Student Perspectives on Multimodal Composing in the L2 Classroom: Tensions with Audience, Media, Learning, and Sharing

Structured Abstract

Purpose
Multimodal composing is often romanticized as a flexible approach suitable for all learners. There is a lack of research that critically examines students’ perspectives and the constraints of multimodal composing across academic contexts.

The current study addresses this need by exploring high school learners’ perspectives and experiences enacting multimodal learning in an L2 classroom. More specifically, this study presents key tensions between students’ experiences of multimodal composing and teacher/researchers’ use of multimodal composition in an L2 classroom setting.

Design/methodology
The article focuses on two multimodal composing projects developed within a Design Based Implementation Research (DBIR) approach and implemented in a high school French class.

Multiple data sources were used: observations; interviews; written reflections; and multimodal compositions.

Data were analyzed using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). A critical incident is one that is unplanned and that stimulates reflection on teaching and learning. Methodologically, CIT was enacted through iterative coding to identify critical incidents, and collaborative analysis.

Findings
Using illustrative examples from multiple data sources, we discuss four tensions between students’ experiences of multimodal composing and teacher/researchers’ use of multimodal composition in a classroom setting: 1) the primary audience of student projects, 2) the media leveraged in student projects, 3) expectations of learning in school, and 4) the role of a public viewing of student work.

Originality/value
This article problematizes basic assumptions and benefits of multimodal composing and offers ideas on how to re-center multimodal composing on student voices.

Keywords: new literacies, media, literacy, literacy teaching
Josie and Jason are partners in a collaborative project in their intermediate-level French class. Together, they brainstorm how to represent a technological world that illustrates a day in the life of a worker in 2070.

Josie shares, “So the future the world has become like filled up with like robots who have taken over the jobs. People work the robots, but they're working from home. So, the streets are basically like empty; you just have robots out there. We have a main character, who is basically going to be working from home from his computer, and we're going to show like how the world has become. So robots have like kind of taken over, and we've mastered the way of robotics.”

Jason adds, “And so robots do the jobs that we would normally do in everyday life, such as being doctors or even at the grocery store. And the world has become a lot more like clean, because there's no need to travel like from work to home or from home to school therefore there's like less pollution.”

Josie describes, “So we're thinking that we're going to do like collages of pictures of what the world would look like, but we also kind of want to work on Pixton and make like a cartoon. And maybe show what life would be like, as you were walking down the street virtually. And we also want to enter some [voice] recordings.”

What’s unique about Josie and Jason’s approach to their assignment is the visually- and conceptually-detailed imagery in their brainstorming, well before getting started on their multimodal compositions. Their envisionment takes into consideration many facets of the future technological world. The challenge, it seems, comes down to executing their ideas.

Students’ emerging multimodal composition processes and their imagination can in theory be synchronized to capture their vision. However, in practice, is their expertise with multimodality enough to execute this vision? And if not, do students feel satisfied with the outcome? What tensions exist between students’ visions and their teacher’s expectations? Tensions, stated or unstated, can create disconnects between students’ experiences with multimodality.

The sections that follow surface the idea that multimodality theory and learners’ experiences in practice may not always align. Teachers who implement multimodal projects often do so because they see multiple points of entry for their students (Jewitt, 2008; Hafner,
2014) and space for a creativity that encourages application of ideas (Dzekoe, 2017; Jiang, 2017). However, this may not coincide with students’ perspectives of classroom-based assignments. Some students we interviewed suggest that multimodal projects are more taxing and more difficult as they navigate resources, learn a second language, and express their socio-scientific perspectives. Moreover, they must work under time pressure and manage expectations from their teachers, peers, and themselves.

In this article, we used a critical incident methodology (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986) and vignettes to illustrate four tensions between students’ experiences of multimodal composing and teacher/researchers’ use of multimodal composition in an L2 classroom setting. We begin by connecting our theoretical framework to related research in multimodality. We then illustrate the use of the Critical Incident Technique as a methodology. Findings create space for critical viewpoints around implementing multimodal composing. The resulting discussion points toward ways students’ perspective can and should be used to interpret multimodal learning in both theory and practice.

**Theoretical Framework and Related Research**

Interconnected theories informed our stance toward this work and were foundational in the design of the multimodal composition tasks that students completed. First, we acknowledge Vygotsky’s (1962) assertion that learning is an inherently social process and that social interaction plays an important role in learning. Linguists (Halliday, 1993) have pointed out the close relationship between linguistic learning and conceptual knowledge development. These perspectives, together with theories of adolescent development (see Leung and Shek, 2019) suggest that peer relationships strongly influence the ways that adolescents collaborate and engage with one another (Brown and Larson, 2009). Adolescence theories (Schall et al., 2016) illustrate the important role of identity development among high school aged learners. Adolescents show increased sensitivity to social evaluation and express preferences around social belonging, acceptance, and respect from peers. These theories, and the associated social pressures that surround them, suggest that social interactions and social tensions together comprise an important backdrop in high school. That context informed the design of this study’s learning activities, suggesting that peer relationships may be even more important to adolescents than the learning activities themselves. Each of these perspectives, including lifespan, learning, humanistic, ecological, sociocultural, and positive youth development theories (Leung and Shek,
Multimodality

A multimodal perspective acknowledges that meaning is made using different modes (Kress, 2010). This communicative practice is commonly used in our daily lives. For example, consider acts as simple as sending a Tweet with a picture and some text or sharing a message with spoken words together with a tone of voice and body language. Each of these modes (image, text, speech, gesture) contribute unique meaning to the overall message. However, the integration of modes takes on different meanings based on context and sociocultural factors (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

Consciously learning how to compose meanings using the affordances of multiple modes has clear applications for learning in multiple contexts, including with second language (L2) learners (Smith et al., 2020; Grapin, 2019; Shin et al., 2020). L2 learners must not only learn another language system but also must come to know other ways of meaning making within the culture(s) that use that language. For instance, French learners must know not only the words to say when greeting another person, but also the additional gestures, such as air kisses, that may be appropriate, depending on the context. Learning about multimodality may also benefit L2 learners in that they can use other modes of meaning than their first language (L1) to support their L2 learning (Dzekoe, 2017).

Studies of multimodal composing in L2 classrooms have emphasized the ways in which these projects open up space for expressing, negotiating, and affirming students’ multilingual and multicultural identities (Danzak, 2011; Jiang, 2018; Lee, 2014). Multimodal composing in L2 classroom settings has also been shown to support students’ metalinguistic awareness and meaning-making more broadly (Shin, 2018; Shin et al., 2020) and to give students authentic writing opportunities that are shared with expanded audiences (Castañeda, 2013; Harman and Shin, 2018).

The research that has examined L2 multimodal composing in schools has illuminated how students generally positively view the creative freedom of communicating through visuals, sound, text, and movement (Castañeda, 2013; Ho et al., 2011). Students consistently express how multimodal projects are more engaging and motivating than traditional writing projects (Cummins et al., 2015; Jiang and Luk, 2016; Lee, 2014). This motivational drive comes from
diverse components of the multimodal composing process, including the challenge, competition, and recognition associated with these projects (Jiang and Luk, 2016).

As promising as it may be, multimodality is often romanticized as a catch-all approach for all learners in all circumstances (Hull, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2015). There is a lack of research that critically examines the constraints of multimodal composing—particularly when integrated into the classroom with a myriad of technological and curricular restrictions (however, see Mills 2007; Pandya et al., 2015). Moreover, few studies have examined students’ perspectives and experiences beyond engagement and enjoyment as they compose within the given constraints of a L2 classroom setting (however, see Jiang, 2018 for an analysis of student investment).

The current study addresses this need by critically examining learners’ perspectives and experiences enacting multimodal learning in an L2 classroom. Based on interviews, written reflections, and classroom observations, this study presents key tensions between students’ experiences of multimodal composing and teacher/researchers’ use of multimodal composition in a classroom setting. In particular, we examined the following research questions:

- What are high school L2 students’ perspectives on multimodal composing for academic purposes?
- Based on these perspectives, what are the tensions they experienced when multimodal composing as a class assignment?

**Methods**

**Context**

Across this year-long research project, researchers and graduate students worked in collaboration with a teacher in a high school French classroom to develop digital activities for L2 learning. The school was located in a southwestern city in the United States, within a public high school known for its college-preparatory focus and rigorous admission process. The research collaboration focused on one combined section of French 3 and French 4. The French program at the school had historically been traditional in nature, focused on grammatical constructs, vocabulary items, and discrete cultural facts.

The goal of the research collaboration was to support the meaningful integration of multimodal projects for L2 learning. Socio-scientific issues—controversial, real-world problems informed by science—were designed as the focus to provide a context for language in use. The
research process was informed by Design Based Implementation Research (DBIR) and executed with a teacher in the context of a school ecosystem (Sandoval and Bell, 2004). This research was grounded in a systematic inquiry designed to understand dynamics between teaching and learning. The teacher played a vitally important role in examining student perspectives and worked collaboratively to co-develop and co-execute the research. The researchers had experience implementing multimodal projects in different contexts. Collectively, we envisioned the project to incorporate opportunities for meaningful L2 communication into the curriculum using digital tools that would engage and challenge learners. Student perspectives, collected during the completion of multimodal projects, were used to examine complex learning dynamics.

Over the course of five months, four multimodal projects were designed and executed with students. The focus of this article involves a close examination of the first two multimodal projects because the researchers could be present in the classroom. The latter two projects were collected during distance learning that occurred during the COVID-19 shutdown. In the next section, we describe the multimodal activities.

Multimodal Projects
Project 1

Project 1 was the culmination of a three-day lesson. In preparation for Project 1, students read an excerpt from a book, *La civilisation, ma mère!*, in which two sons introduce electricity to their mother in the 1930s. Instead of explaining how electricity works, the sons convince their mother that a magician lives inside the radio. Project 1 involved students using a template to create an Instagram post from the perspective of one of the characters (see Figure 1). A group brainstorming activity focused on the story’s themes and introduced the multimodal features to include in these posts. Moreover, an individual reflection on their own post and the choices they made supported students’ work in Project 1. As a culmination of the project, students presented their Instagram posts to the class.

Insert Figure 1 here

*Figure 1.* Template students used in Project 1 to create their Instagram post.

Project 2

This two-week project focused on envisioning a day in the life of a future workplace in 2070. The introductory vignette comes from partners’ brainstorming for this project. The project
was designed to encourage students to think about the societal dimensions of technology and impacts on the personal, local, and global world. The students worked collaboratively in pairs and trios. The requirements specified that students should integrate three different modes to communicate their ideas. The length of the video was expected to be 1½-3 minutes, and students were asked to incorporate French oral narration. Following the project, students were asked to reflect on their use of modes and any challenges they faced in executing the project. As with Project 1, students showcased their completed work to the class.

In both projects, researchers introduced the projects, discussed the objectives (extension and application of previously-learned material, opportunity to communicate through multiple modes), and presented the basics of multimodality (what it is, how it can be used to expand meaning-making). Researchers and the teacher were on-hand to answer questions and to help students with any technological issues.

These two projects allowed us to explore contrasting examples of unit designs. Project 1 was shorter in length, and multimodal compositions were created individually within a single platform. In keeping with DBIR methodology, we analyzed the data from Project 1 as a way to inform the design of Project 2. Project 2 was a lengthier culminating project that involved the integration of multiple technologies and platforms. It involved project-based learning and required collaboration among student pairs and trios.

*Participants*

The French teacher, Mr. M, was in his first year at the school. He had taught previously, both at the university level (French, 3 years) and at the high school level (English, 8 years). This was his first time integrating multimodal projects at the high school level. Mr. M viewed multimodal composing as a way to promote digital literacies and L2 communication among students.

There were a total of 24 students enrolled in the French course where projects were designed and implemented. Eighteen students (and their parents) consented to participate in the study. Students were primarily eleventh graders (n=20) with students from a few other grades (10th grade, n=3; 9th grade, n=1). The student population was primarily White (n=15), in addition to students from Latinx (n= 6) and Middle Eastern backgrounds (n=3). The class was skewed in terms of gender: 20 of the students identified as female, 4 as male. The students were
very serious about school. All were enrolled in multiple AP courses. School-related stress was common among students.

Data Sources & Collection

Multiple data sources were triangulated to draw out tensions that surfaced from students’ perspectives. The data sources included: fieldnotes and video recordings of student work time, student showcases, and instruction (75 min); interviews with students (75 min) and the instructor (59 min); written reflections by students (39 pages); and final multimodal compositions (n=29) (see Figure 2 for visualization of data collected).

Figure 2. Data sources. Colors indicate the type of data collected and size of the circle represents the relative amount of data collected and analyzed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students as they worked on their multimodal projects. Interviews focused on in-the-moment exploration of composing processes, including questions about design decisions and how previous lessons in their French class connected to their project. Similarly, interviews with the teacher directly following class work focused on the teacher’s immediate objectives and expectations of the project. An extensive interview was conducted with the teacher at the end of the research collaboration that addressed what went well and what was challenging throughout the projects. The teacher’s insights were central to identifying what was successful and what needed to be improved or redesigned, in line with the DBIR framework.

Data Analysis: Critical Incidents Technique

In the context of teaching and learning sciences, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) has been used to examine interactions, disruptions, and tensions. A critical incident is one that is unplanned or unanticipated and disrupts the planned flow of teaching and learning (Farrell and Baecher, 2017; Tripp, 2011). Importantly, the onset of a critical incident not only represents a disconnect in expectations, but also provides an opportunity to shore up conceptualizations of teaching/learning processes. Indeed, the criticality of incidents hinges on reflection and analysis; it is in reflecting on and analyzing these moments of disconnect that incidents become important sources of insight in revising and updating teaching practices and theory (Farrell and Baecher, 2017).
Methodologically, we enacted a systematic process for CIT. First, we identified critical incidents—unplanned or unanticipated moments, events, or reactions throughout the multimodal composing projects and processes—through iterative coding of the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Each of the projects involved successive passes through our data. These passes allowed us to identify CIs but also to update our pedagogical approach, in line with our DBIR framework. Each critical incident sparked collaborative conversations and led to instructional revisions for subsequent projects.

When we had a stable, cumulative list of CIs at the end of the research collaboration, we proceeded to analysis using the following coding scheme:

- When in the multimodal composing process did the CI occur? (product, process)
- Who/what was involved/implicated in CI? (teachers, researchers, students, requirements)
- What was the nature of the CI? (critical, affirming)

We grouped incidents into broad tensions, defined as a disconnect between how students’ experienced multimodal composing and how we had used multimodal composition in the classroom. See Table I for a full list of tensions. During this phase of analysis, we drew on several strategies to build the validity of our tension categories: looking for negative evidence, analyzing outliers, and drawing constant comparisons to ensure that each tension was distinct (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

**Table I.**

*Full List of Tensions Identified in the Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Audience*</td>
<td>Students and instructor/researchers had different understandings of who students were composing for and why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Used/Message*</td>
<td>Students selected media (e.g., TikTok, meme templates) intentionally, as a way to create meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of Learning in School*</td>
<td>Students and instructor/researchers had different expectations around where and when meaning-making happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Viewing of Student Work*</td>
<td>Students were resistant to public viewings of their multimodal compositions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Technical Skill/Support</td>
<td>While students expressed a strong desire for independence in using different digital tools, they also needed support and struggled to complete projects without the appropriate technological skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Review/Revision</td>
<td>Students did not always find merit in reviewing or revising their compositions, preferring an impromptu or extemporaneous affect.</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of Planning/Scaffolding</td>
<td>Students found detailed rubrics and scaffolding (e.g., storyboarding) to be detrimental to their composing process.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* denotes tension discussed in findings section.

We chose to focus on the tensions that had the most examples from the widest range of data sources. For each of these four tensions, we engaged in multiple collaborative discussions to better understand the source of the tension.

**Findings**

The following sections are organized into four tensions that were identified through analysis of critical incidents. We explore each tension with vignettes that juxtapose researcher/teacher uses of multimodal composing and students’ experiences and expectations.

*Re-interpreting the Primary Audience as their Peers*

When projects were initially introduced, the students, instructor, and researchers worked to develop a common understanding of the multimodal projects. However, the social nature of learning in a classroom surfaced different understandings of who students were composing for. A closer look at students’ perspectives collected during multimodal composing unearthed nuances about connecting with an audience of their peers, an important feature of youth learning (Moje and Tysvaer, 2010; Pandya and Low, 2020). The following interaction illustrates how students situated their message and audience as a key driver of their compositions:

*Kenya was discussing Project 2 with one researcher. When asked if she was looking forward to seeing other students’ projects, she replied, “Yeah, we all have a similar sense of humor so they should be really funny.” The researcher asked if they weren’t funny, if she would still like them. Kenya blithely responded, “As people, yeah, but their videos, probably not.”*

*Later on, Kenya discussed her choice to include a French song from the movie Ratatouille played over a Star Wars style video intro and what was funny about that choice. “Well, it’s like a French song from Ratatouille, instead of the Star Wars thing. It’s the French song from Ratatouille.” She insisted that if she put a video from Ratatouille in with its own music, “it would be kinda funny, but it’s the Star Wars part that’s funny, not Ratatouille.”*
It was easy to assume that Star Wars was included to make the project more futuristic. Kenya claimed that that wasn’t her intent, “but I’ll claim that if it gets me extra credit.”

This interaction illustrates the importance of humor as an engagement factor for students. While the purpose of the assignment may not have been to “engage your peers,” students were clearly motivated to include witty, clever, and humorous content in their multimodal projects as a means of connecting with an audience of their peers. In Project 1, for instance, students made reference to contemporary youth culture—hashtags (e.g., “#lolz”), captions (e.g., “OK Boomer”), and a popular film for adolescents on Disney+ (Radio Rebel)—to create shared meaning for their peers (Floyd and Castek, 2020). Indeed, during the showcase of the Instagram projects, many of these youth culture connections needed to be explained to researchers, who did not always catch the references (fieldnotes). Through their multimodal creations, then, learners intended to appeal to their age group, not to the age group of the teacher or researchers who designed the project.

Re-positioning the Medium as the Message

Students’ multimodal composing processes bumped up against some boundaries but they also incorporated elements of choice. One choice was the digital platforms and media they could use for composing. During Project 2, one pair of students arrived at TikTok as their preferred medium, and they used Tik Tok as a message itself. The following vignette provides context:

One of the researchers and a student were reviewing the students’ work in progress. The researcher asked, “And you incorporated that [Tik Tok video] in there. Why?

Leena responds, “The fact that it's like kids our age are making pretty much unrestricted content. And then the TikTok algorithm caters to what you like. So like you get to see pretty funny stuff. So it's like pretty funny stuff it's sort of like Twitter, but like, put into video form so that's really funny. Or Reddit put into video form.”

The researcher went on to ask, “Would you say the TikTok videos that you created [as a part of the multimodal composition] were within that genre?”
Leena replies, “Well, yeah. Well maybe. Well ours were just for a project so they weren’t like, funny, but the fact that we used TikTok was pretty fun.

What Leena asserts here is that they are using TikTok because it is fun, but “it isn't as funny because it's for school.” What appeared to elicit humor from students and their peers is the choice to incorporate a non-academically centered genre into an academic project, for the purpose of entertaining their peers with the medium. The integration of TikTok within their project illustrated to their peers implicit insider humor since TikTok is not a typical platform for classroom assignments. Rather, using it was a message precisely because TikTok was being used in school, for a school project. This choice illustrated that students are both consciously interpreting their choice of media, which reflects their social media awareness, and consciously including remixed social media within a school project to provoke humor.

This conscious selection of media to connect with peers extended beyond TikTok into other forms of popular media. In Project 2, for instance, students selected Pixton, a comic creation platform, to emulate popular graphic novels. In Project 1, several students adopted popular meme templates intentionally, as a way to “bring humor to the character in a more modern way” (Ailsa reflection). Indeed, the reaction that the use of memes elicited was immediate; the content of the projects was secondary to the form it took, which triggered immediate laughter when showcased in front of the class (fieldnotes).

Most teachers and researchers may not understand what is being conveyed through the choice of these genres. This extended interaction goes on to explain the genre of TikTok:

Leena suggests, “It's just like, TikTok is like unrestricted creativity from our peers (researcher emphasis). So like we get to see cause like we laugh at our peers, obviously, so we get to see even more of that, but unrestricted and put into like a more video form so it's easier to understand and it's more accessible.”

Leena represents how her choice of media, like TikTok, may serve as an inside joke with peers, making their ideas more interesting, entertaining, and relatable to adolescent insider culture, while clearly showing that the teachers and researchers are part of an outsider audience.
Re-positioning the medium as the message, then, dovetailed directly with an additional identified tension, re-interpreting the primary audience as their peers.

*Re-investigating Students’ Expectations of Learning in School*

Central to the teacher and researchers’ use of multimodal composing in the classroom was the perceived opportunity for learning: multimodal composing projects offered the chance to apply and extend learning, allowing students to use the French language and content they had learned toward authentic communicative goals.

This approach contrasted significantly with student perspectives on the learning accomplished during the multimodal composing projects. Project 2 was particularly controversial, as illustrated by these quotes from students:

*This isn’t English class,”* (student comment, Mr. M interview/fieldnotes)

“*[Project 2] was a hindrance to my learning because it created more stress and it really did not help me learn any French. I think I lost my French ability by doing this project.”* (Kenya, reflection)

“I don’t feel that the many forms of tech we used helped me learn French any better. It was cool to use new modes of communication and it did help make our presentation more creative but more so in terms of the plot than the actual language skills.” (Alex, reflection, Project 2)

The first quote, a refrain that we heard throughout Project 2, suggests that students did not see the L2 classroom as a place where projects centered on meaning-making should take place. Students’ perspectives suggested that the act of communicating itself, whether in one mode or multiple, was the prerogative of English language arts classes, not L2 classes.

The second and third quotes, also representative of student reactions, indicate that students saw the second multimodal project as stressful and detrimental to their French language learning. This reaction hinged on students’ understanding of learning as the accumulation of novel concepts and rules. Mr. M pointed out that, “[these students] are not used to, in the World Language class, having subjects to talk about. Like, to them, it’s just about memorizing grammar or vocabulary lists. Fill in the blanks.” This view of learning was in juxtaposition to the approach
that guided the design and implementation of the multimodal projects, namely the application of previously-learned content in collaborative, creative, socially-rich environments and interactions. Although we presented this approach to students before beginning the project, students did not accept the extension and transmediation of already-learned concepts into collaborative and creative multimodal composing projects as legitimate learning or assessment.

These perspectives appeared to hold true despite multiple examples in which students not only acquired new concepts but applied past learning to novel contexts. For instance, in imagining the future of work, students extended the prefix “télé,” from the unit’s vocab word “télétravail” (virtual work), to “téléporter” and “téléporteur” to describe future commuting options (see Figure 3).

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

Figure 3. Screenshot from student project on the future of work. This frame was accompanied by the text “She uses her strength to teleport to work [Elle utilise ses forces pour se téléporter au travail.]”

Mr. M saw this innovation and extension—his “making a new word” from what they had already learned—as part and parcel of his learning objectives. Moreover, learning a new constellation of words in this way would also fit into students’ understandings of learning, despite the fact that students did not realize or acknowledge this learning.

Re-imagining Student Identity: Role of Showcase or Public Viewing

The showcase or public showing of projects is a standard component of multimodal composing in academic settings. As a culmination, students present their work for appreciation and discuss it within the classroom. The work may also be displayed and shared with a larger school-wide or community-based audience (Hafner, 2014; Jewitt, 2008). Showcasing work is understood as a way to celebrate hard work done by students and to expand the audience beyond the teacher.

The high school students we worked with, however, struggled to see the merits of publicly showing their work. Students’ reactions to showcases also shifted across the multiple projects. While initially hesitant, the students appeared to come around to the idea of sharing their compositions in Project 1, as illustrated by the following excerpt from researcher fieldnotes:
When we [researchers] arrived for the first showcase [Project 1], only about half of the students had posted their projects to the slideshow. For the first presentation, the classroom stayed quiet, and as the facilitator, I did a lot of prompting: whose post is this, tell me about how you designed it. Students’ answers were complete, but they didn’t elaborate.

For the third presentation, I asked how the student came up with the hashtags. Her response, “Oh I just thought it was something a mom would say. #Imblessed. #Ilovemysons,” got big laughs that rippled across the classroom.

The student presentations that followed required less prompting, and the laughter continued. Students continued to work as they listened to the discussions. By the end of the showcase, almost all of the projects had been posted to the slideshow. Students were raising their hands to present (fieldnotes, video recordings).

However, we discovered that students had not been fully won over as to the merits of public sharing: students’ reactions to Project 1, a short-term project, did not hold true for the more-involved Project 2. Rather, students were acutely concerned about their classmates’ reactions to their digital stories on the future of work. They found the showcase component to be distracting, in that “I was not working on my French learning at all during the project as my worry was focused on how good the presentation would look” (April, reflection). A component of this distraction was the self-consciousness that it appeared to raise among the students. For some students, the entire showcase was problematic: “I also didn’t like how we had to watch them in front of the class because it was embarrassing” (reflection). For others, the concept of recording their voices was particularly troublesome. One student, exasperated when the voice recording component of Project 2 was confirmed, lamented “That [voice recording] is so much worse. I’d rather just get up in front of the class” (observation). Self-consciousness and self-critique was explained by one student: “I just don’t like the sound of my voice being recorded.” For students, then, the showcase became less about a celebration of work and more a trigger for feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, and stress across projects.

Discussion

In this article, we critically examined students’ perspectives on multimodal composing for academic purposes in L2 settings and drew out the tensions they experienced in completing
multimodal projects within their French class. Our DBIR-inspired implementation of multimodal projects within an L2 context situated learning as a social process in which social interaction played an important role (Vygotsky, 1962). The tensions identified in the previous sections were likewise socially-derived and surfaced new tensions about the assumptions and benefits of multimodal composing. Our analysis of students’ perspectives and critical incidents led to new questions.

Re-Assessing Assumptions

A prevailing assumption in the theorization and practice of multimodal composition is its flexible fit with different content, easily integrated into all learning contexts, with all types of learners, with minor modifications needed for implementation (however, c.f. Mills, 2007). In the current research, student perspectives on the merits of multimodal composing shifted across the types of projects they completed. While their affect started out strong in Project 1, they became increasingly disenchanted in Project 2. Moreover, the execution of multimodal composing projects appeared to be fundamentally misaligned with the students’ expectations and literacy experiences.

Students in this research explicitly and implicitly voiced the weight of what completing a multimodal composition project demanded of them. Project 2 specifically required them to move dramatically beyond the usual activities of their L2 classroom, simultaneously engaging in deep creative thinking, transmediating complex concepts into new forms, and expressing themselves in a second or third language. All the while, students were asked to work collaboratively while managing their peers’ impressions of them, a tall order given the centrality of peer relationships and social acceptance in the lives of adolescents (Brown and Larson, 2009; Schall et al., 2016). They were also asked to juggle the daily yet significant academic stress of excelling in a high-achieving school. For these students, there was nothing about completing these multimodal composing projects that was easy, straightforward, or predictable. These findings call into question whether multimodal composing is a good fit for all learners, in all contexts, across all types of assignments.

Re-Thinking Benefits

The tensions drawn out in this study also call into question some assumptions about the benefits of multimodal composing. An obvious contradiction found in the data centers on the overwhelmingly positive accounting of student experiences with multimodal composing (see
Smith et al., 2020 for a review). In contrast, students in this study were not always excited to be working with different technological tools to complete multimodal projects. Moreover, students did not appear to enjoy showcasing their work, a facet that has often been touted as an important part of multimodal composing projects (Hafner, 2014; Jewitt, 2008). The opportunity to compose for an expanded audience and the recognition provided by the showcase were sources of stress for students in the project, rather than a motivation (Castañeda, 2013; Harman and Shin, 2018; Jiang and Luk, 2016). Indeed, re-interpreting their peers as the primary audience seemed to create additional angst for students in this project, highlighting the complex yet central role peers can play for youth in multimodal composing contexts (Brown and Larson, 2009; Pandya and Low, 2020).

Another documented benefit of multimodal composing that was contradicted by students’ perspectives was increased motivation to expressively create, with few restrictions (Castañeda, 2013; Jiang and Luk, 2016). Students were offered the chance to expand their literacy practices through artistic meaning-making using multiple modes (Shin, 2018; Shin et al., 2020). However, they did not always find value in creative meaning-making, or feel it was beneficial in their L2 learning classroom. Students’ engrained expectations as to what meaning-making entailed and where it could happen, cultivated by how L2 learning had been framed and conducted previously, did not line up with this new, multimodal approach. In short, their conceptions of what learning is, and how it is supposed to occur, were directly challenged.

New Tensions

The tensions drawn out in the previous sections have led us to new understandings but also have brought into focus additional tensions and questions. For example, an important consideration stemming from these findings lies in the need to re-center the theorization and practice of multimodality in light of students’ experiences and perspectives, particularly in academic settings. A central tension brought forth by the data requires us to balance respect for student voices and perspectives, especially when their experiences with multimodal composing are less than positive, and designing ways to learn and grow without abandoning multimodal composition altogether. When taken together, an important question becomes: how can we reconsider the themes identified here—peers as the primary audience, the media is the message, expectations of learning in school, and the role of the showcase or public viewing—to reimagine multimodal composition and its implementation?
It would be antithetical to the goals of this research project, and to larger efforts to re-center the theorization and practice of multimodal composing, to explain away students’ legitimate critique of their experiences with multimodal composing as invalid or incorrect. Rather, it is our obligation to respect students’ experiences and offer them new ways of engaging in social interaction as they take part in discussion, collaboration, and composing projects.

As educators, our charge becomes to reconceptualize implementation of the multimodal composing process—e.g., audience, media, school-based learning, showcases—in ways that expand learning experiences and honor students’ preferences and developmental stages. We must recognize that composing multimodally is cognitively- and socially-complex and requires the scaffolding and support of a knowledgeable instructor. It is up to us as responsive, patient educators to become more creative in our interpretations of multimodal composing and flexible in our thinking about implementation. Listening closely and acting on students’ suggestions is paramount to creating positive learning experiences.

**Implications**

The discussion surfaced tensions that suggest the need for the field to examine student perspectives and reconceptualize the thinking, planning, and theorizing that needs to happen in order to make multimodal composing suitable for different contexts and assignments. Particularly salient is the observation that not all students are ready to engage in expanded meaning-making practices in all contexts. This realization points to the need for more support, beginning in the early grades (Mantei and Kervin, 2016).

Central to the pedagogical implications of this work is the need to rethink the role of scaffolding the processes and purpose of multimodal composing projects in academic settings (Jocius, 2020). As evidenced in this project, students do not always understand the overarching rationale for engaging in multimodal composing in school—what they might be learning, why engaging in expanded understandings of meaning-making might be important, and how they can infuse their creativity in school-based assignments. Making the rationale and process behind multimodality and multimodal composing explicit to students throughout a project may create a more carefully constructed set of expectations for communicating effectively using different modes (Callow, 2006). A recalibrated approach to scaffolding multimodal composing projects based on the findings of this study would also include discussion of audience: engaging students in thinking about who they are composing for (addressivity) and ways that creating compositions
affects their motivation to learn (affect) could further support their meaning-making. In doing so, the role of social relationships may be used to enhance the multimodal composing experience (Pandya and Low, 2020). Finally, modeling for students how an L2 can be learned through multimodal projects is equally important.

Research implications of this study include the need to continue to research the ways in which peer-relationships influence student experiences of multimodal composing and additional ways to encourage students to interpret their peers’ applied use of a target language. Such research might tease out the relationship between the ways students read and interpret multimodal texts and the choices they make in their own multimodal composition efforts. For example, research could examine ways students use a combination of modes across their choice of sign systems to create connections between different cultures and media. Additional studies that address the relationship between application contexts, instructional efforts, peer influences, and outcomes may open new doors to better understanding students’ perspectives. Finally, research that prioritizes a longitudinal approach might also benefit the field, teasing out the factors that contribute to changes in student perceptions of multimodal composing over time.

Conclusion

In the opening vignette, Josie and Jason demonstrated their visionary qualities, showing us what the future of work could be like. Given the ways that technology, and the opportunities for multimodal expression, have expanded, our classroom practices must also adjust and adapt. The future possibilities are endless if we remain responsive to the rapidly-changing landscape of learning in the 21st century. As educators, we need to adapt to continual changes, respect students’ voices, and respond to students’ perspectives. In turn, we need to provide responsive options for students to grow in their self-expression of ideas and meaning-making.

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References


Nom de la personne

Image

76 likes
Un petit message ou une légende ici. Incluez les hashtags.
Multiple Data Sources & Data Triangulation

- Video Recordings
  - Instructional Flow and Implementation
  - Student Processes/Work Time
  - Students’ Reactions & Perspectives
  - Showcase of Student Work

- Student-Produced Work

- Interviews
  - Teacher Interviews
  - Student Interviews (while working)

- Students’ Written Reflections
- Researchers Field Notes
- Students’ Multimodal Compositions