generators

- [Imgflip](#)
- [Kapwing](#)
- [iLoveIMG](#)

Online Whiteboard

- [Google Jamboard](#)

Online Brochure Design Tool

- [Canva](#)
- [Venngage](#)
- [VistaCreate](#)

References

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