THE ROLE OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH LEARNERS' MULTIMODAL LITERACY

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Abstract:

In today's context, successful communication requires individuals to grasp, engage with, and construct multimodal texts in various formats. The creation of knowledge artifacts is central to developing multimodal literacy and communicative competence. This action research study sought to investigate the influence of explicit instruction on enhancing students' overall semiotic awareness. A multi-dimensional instructional model was tested for its effectiveness, with students' feedback serving as the primary evaluative tool. The study sample consisted of sixteen students, comprising seven males and nine females, all aged 17 or 18 years. A post-instruction questionnaire was conducted to collect students' reflections and feedback on the strategies used during the class session. The intervention lasted approximately two hours. Data from the qualitative questionnaire reported a high level of affective and cognitive engagement. The findings also indicated a noticeable increase in students' overall semiotic awareness due to explicit instruction. These results could serve as a foundation for refining and implementing instructional methodologies that continue to empower students in their understanding and utilization of multimodal communication in diverse contexts.

Keywords: multimodality, multimodal literacy, communicative competence, explicit instruction, semiotic awareness

1. Introduction

Educators can help develop well-rounded citizens by "*rethinking the fundamental premises of literacy pedagogy*" (New London Group, 1996). Traditional definitions of literacy as encompassing the ability to read and write have become outmoded. Cordes (2009) conceded that although reading and writing are still the primary means to acquiring new knowledge, "*literacy in this age means more than the ability to read and write; it requires a complex set of skills including: access, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and use of information in a variety of modes*" (p.1). The mass media and subsequently the internet

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"*spawned whole new genres of text which meant that narrowly conventional understandings of literacy were fast becoming anachronistic*" (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023, p. 1). In other words, the ubiquity and accessibility of digital technologies have rendered monomodal texts a relic of the past.

The juxtaposition of several key elements of design is referred to as multimodality. The latter has become "*the normal state of human communication*" (Kress, 2010). The integration of various modes of communication, known as multimodal literacy, has emerged as a crucial skill set. To be multimodally literate requires the ability to comprehend, analyze, and create messages through multiple mediums such as images, sounds, gestures, videos and text. Understanding the relevance of teaching multimodal literacy within language education has become increasingly vital, yet there exists a noticeable research gap in this domain. Applying an instructional model proposed by Lim & Tan-Chia (2023), this action research study sought to investigate the effect of explicit instruction on students' semiotic awareness.

This study, therefore, set out to address two questions:

1) What are the benefits and challenges of multimodal learning?
2) What is the impact of explicit instruction on students' multimodal awareness?

2. Literature Review

Effective educators and managers are seen as designers of learning processes and environments, not as "*bosses dictating what those in their charge should think and do*" (New London Group, 1996, p. 7). Both seek to inform their work practices with ideas emanating from sound theories and rigorous research. They are always in the process of designing and redesigning their working environments to meet the needs of those they are in charge of. The notion of design derives its essence from the idea that "*learning and productivity are the results of the designs (the structures) of complex systems of people, environments, technology, beliefs, and texts*" (New London Group, 1996, p. 73). By the same token, both the instructor and the learner are designers of meaning as both are involved in creating the social interchange between them through communication (Kress & Selander, 2012). In short, instructed learning is a complex process that demands a high level of collaboration and creativity.

The interplay between forces of globalization and evident local diversity made the act of communicating a challenging enterprise which can be effectively addressed by highlighting the differences instead of exploring sameness (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). Moreover, the digital and information revolution has granted individuals unprecedented access to data and information, as well as the ability to generate information themselves (Roetzel, 2019). As a result of this technological and sociocultural transformation, literacy pedagogy has been expanded to include other meaning-making modes. As Lim and Tan-Chia (2023) put it, "*being literate in this day and age includes being able to communicate effectively with multimodal meaning-making resources*" (p. 3). Learning in this new environment requires exploring cultural differences as the world is becoming more and more globalized (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023; Deardorff, 2009).

Jewitt and Kress (2003) coined the term 'multimodal literacy' to describe "*the meanings that are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade in interpretation through many representational and communicative modes*" (p. 1). Jewitt (2005) ushed in a new era in literacy education where students were viewed as agentive meaning-makers across contexts. This 'multimodal turn' emphasized the development of students' semiotic resources. Multimodal literacy is subsumed under multiliteracies pedagogy. The latter sheds light on the multiplicity of meaning-making in different cultural, social or domain-specific contexts. The multiliteracies approach suggests integrating multimodal texts, especially those widely used in digital media, into the curriculum and classroom (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023). Multimodal literacy can also be described as a dimension of digital literacies (Sindoni *et al.*, 2019). The multi– of multimodality refers to "*the various modes of meaning-making, such as images, sound, gestures, animations, and others*" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 3). The principles of multiliteracies brought about curricular change and influenced teaching practices in many developed countries (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023).

In language teaching, instructional approaches have been exploring and experimenting with a wide range of methods to help language learners develop their communicative competence. Several models have been proposed to frame and conceptualize communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 1995; Savignon, 1997). All of these models emphasized language as the main meaning-making mode. The multimodal approach, while emphasizing the meaning-making potential of words, draws on the social semiotic theories of meaning making. Social semiotics explores "*the systems, principles, and resources that people develop to make meaning of, in and with the world around them*" (Bezemer & Cowan, 2020, p. 1). Language in all its manifestations represents only one semiotic resource. Consequently, communicative competence needs to be expanded to include other semiotic resources. Developing students' semiotic awareness is a worthwhile endeavor.

Semiotic awareness is described as the "*critical attention to relational, multimodal aspects of meaning design, without which meaningful assessment schemes can neither be conceived nor implemented*" (Towndrow *et al.*, 2013, p. 328). The essential idea of semiotic awareness is that the intentional juxtaposition of signs creates layers of meanings accessible only through the ability to discern the reciprocal relationship between the signifier and the signified (de Saussure, 2002). Semiotic awareness can be fostered through understanding the functions and forms of different semiotic modes and how they interact to create meaning in multimodal texts. Learners also need to understand the communicative contexts and respond creatively to the particularities of the situation.
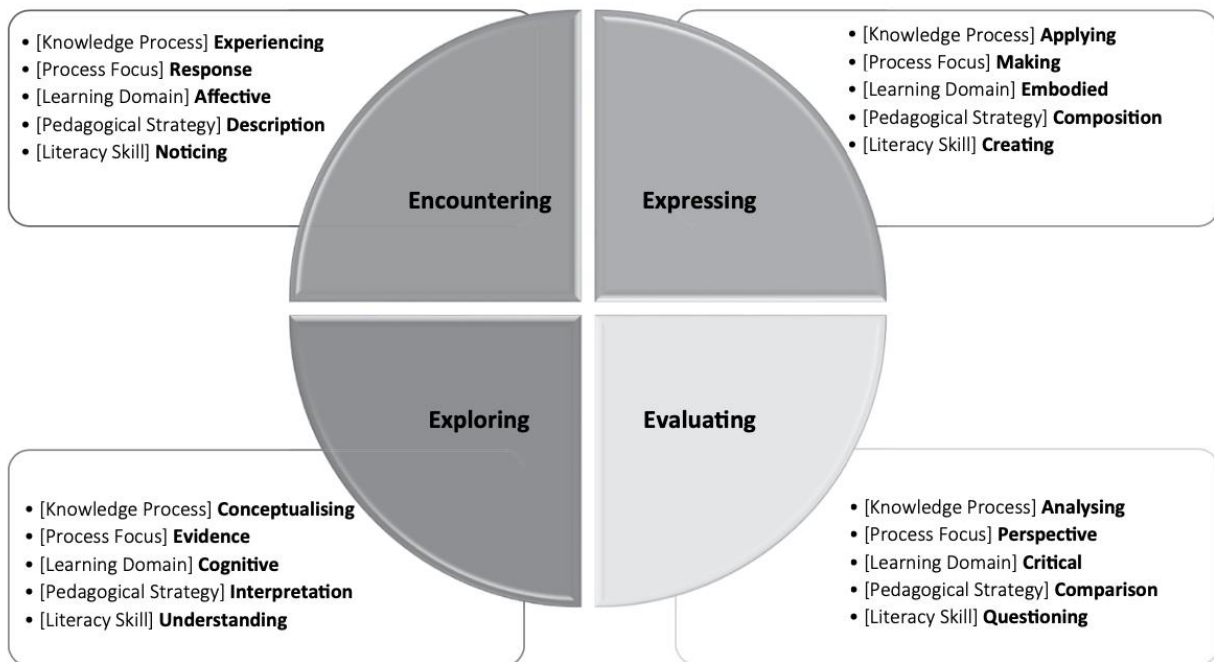
Although our generation of students can be aptly described as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), past research has shown that they are not quite skillful in the production and interpretation of visual communication (Brumberger, 2011). It is important to note that digital natives have varying degrees of digital competence owing to differential access and opportunity (Selwyn, 2009). Access and opportunity are often attributed to environmental factors such family income (Hatlevik & Christophersen, 2013). It is crucial for educators to realize that semiotic awareness is essential in

navigating today's digital world and some students' digital mastery should not be mistaken for multimodal literacy. There is a body of knowledge and a set of skills associated with analyzing, interpreting and evaluating multimodal texts that need to be taught explicitly through the integration of viewing and representing into the curriculum and classroom (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023).

2.1 Theoretical Framework of the Study

The instructional model that guides this study is the Learning Processes proposed by Lim and Tan-Chia (2023). The learning processes build on the dimensions of the Learning by Design Framework (New London Group, 1996) which have been developed as knowledge processes in Cope and Kalantzis (2015), Cope and Kalantzis (2021), and Lim *et al.* (2022). The learning processes are expounded in connection with foci, learning domains, pedagogical strategies and literacy skills. The learning processes inform the classroom instruction as the teacher applies them to facilitate the interpretation of the multimodal text, as well as to scaffold students' multimodal representation of meaning. The learning processes in multimodal literacy are Encountering, Exploring, Evaluating, and Expressing (see Figure 1) .

Figure 1: Learning Processes in Multimodal Literacy

- [Knowledge Process] **Experiencing**
- [Process Focus] **Response**
- [Learning Domain] **Affective**
- [Pedagogical Strategy] **Description**
- [Literacy Skill] **Noticing**

Encountering

- [Knowledge Process] **Applying**
- [Process Focus] **Making**
- [Learning Domain] **Embodied**
- [Pedagogical Strategy] **Composition**
- [Literacy Skill] **Creating**

Expressing

- [Knowledge Process] **Conceptualising**
- [Process Focus] **Evidence**
- [Learning Domain] **Cognitive**
- [Pedagogical Strategy] **Interpretation**
- [Literacy Skill] **Understanding**

Exploring

- [Knowledge Process] **Analysing**
- [Process Focus] **Perspective**
- [Learning Domain] **Critical**
- [Pedagogical Strategy] **Comparison**
- [Literacy Skill] **Questioning**

Evaluating

Note: Adapted from *Designing learning for multimodal literacy: Teaching viewing and representing* by Lim & Tan-Chia (2023, p. 23).

A. Encountering

Students encounter the multimodal text, which can be a visual image, a video or a brochure and are asked to express their intial reaction to it. At this stage students are allowed to convey their emotional response about the multimodal text. It is also an opportunity for students to fuse their lifeworlds with the classroom experience.

B. Exploring

The learning process of exploring encourages students to think about how the semiotic resources were applied by the author of the multimodal text. The students can work out the meanings by themselves or seek out the help of an instructor. It is recommended, though, that explicit instruction take place at this stage. Teachers can use a set of pedagogic metalanguage to teach design elements and discuss their meaning-potential.

C. Evaluating

The evaluating learning process invites students to take a chance and critique the multimodal text. Students are encouraged to make a critical evaluation of the text by exploring its underlying values, questioning its intended message and identifying the range of perspectives on the central issue.

D. Expressing

The learning process of expressing is reminiscent of an ecological approach to leaning which "*sees the learner as a whole person, being taken seriously, being given responsibility, and being encouraged to tackle challenging projecsts, to think critically, and to take control of one's own learning*" (van Lier, 2004, p. 223). The learning process of expressing is about emancipating students from perpetually being at the receiving end of the educational process and encouraging them to take on a more active role as agentive designers of meaning.

The learning processes of multimodal literacy should also not be thought of as distinct levels of learning. All four learning processes should be present in the student's learning experience at every stage of learning but at increasing levels of sophistication, from basic to intermediate and advanced.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study sample consisted of sixteen students, comprising seven males and nine females, all aged 17 or 18 years old. The majority of the students demonstrated a high level of language proficiency, with most falling within the CEFR B2 category, indicating a solid grasp of the language. The students were enrolled in the first semester of a preparatory course that serves as a foundational step toward pursuing an engineering degree in industrial management. It is should be noted that the participants exhibited high motivation, as evidenced by their consistent attendance and active engagement in class activities.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

A post-instruction questionnaire was conducted after the instructional session to collect students' reflections and feedback on the strategies used during the class session. The post-instruction questionnaire aimed to investigate the impact of the instructional model on students' perceptions and understanding of multimodal literacy. The

questionnaire consisted of five questions. The first three questions attempted to elicit specific information from the students with regard to the benefits as well as the challenges of working with multimodal texts. The fourth question was intended to assess the impact of explicit instruction on multimodal literacy. The last question gauged students' enthusiasm about multimodal learning.

1) What did you find particularly interesting about the lesson?
2) What aspects of the lesson did you find most challenging?
3) What aspects of the lesson did you find most enjoyable?
4) To what extent has the lesson helped you to analyze, evaluate and compose multimodal texts?
5) Would you like to try the same activity in a future lesson?

3.3 Classroom Intervention

Learning Objective	To analyze a film critically, engage in collaborative discussions, and compose a structured review.
Materials	TV set connected to a wifi network, Youtube video, a set of cards
Film title	Alternative Math
Plot	The short film (approximately 8 minutes long), directed by Maddox, depicts the journey of an elementary school teacher Mrs. Wells, portrayed by Allyn Carrell, as she deals with a developing dispute concerning a student's undeniably incorrect response. The film represents a satirical account of post-fact America where truth distortion holds prominence.

The lesson started with the teacher outlining the objectives of the activity. Students were organized into groups of four, each group receiving three cards containing distinct titles: encountering, exploring, and evaluating. Each card presented a series of questions related to the respective theme. The questions are based on five key questions of media literacy (Center for Media Literacy, 2005).

A. Encountering Card
- What is happening in the film?
- What is your immediate reaction to it?
- How does it make you feel? Why?
- Which memories or experiences does it stir in you?

B. Exploring Card
- What happens in the beginning, middle, and at the end of the story?
- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Which characters speak and which don't?
- What do the speaking characters sound like?

C. Evaluating Card
- What values or opinions are being suggested by the creator of the film?
- How would you summarize its message?

- Who do you think the intended audience is? Why?
- Who would you recommend it to? Why?

As the students settled into their groups, they looked at the cards and read the questions carefully. Following this preparation, a ten-minute video was screened. After watching the video, the class reconvened for group discussions, focusing on the questions presented in the cards. The teacher guided the sequence, prompting discussions in the order of encountering, exploring, and evaluating the film. The teacher also helped with language. After analyzing and evaluating different aspects of the film, the teacher distributed the final card, (expressing card) containing instructions for composing a comprehensive review of the film.

D. Expressing Card

Make a short video (3–4 minutes) of yourself giving a review. Include:
- A summary of the film's plot,
- A description of the main characters,
- The performances of the main actors,
- The film's message.

In their groups, students worked on the review script, brainstorming and outlining key points to cover. Students were given half an hour to create a short video in which they give a review of the movie. The teacher encouraged the groups to use film editing features such as background music, cutting on action, a match and so on. Only one group was able to create complete the task on time. The rest of the class asked for extra time to complete the assignment.

4. Findings

Qualitative data from the post-instruction questionnaire were analyzed thematically to identify themes and insights regarding students' reactions and experiences of the lesson. The qualitative data was categorized based on students' responses to five questions.

a. Aspects students found particularly interesting about the lesson

Theme 1: Engaging and creative learning,
Theme 2: Group work and discussions,
Theme 3: Movie analysis and critical thinking.

Students appreciated the lesson for its departure from traditional methods, promoting creativity and deeper engagement with the content. Collaboration and discussions within groups were highlighted as interesting aspects, allowing for diverse perspectives and shared insights. Many appreciated the opportunity to critically analyze the movie, discuss emotions, and learn new skills related to film analysis.

b. Aspects of the lesson students found most challenging

Theme 1: Technical challenges,

Theme 2: Analytical thinking,

Theme 3: Time constraints.

Students faced technical challenges related to video creation, language barriers, understanding cinematography, and video editing. Some found it challenging to critically analyze the movie, especially identifying technical aspects or finding appropriate language to describe certain aspects of the film. The amount of the time allowed to complete the task was not commensurate with the challenge level of the task, more time was needed to complete the task.

c. Aspects of the lesson students found most enjoyable

Theme 1: Creative process,

Theme 2: Group work,

Theme 3: Discussion.

Students enjoyed the creative aspects of scriptwriting, filming, and editing the video. Collaborating within groups, discussing the movie, and exchanging perspectives were highlighted as enjoyable aspects. The lesson's departure from traditional activities as such essays and the freedom to express sincere thoughts and emotions were enjoyable for many.

d. Impact of the lesson on students' ability to understand and compose multimodal texts

While responses varied, some acknowledged an increased awareness of multimodality, vocabulary development, and deeper content exploration through multiple mediums such as video and discussions.

e. Interest in similar future lessons

There was a mixed response regarding the willingness to engage in similar activities in the future, with a majority showing positive inclinations but some expressing hesitation or a desire for variety in learning activities.

5. Discussion

One particularly interesting aspect of the lesson is the emphasis on engagement and creativity within the activity. Being a far cry from conventional teaching methods, the lesson sequence seemed to have a positive effect on student engagement, encouraging creativity and deeper interaction with the content. This suggests that introducing novel approaches in education, like integrating multimodal strategies, can effectively stimulate students' interest and involvement in learning (Thomson & Parsons, 2017). One of the students commented *"What I found particularly interesting about this activity was the opportunity it provided to engage with the content on a deeper level. Watching the short*

film and then summarizing it in a video format allowed us to explore creative ways of storytelling"

The emphasis on group work and discussions as a beneficial component of the activity is noteworthy. It highlights the significance of collaborative learning environments in facilitating diverse perspectives and shared insights. This aspect has the potential to lower students' anxiety, allowing them to take risks and negotiate meaning with their peers without feeling intimidated or challenged as may be the case in a competitive learning environment where students are rewarded when they give right answers and scolded or ridiculed when their contributions fall short of the expected outcomes (Cloud, 2014).

Movie analysis was used as a strategy to develop students'critical thinking skills. The use of movies in the classroom and enhanced learning are strong correlated (Champoux, 1999). The opportunity to analyze and discuss emotions, interpretations, and technical aspects of the film enhances students' critical thinking abilities. However, the challenges related to this theme, such as identifying technical aspects or analyzing different aspects of the movie, indicate areas where further support or guidance may be needed.

Technical difficulties in video creation and lack of metalanguage to describe the technical elements involved in the production of a film were all expected challenges which require additional support and resources to ensure all students can fully engage with the multimodal approach. Similarly, addressing time constraints and providing adequate preparation may help avoid difficulties associated with self-expression and lexical choices. One of students succinctly summarized the challenges by saying "*While the activity was enjoyable, I did find the time constraint to be a bit challenging. Balancing the need for a comprehensive summary with the limited time available for the video was a creative challenge*".

Despite the challenges, several aspects of the lesson were notably enjoyable for students. The creative process of scriptwriting, filming, and video editing provided an enjoyable and engaging learning experience. Additionally, the emphasis on group work, discussions, and the departure from traditional teaching methods allowed students the freedom to express their thoughts and emotions without reserve. As one the students put it "*I guess the discussion part was the most enjoyable part of the activity because we could see the movie from diffrent perspective, and I even paid attention after the discussion to some scenes I didn't even notice first*".

Regarding the impact of the lesson on students' increased semiotic awareness, students expressed varying attitudes. One of the students, for example said that "*it didn't help me much to improve my analyzing skills*". Another complained that "*I have been asked sudden questions that I had to give answers to off the top of my head*". Another student contemplated the novelty of the lesson by remarking "*I haven't really done anything similar to this before, so this pretty much introduced me to the concept and allowed me to develop myself in this regard*". The dissatisfaction expressed by some students was probably due to the inadequate amount of time allocated for the different stages of the activities. It is important to remember that innovative approaches in education are often

met with skepticism or dismissed as irrelevant, which may undermine their initial introduction into a social setting (Keeney-Kennicutt *et al*., 2008).

Given the nature of the study, the intention was not to quantitatively measure the effects of explicit instruction on students' ability to interpret and create multimodal texts. Instead, the aim was to gain insights into the role of explicit instruction in raising students' overall semiotic awareness. The learning processes model used in the lesson provided structure and engaged students' affective and cognitive faculties. Additionally, it facilitated a deeper understanding of film production, enhanced students' critical analysis and communication skills, and culminated in the production of oral reviews enriched with creative elements.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of explicit instruction in enhancing students' awareness of multimodal literacy, contributing to the ongoing discourse on its role in fostering communicative competence. The findings could also serve as a foundation for refining and implementing instructional methodologies that continue to empower students in their understanding and utilization of multimodal communication in diverse contexts. The small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study's focus on a single educational institution might restrict the broader application of the results.

Overall, this study highlighted the potential benefits of incorporating multimodal literacy strategies in education while also identifying areas where additional support and diverse learning opportunities could enhance the overall learning experience. Educators' mission is to reflect the current sociocultural trends in their teaching practices. Multimodal texts are the new trend. Failure to update our teaching practices will reflect poorly on our students' ability to handle real-life challenges.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare that they have no financial or personal conflicts of interest related to this research. No funding was received for this study, and the authors have no financial relationships with any organizations that could be perceived as influencing the research. Additionally, there are no other potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

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