Multimodal Texts: Spaces for Linguistic and Social Learning in Second Language Classrooms

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**Explorations of Multimodal Texts**

The digital mobile connection has undeniably redrawn the literate borders of language, challenging the print-centered skills of heritage language (HL)/second language (L2) teaching and learning, and the linear linguistic encoding of text (Lotherington, 2021). In HL and L2 learning, written text plays an important role, as the focus has traditionally been on the structural elements of language. As Lotherington (2021) and other authors have posited, the disregard for additional semiotic sources in a text is the result of the distinct bias toward literate learning in education. In the educational context, literacy has often been referred to as “language written down” (p. 220), which “makes for a messy transition to digital multimodal communication” (p. 220). With digital upgrades and enabling interactivity, literacy has morphed from discrete reading and writing of the static page into a multimedia read/write capacity, which underpins collaborative authorship and both local and global audience awareness. We have never discounted what has been considered traditional writing (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Oskoz & Elola, 2020), in which the main mode of communication is written text and which has focused, for example, on argumentative and expository texts written by individual authors. On the contrary, we see traditional writing genres as the foundation for composing in a multimodal manner. We do see the need, however, to expand notions of texts employed in language classrooms.

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to include the different semiotic resources (e.g., text, images, and sounds) that digital tools afford, and also to shift the focus from traditional academic texts to digital multimodal texts, often developed collaboratively, as valid forms of texts that are relevant in their own right.

This shift toward multimodality is the result of addressing learners’ needs to develop 21st-century multiliteracy skills. Consistent with this broad conception of text—or perhaps due to the advent of new technologies and the evolution of HL/L2 writing perspectives over time—HL/L2 digital writing/composing integrates a combination of literacies. We therefore subscribe to Chen’s (2013) definition of literacies as “social practices that are fluid, sociocultural, multimodal, and dynamic” (p. 143), including collaboration as an integral part of learners’ development and an expanded sense of audience which encourages learners to explore local and global contexts. In the case of digital literacy, which is similar to digital multimodality, internet- and technology-mediated learning and its interconnection with other literacies associated with communication skills are essential (Chen, 2013).

In line with learners’ needs, the use of these diverse modes of expression and multimodal texts has allowed researchers and educators to explore multimodalities on different fronts and from different perspectives, allowing us to provide narratives about HL and L2 learners that are not limited to linguistic gains, and that provide opportunities to explore research areas such as identity, authorship, and voice. When creating digital multimodal texts, learners’ engagement resembles the construction of a puzzle that needs to address three main aspects.

First, while the communicative purpose of L2 writing/composing is at the forefront (we always write, or should write, to communicate meaning to an audience) of the curriculum and tasks, the modalities in which those meanings are expressed (e.g., oral and visual) and the medium in which they appear (e.g., blogs) have changed.

Second, although the textual (written) mode has only recently played a predominant role in L2 writing classrooms, awareness regarding the need to include other semiotic resources in L2 writing/composing classes has increased. Images and sounds, or the use of different fonts, are incorporated into composing, not only to support written words, but also to create meaning and thus produce a single multimodal text.

Third, regardless of whether the HL/L2 writing aims to improve learners’ academic writing skills and HL/L2 competence, the need to help HL/L2 learners develop—among other things—their linguistic and multimodal competences has been increasingly recognized. This thematic issue of CALICO
Journal presents three studies which explore multimodality through different lenses, processes, products, and practices that can be considered in L2 classrooms.

The integration of digital multimodality has also provided a reconception of genres that have not been traditionally embraced in HL/L2 classrooms, such as infographics or digital stories (as seen in this thematic issue) or informative YouTube videos (Darvin, 2023), which, by their very nature, require the integration of different semiotic resources for meaning creation in several modalities. The inclusion of diverse genres, such as letters, poems, and plays which are “to be the original products of a single author” (Blyth, 2014, pp. 203–204), represents a Western-centric perspective of literacy that emphasizes the written over the oral text. This approach to writing does not exactly reflect current literacy practices outside HL/L2 classrooms, which include and even emphasize “collaborative forms of textual composition and interpretation” (Blyth, 2014, p. 204). For example, digital stories, 5–10-minute storylines that require the complementary integration of texts, images, and sound, or infographics, which are visual representations of data that combine textual and visual modes, are examples of literacy practices less known or practiced in more traditional language classrooms. In this context, learners should decide what to represent and how; that is, what selection of modes, genres, and ensembles of mode and genre, and in what circumstances they are going to be used (Kress, 2003). For instance, although the written text is still a relevant component of a digital story, during its development an L2 practitioner can combine the textual (e.g., subtitles or additional text), visual (images), and aural modes (e.g., spoken word and music) through digital storytelling software (i.e., tool or medium). The combinations of these diverse modes, which have altered our comprehension of the (printed) text, compel a new understanding of the act of composing. As observed in digital stories, the shift from print to digital, in which the dividing lines between oral and written expressions are blurred, is impacting and has far-reaching effects on higher education teaching and learning, especially in the humanities (Hayles, 2012).

**Frameworks and Areas of Exploration**

The authors of this thematic issue have provided frameworks that can be employed in multimodal L2 classrooms. These authors integrated diverse, critical, and writing-oriented approaches in conjunction with other frameworks, such as systemic functional linguistics (García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud), a visual metadiscourse framework (Li, Gibbons, and Pham), and multiliteracies (Ruiz-Pérez) perspectives. For instance, Li et al. employed D’Angelo’s (2010, 2016) visual metadiscourse framework to evaluate the comprehensibility and
organization of English language learners’ infographics. As presented by Li et al., and drawing from Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) grammar of visual design and Hyland’s (2000) metadiscourse model, D’Angelo’s framework focuses on the use of visuals to enhance the comprehensibility and engagement of multimodal texts. This visual metadiscourse framework is important for the analysis of infographics, an underexplored multimodal genre (Zhang et al., 2021). García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud adopted Ivanič’s (1998) writer identity model, Martin and White’s (2005) attitude system, and notions of multimodality to explore how English language learners build their multimodal composing identities to produce a digital story. In doing so, García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud examined the impressions that learners convey of themselves through textual features to evaluate and adopt stances in their textual production, which aid in constructing identities and managing interpersonal positionings and relationships (White, 2023) in their multimodal texts. Ruiz-Pérez considered literacies as multiple and entrenched in social practice, which is consistent with Johns’ (1999) concept of “socioliterate views,” in which “literacies are acquired principally through exposure to discourses from a variety of social contexts” (Johns, 1997, p. 14). Following a multiliteracy approach (New Rhetoric), design analysis (Kalantzis et al., 2016), and the protocol “Voice and Choice” (Sheya, 2018), Ruiz-Pérez illustrated how L2 learners develop their multimodal authoring and expand their authorial choices through the inclusion of a multimodal task in the higher education L2 curriculum. The emphasis on the social and ideological contexts, as well as on notions of multiliteracies, which assume that writers govern the content and array of arguments based on the global or local audience, aids student voice representation.

The burgeoning interest in HL/L2 learners’ voices and identity development when developing multimodal texts cannot be underestimated (García-Pastor, 2020; Klimanova, 2021). In fact, García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud’s and Ruiz-Pérez’ studies both focus on L2 composers’ identity, seen as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000, p. 5). From an identity perspective, learning is a social, rather than a cognitive phenomenon, prompted by desire and prowess to increase the array of our current identities as we explore other worlds (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Within this social paradigm, HL/L2 learners’ discursive contexts are connected to identity and voice, and are created within and through discourses, underscoring the links between the paradigms of genre and discourse and those of identity and voice (Tardy, 2009).

In their studies, both García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud, first, and Ruiz-Pérez, second, expressed the value of providing learners with the tools (e.g., learning about the effects of linguistic choices when developing a script) to
become agents of their own identity construction. For instance, García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud presented how 11th graders in Spain learning English as a foreign language have crafted their multimodal composing identities, and how those identities fluctuated throughout the composition process of a personal digital story. The authors, who analyzed both how learners utilized the attitude categories (Martin & White, 2005) in digital stories and how they arranged semiotic resources within and across modes, found that their learners’ increasing awareness of attitudinal resources is instrumental for their writer identity construction and interpersonal meaning-making. Similarly, Ruiz-Pérez also demonstrated that three learners working collaboratively to create a digital story in Spanish expanded their authorial choices and repertoire of voices when provided with a metalanguage to conceptualize multimodal authoring. By making learners explicitly aware of design choices (e.g., intention, voices present, and structure), they were able to purposely select multimedia elements and make them interact with each other in a dialogue. The ability to discuss design choices allowed learners to select more fitting voices and perspectives, in order to express a deliberate message and, at the same time, to be observant of the voices they excluded.

As we move forward, although research has generally explored L2 learners’ identities (García-Pastor, 2020; Lam, 2000; Li & Storch, 2017; Nelson, 2008), learners’ identities in multiple languages composed by current writers (Tardy, 2009) and their design choices and voice, as well as other digital genres in which multimodality plays a key role (Darvin & Norton, 2014) should also be further explored. Furthermore, broadening our perspectives on multimodality allows us not only to witness the creation of transnational identities that echo multiple ideologies and communicative practices (Darvin & Norton, 2014), but also to assist marginalized learners in becoming active agents of their own learning (Chen, 2013).

**Pedagogical Approaches to Multimodal Texts**

The key question that L2 instructors and researchers still tackle is how to acclimate to “the changing qualities, purposes, and contexts of [digitally] mediated language and literacy use, and specifically toward the challenge of deciding which emerging literacy practices to include in instructed educational curricula” (Thorne, 2013, p. 208). In the digital environment, becoming proficient in diverse media and diverse semiotic resources signifies that the HL/L2 composers can navigate multifaceted technological and composing skills, become digitally competent, and be cognizant of digital literacies. In classrooms, HL/L2 learners should gain multimodal competence, that is, “the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use
that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms” (New Media Consortium, 2005, p. 2). Various pedagogical frameworks can assist in achieving HL/L2 digital writing literacies and multimodal competencies, such as task-based language teaching (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Oskoz & Elola, 2020), learning by design (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Zapata & Lacorte, 2018), bridging activities (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), and genre pedagogies (Johns, 2002).

The authors in this thematic issue intentionally utilized diverse frameworks when approaching multimodal texts in L2 classrooms. For instance, in addition to genre-based systemic functional linguistics instruction of L2 writing, García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud’s students received instruction on attitude categories (Martin & White, 2005), which are the linguistic resources through which a speaker “indicates positive or negative assessment of people, places, things, happenings, and states of affairs” (White, 2023). While attitude has been employed in telecollaborative contexts to examine learners’ discourse (Belz, 2003; Oskoz & Gimeno-Sanz, 2019, 2020; Oskoz & Pérez Broncano, 2016; Vinagre & Corral, 2018; Vinagre & Oskoz, 2020), García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud demonstrated the value of including instruction on the three subcategories of attitude (i.e., affect, judgment, and appreciation) to aid L2 learners develop their writer identities, and to build distinct discoursal and authorial selves when developing their digital stories. Focusing on infographics as a genre, Li et al. adopted D’Angelo’s (2010, 2016) visual metadiscourse framework, and illustrated the value of teaching visual metadiscourse and assessing multimodal texts in language classrooms. Based on their study, Li et al. suggested that there is a need to train instructors about the effect that specific aspects of visual metadiscourse, such as font variability and graphic elements, convey meaning. Finally, Ruiz-Pérez, adopting notions of multiliteracies, design analysis (Kalantzis et al., 2016), and the protocol “Voice and Choice” (Sheya, 2018), provided his learners with the metalanguage to conceptualize multimodal authoring, therefore expanding their authorial choices and repertoire of voices. In summary, these three studies have demonstrated the positive effects of integrating different frameworks to provide learners with the necessary textual and visual metadiscourses to aid them in digital multimodal composing. Through varied pedagogical frameworks, we can empower HL/L2 learners, so they can decide for themselves how to communicate and how to position themselves based on their own and others’ values. This empowerment allows learners to express themselves by selecting a diverse repertoire of semiotic resources and choosing the digital tools that best express their own voices.

Garcia-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud also called for observation of different genre-based pedagogies (Hyland, 2004; Johns, 2002) and other instructional
perspectives that are more attuned to researchers’ and educators’ theoretical orientations and specific instructional contexts. García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud advocated that genre-based pedagogies, for instance, can assist researchers and educators in investigating and promoting the relationship between L2 digital multimodal composing and identity, in order to be able to observe learners’ intersubjective positioning and stance in L2 academic writing. As we progress with pedagogical practices in the HL/L2 classroom, additional genres should be explored and included in our instructional practice. Li et al.’s infographic analysis illustrated the value of including less explored yet relevant genres, such as posters, infographics, or Instagram, in HL/L2 classrooms. Furthermore, Ruiz-Pérez, as well as García-Pastor and Piqueres Calatayud, argued for the inclusion of multimodality and the development of our HL/L2 digital literacies by utilizing diverse multimodal genres, such as vlogging, digital graphic novels, or podcasts. These practices undeniably echo a new worldwide 21st-century educational trend that “encourage[s] the development of critical reflection and student agency” (Lacorte, 2016, p. 110). Pedagogical approaches, for example, need to continue to explore ways in which multimodal texts are holistically created and analyzed (Kalantzis et al., 2016). As noted by Li et al., if texts are multimodal in nature, socio-semiotic perspectives are necessary to explore not only the transduction (the reorganization of semiotic resources across modes) and transformation (the actions of reordering and repositioning semiotic resources within a particular mode) phenomena within digital multimodal composing, but also the ways in which semiotic resources (e.g., image and language) can be included in creating meaning in multimodal genres.

Our goal should be to move toward pedagogical approaches that may aid in operationalizing digital literacies and multimodality. As Li et al. proposed, future research should adopt the visual interactive metadiscourse framework to investigate L2 students’ use of visual metadiscourse in highly diverse multimodal genres (e.g., infographics, conference posters, and digital storybooks) with different technology tools that support digital multimodal composing (e.g., Canva, PowerPoint, StoryJumper, and Glogster). In addition to visual interactive resources in multimodal texts (guiding the audience through the text), students’ use of visual interactional resources (involving and engaging the audience in the content) using metadiscourse models should be studied (Hyland & Tse, 2004).

**Final Thoughts**

As observed in this thematic issue of *CALICO Journal*, language learning and teaching during this era are inherently connected to digital multimodal tools.
Language proficiency development has guided (and still does) many of our curricular decisions. However, in a world in which multimodal expression, collaborative endeavors, and global interaction play a key role, multiliteracy development should be pursued, and HL/L2 learners should be promoted and encouraged to have a voice in education and society, thus bridging the digital and linguistic divide. New ways of communication, the development of traditional and new genres, new tools, and diverse populations of learners have urged researchers and educators to seek instructional practices that represent the world that digital learners inhabit. In this challenge, we should explore digital multimodality through diverse lenses, such as learners’ multilingual, translilingual, and multicultural practices, as well as instructional practice. Acknowledging this challenge can force future research to reflect on how globalization has directly or indirectly affected pedagogical goals and excluded traditional approaches in language education.

When working with multiliteracies and multimodality, another aspect of research and pedagogical consideration is that we cannot continue thinking of our language learners as uniform learner bodies. Although the three articles included in this issue focus on language learning as an L2 (with the exception of one HL learner in Ruiz-Pérez’ study), our classes are composed of various learners with their own particular stories. In particular, we should acknowledge the different characteristics of L2 learners and HL learners (Zyzik, 2016) when working with multimodality. Furthermore, it is imperative to stop treating HL/L2 learners as speakers of two separate languages which cannot be mixed. Although there is an expectation that bilingual and multilingual speakers label and separate languages at the conscious level, languages cannot be separated in an authentic communication, because these speakers create single communicative repertoires (Ortega, 2017). Although we can attest that linguistic considerations in the development of digital multimodal texts have normally adhered to standard versions of the digital literacies of the target language, recent language ideologies, moves in pedagogies, and the reality of people frequently sharing languages in contact with others (as a result of historical circumstances, migrant status, and media access) have affected the manner in which we view multilingual and translational practices as part of social justice approaches in HL/L2 curricula. As discussed by Canagarajah (2013), multilingual and translational positioning acknowledges literacies (and this includes digital multimodality) as a combination of the processes and practices of cross-language relationships. When helping our HL/L2 learners with digital literacies, we must also recognize that translationalism should have its own educational space. As notions of literacies expand, we should continue to explore the inclusion and integration of diverse languages in our learners’ digital literacy development. The acknowledgement of individual differences
also goes hand in hand with the need to acknowledge different populations of learners. It is essential to include the diversity of participants beyond L2 college learners and include, for instance, participants at the K–12 level.

The intention of this thematic issue is not to present an ontological and prearranged way of engaging in multimodality. In contrast, this issue provides insights into how HL/L2 learners’ multimodal competences are recognized, and also highlights how different studies informed by diverse theoretical and pedagogical approaches have explored multimodal texts beyond linguistic and structural aspects. Multimodality should be continuously explored by advocating for new research paths that foster the development and growth of HL/L2 learners’ (multi)linguistic, semiotic, and discourse development and competence through the use of multimodal texts.


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References


