MULTIMODAL DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN L2 TEACHING/LEARNING CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The unparalleled experience of teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic has generated far-reaching effects on the way in which conventional educational practices were conceived, forcing both teachers and students to adapt to the changed situation. When shifting from off-line to online, many changes occurred and affected not only the teaching and learning activities, but also other components of the educational system, like the assessment methods, curriculum and syllabus. Nowadays, once the pandemic passed, we cannot go back to the way things were before, but we have to strive to improve and re-adapt, by acknowledging the important role that new technologies and methods brought along by digitalisation play in L2 settings (i.e. English as a Foreign Language and English for Specific Purposes). Thus, we discuss aspects related to multimodality and to how the introduction of digital technologies fostered the use of various modes at once to create meaning. We pay particular attention to elements that are linked to multimodality and that could enhance the quality of teaching/learning in L2 contexts: the extensive use of technologies, the transfer of specialised content during multimodal teacher-student interaction and the stringent need to develop 21st century skills in EFL students at tertiary level (multimodality at the interface of disciplines). These elements are the results of a qualitative analysis of students' formal feedback provided anonymously at the end of the semester. The aim is to account for the need of innovative pedagogical approaches of multimodal communication, which utilize diverse media to represent visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and tactile dimensions of communication in addition to traditional written and oral forms (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) and to analyse the implication for EFL teaching/learning practice.*

Keywords: *multimodality, digital communication, teaching/learning, L2 setting, English as a foreign language, English-medium instruction*

Introduction

The first decades of the 21st century have witnessed an unparalleled proliferation of interconnected social, economic, cultural, and technological changes that have already begun to transform the nature of human communication in discernible ways. Many of these developments are closely linked to the joint processes of globalisation and technological innovation.

"Globalization and digitization have reshaped the communication landscape, affecting how and with whom we communicate, and deeply altering the terrain of language and literacy education."

(Lotherington&Jenson, 2011)

In addition, the ubiquity of the internet, and the rapid thrive of social media, mobile phones, and other digital technologies have engendered a cultural moment in which texts, images, and sounds regularly combine to convey complex messages. In their different ways, emojis, internet memes, the automatic captioning of live-streamed online shows and e-literature are all illustrative examples.

In this context of profound changes generated by the Covid-19 pandemic that profoundly affected every aspect of our lives, the way we interact, relate and communicate with one another is brought to the fore. We all woke up one day and had to let technology rule our lives. Globality has never felt more present in all the aspects of life, having both positive and negative consequences

1. Multimodality

Nowadays, communication frequently involves more than one mode (Bezemer & Mavers, 2011), since it incorporates words, images, movement, gesture, posture, gaze, music, 3D objects, and so on (i.e., Internet memes combine writing and images, vlog posts frequently involve speech, text, moving images and music). This multiplicity of modes has the potential to equally contribute to the meaning being expressed (Jewitt 2009a: 14; Jewitt et al., 2016: 2), since each mode is partial, and to communicate effectively one needs to apply several modes at the same time (Jewitt, 2009: 254). Moreover, a mode consists of elements and norms which express "well-acknowledged regularities" in a certain community (Jewitt, 2009: 254).

Even though not all theories or theorists share the same understanding of meaning, one thing is common: now, communication, in all its forms, involves more than merely language.[1]As a result, multimodality occurs with ever greater frequency and multimodal contexts are becoming omnipresent, especially in communication, mainly because of globalization, the rise of digital media and technological innovation. In fact, digital technology enables people to combine means of making meaning that were impossible before.

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[1] Multimodal Communication was established in 2011, but its roots could be identified when Halliday discussed about multimodality in communication: if more than one mode is being used simultaneously, then the interaction is, by definition, multimodal (cf. Halliday 1978, 1985).

Being widely used now in the academic world, the term *multimodality* emerged from "a cluster of interrelated interdisciplinary research domains which recognised that representation and communication involve far more than merely linguistic exchanges" (Boria et al. 2020). It has been used to cover a wide range of approaches associated with arts, humanities, social sciences, as well as engineering and artificial intelligence. At first, the attention of the research community was drawn to different modes other than language (Hodge and Kress, 1998; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), thus preparing the grounds for multimodality. For instance, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) studied visual texts to reveal semantic resources, meaning potentials and their organization to visually convey discourses and ideologies.

Starting from the assumption that meaning making is always multimodal, Jewitt et al. (2016) recently identified three core premises that characterise multimodal research in general:

1. Meaning is made with different semiotic resources, each offering distinct potentialities and limitations.

2. Meaning making involves the production of multimodal wholes.

3. If we want to study meaning, we need to attend to all semiotic resources being used to make a complete whole. (Jewitt et al. 2016, 3)

According to Bezemer and Mavers (2011), multimodality relies on three main theoretical assumptions: a). communication and representation are realized through combinations of various modes (gestures, language, space, voice, etc.), which are all meaning-making resources that contribute to better communication; b). meaning-making resources are socially shaped, in the sense that they should be used in a particular society to express a certain meaning (i.e. the selection of modes is of vital importance to communication and creation of meaning); and c). people express meaning through mode selection and configuration. Therefore, it should be highlighted that there is an interplay between the modes, each mode adding something special to the meaning and its perception, which others cannot.

2. New context(s) of teaching and learning in a digital multimodal landscape

The 21st century has brought along an intense feeling of globality and a convergence culture in which the individual has become simultaneous creator and consumer of mediated communication. Corroborated with unprecedented advances in technology, this new context of communication engages people in exchanges of texts and discourses that go beyond space and time, using screens, which help access and mix resources instantaneously, and new media, which is in constant evolution.

This new context is dominated by modern technology, which also influences multimodality, offering various means and newly emerging modes of meaning-making and new ways of expressing the same thing.

The impact of all these factors on teaching and learning is straightforward. If, traditionally, language (both verbal and non-verbal) was considered the most important and powerful means of meaning-making and the one which can serve various communicative functions, nowadays the various modes encode knowledge very differently. In other words, what is produced and how one knows and comes to know are different from traditional means and resources.

The use of several modes at once, mediated by technology, makes it easier for the audience to understand the message. According to Jewitt (2013: 13), technology shapes what knowledge can be represented – and how it is represented. That is, it changes both what it is that we see, how we see it, and what we can do with it. In her study from 2008, Jewitt explored the basic connections between a variety of modal resources and showed how digital technologies have changed the ways in which students and teachers interact and exchange information. Her study has also revealed that new technology reshaped the variety of modes, semiotic resources, materiality and modal affordance.

The incorporation of mobile devices and digital resources (digital tools, educational platforms, applications, etc.) into the classroom changed the way in which teachers and students approach learning. The fact that information is incorporated in a multitude of modes determines the entire instructional activity, regardless of subject, to be in constant need of adaptation and change. In Kress' opinion, "assumptions about learners, language form and format, text types, and social discourses must all be reexamined, because we have moved from telling the world to showing the world" (Kress, 2003:140).

On the other hand, information contained in digital resources is layered via hyperlinks, and digital texts include structured pathways, which visually models the need "to move between studying and connecting across different kinds of information or experience" (Jewitt, 2013: 19). According to Jewitt, these differently configured modal resources and this multimodal organization indicates that two different kinds of engagement are required of the students: at the level of display, it demands students' imaginative engagement – hypothesizing and planning – while, at the level of language, it demands engagement with the factual information or outcomes (Jewitt, 2013: 20).

Even traditional textbooks have undergone significant changes in both appearance and content. With simplified text, textbooks have become increasingly image-centred, moving away from the linear toward a more modular design framework (Kress, 2010). Cope and Kalantzis (2009)

described changes in reading from page to screen and noted that websites are read more like images than linear text.

Furthermore, Lotherington (2010) proposed the idea of two-dimensional (2D) literacies to metaphorically capture the static, linear, paper-based reading and writing agendas of school language curricula and assessment. Digitally mediated, multimodal communication is dynamic, adding a third dimension of space, in that the reader can enter the text in new and exciting ways (e.g., as co-writer in collaborative texts, actor in augmented reality contexts, or avatar in virtual games); and it is interactive, adding the fourth dimension of time. In this metaphorical view, classroom activities are transformed by engaging the participant in dynamic, multidimensional communication, involving social interaction, haptic activation, physical coordination, visual design, modal complexity (e.g., multiple language engagement, musical accompaniment and animation), dynamic and collaborative text construction (Lotherington, 2010). Students are seen as partners (Healey et al. 2016), as knowledge creators.

Against this background, the 3 Rs of modern education (reading, writing, arithmetic) have become the 4 Rs in the digital era: reuse (backup), revise (adapt), remix (combine), and redistribute (share) (Sinclair, 2010, cf. Lotherington&Jenson 2011), which are fundamentally ludic and collaborative, and which are meant to help the educators adapt their methods to suit a generation of digital natives whose expectations about education are different from what their teachers had prepared for. It is a generation for which technology is neither a means, nor a tool, but part of their lives. They have a special relationship with technology and they integrate it in every aspect of their everyday lives. They think the same about games, which create a virtual world of collaborative interaction in problem-solving situations and facilitate connection, interaction and learning.

These new possibilities ought to reshape how knowledge is understood, taught and tested in the classroom, since knowledge is different (Bates, 2019), especially now in the digital era. The development of digital technologies has actually "changed the nature of knowledge" (Bates, 2019: 66), and one way knowledge is certainly changing is in the way it is represented. This will influence strongly what needs to be taught, as well as how it will be taught. That is why pedagogies should be rethought, curricula, redesigned, and content, adjusted to the changed realities. When the pandemic broke out, the educational system went through a radical paradigm shift, moving its activity from on-site to online, or from *bricks to clicks* (Adams et al. 2021), which made online learning not an alternative option—to traditional learning— but the only option for all actors involved in the process. This paradigm shift is characterised by trends which would prove both indispensable and challenging in the transition to the online teaching/learning. Some of these

trends, which have been the most impactful on our activity, will be detailed in the next section.

3. Implications of digital multimodal teaching/learning in L2 context

Starting from the consideration that most of our communication process relies on non-verbal means (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010) and that images, videos, the tone and pitch of voice and gestures could improve the perception of a particular message, we highlight the importance of multimodality in teaching in L2 contexts, especially in the fully digitalised environment generated by the pandemic. Not only did digitalisation enable the configuration of new modes, but it also mediated students' participation and meaning making by directly inserting them into a digitally mediated multimodal classroom. The screen, which was the main instrument in this mediation, created multiple possibilities, and reshaped and remade the traditional page. It also reshaped the work of the teacher[2] and of the student.

On a general level, in L2 settings, the (virtual) classrooms became digitally mediated interactional spaces, focused on more informal learning and aimed at answering to students' needs and facilitating the transfer of authentic, relevant content. In the case of this study, the implications analysed are based on the opinions extracted from the students' feedback forms collected at the end of the semester for the activities carried out during courses of EFL and ESP.

3.1 Extensive use of technologies and digital resources

The first challenge for both teachers and students was the unprecedented use of technologies, from mere communication and interaction, to teaching, learning and testing specialised knowledge.

There is no denying that teaching and learning during the online period made technology indispensable. Shortly after the initial shock caused by the pandemic, we, the teachers, together with members of administrative and technical bodies in our educational institutions, were faced with the challenge to transfer all the teaching activity to the online environment. However, the biggest challenge was to teach the digital native students, as we are digital migrant teachers, who, in just a few weeks, had to get acquainted with digital resources and platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meets and Microsoft Teams, of which, in most cases, we had not even been aware before this crisis. In an attempt to speed up the adjustment process, the national responsible body proposed guidelines regarding safety measures and organisational procedures,

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[2] The contemporary teacher should be permanently involved in the pedagogic design of digital multimodal texts (Jewitt et al., 2009).

but no practical support or training to teachers and students on the technical tools that could be used[3].

Despite the slow start and the initial difficulties (i.e. lack of technical means and instruments—many of our students did not have laptops or digital tablets to work on or enough of such devices to be shared with the other members of the family—, lack of Internet connection or poor connection—especially in remote, rural areas—, lack of training or the difficulty to foster interaction), both teachers and students tried to overcome the inherent problems and adapted surprisingly well to these new tools. Soon, all started to appreciate the concrete advantages they brought.

Now, when face-to-face activity has been resumed, we should continue to rely on the multitude of technological tools and computer-based activities in order to facilitate learning. Many of the tools[4] we used during the online activity, like Kahoot, E-portfolios with Microsoft OneNote[5], have proven useful in both teaching and learning. In their feedback forms, students admitted that they became familiar and confident with these tools, and even suggested to continue to use them as support platforms, especially for the practical language courses.

The extensive use of technologies has mainly influenced three important components of the teaching/learning activity. On the one hand, it has implications on the transfer of specialised content, which will be discussed in more detail in the next sub-section. On the other hand, the way assignments and in-class language activities are to be handled is affected. For instance, our EFL students suggested that they should be allowed to turn in multimodal assignments, which is in line with the idea that there is one main

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[3] New guides of Romanian Ministry of Education: https://www.edu.ro/ghid-informativ-al-mec-în-contextul-covid-19

[4] Some useful tools for online teaching/learning that we used during the online activity, besides the institutionally recommended platforms Zoom and Google Classroom, are: Kahoot (www.kahoot.com) for creating online question-answer tests and multiple-choice quizzes; Flinga (www.flinga.fi), an app designed to facilitate the use of collaborative whiteboards for collaborative thinking, a great tool for questions, answers and comments ("Flinga platform combines different mobile devices to function as a tool for collaborative knowledge construction. Flinga allows students to participate either individually or simultaneously to conversations or questions asked by the teacher. With Flinga, it is possible to collect students' comments, questions and answers quickly and easily for all to see. The entire classroom can simultaneously participate in collaborative working in a new, easy and a fun way", cf. https://www.nordtouch.fi); and Mindmup (www.mindmup.com) or Miro (www.miro.com) for creative mindmaps and collaborative whiteboards, using images, sticky notes and drawing capabilities (we worked more with the Miro collaborative platform, especially for online meetings and brainstorming in our research activity).

[5] More information about OneNote and other online tools and training materials provided by Microsoft Education Portal are available at: https://learn.microsoft.com/ro-ro/training/educator-center/.

mode in all texts and writing genres, which is language, but that this mode should be looked at from the social functional perspective as a system of possible choices and meaning potentials (Halliday, 1978; apud. Jewitt, 2009). Last, but not least, it has influenced evaluation and testing, by ruling out the traditional pen-and-paper testing, which still framed many educational systems before the pandemic, and replacing it with E-portfolios, online group projects, short quizzes throughout the semester (aimed at checking the understanding of course content and documenting learning progress), online final exams (testing mainly teachers' creativity in drawing up questions that would prevent copy-pasting answers from the Internet or course handouts).

In this context, writing as a practice has also been significantly transformed by digital technologies[6]. According to Jewit:

> This goes beyond the immediate impact of word-processing features on writing (e.g. spell check, editing, and formatting tools) to the visual and dynamic character of writing in digital environments. The new configurations of image and writing on screens and the changing relationships between speech and writing are also transformed.
>
> (Jewit 2013: 20)

Despite our limited practical experience in such matters, the very positive feedback we got from our students highlights the need to continue to use multimodality in both class work and homework. Students' enthusiasm when presenting their collaborative assignments to their peers in Power Point format (with texts annotated visually and links that connected to webpages, with videos, audio clips and photos to illustrate the topic discussed) prove that they involve more actively and responsibly in doing their assignments, especially when their work is appreciated and has an impact on their colleagues.

To encourage them more and to further develop their active participation, we replaced group work with breakout rooms during online teaching, which gave students the possibility to interact with their peers during seminars, to be more involved in teamwork, and to collaborate more effectively in order to do the assignments.

However, there are several drawbacks about the extensive use of technology. One is the difficulty to concentrate, since students often get lost in trying to follow and understand the content. The other is the lack of human interaction, since it has become more obvious than ever that computers

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[6] On how technology influences the development of writing skills and on the correlation between theory (what EFL teachers should do) and practice (what they actually do) in teaching writing skills to young learners, see Resceanu&Tilea (2019). Moreover, on how to develop critical thinking skills at EFL students, see Reșceanu (2017).

cannot possibly replace the human interaction, which plays a key role in mediating understanding.

3.2 Transfer of specialised content

Currently, the main focus of educational institutions at all levels is no longer to provide information (which is already available), but to present concepts, to develop practices that help students understand and interact with new information, to help them retain and apply new knowledge in a creative way. We must have the courage to update our educational curricula, removing certain technical information that is difficult to learn and easy to forget, focusing, as mentioned above, on fundamental concepts.

Bates (2019) claims that:

> 'Stuff' or content does matter but knowing (a) how to acquire content and (b) what to do with content we have acquired, is even more important. Thus, it is not sufficient just to teach academic content (applied or not). It is equally important also to enable students to develop the ability to know how to find, analyse, organise and apply information/content within their professional and personal activities, to take responsibility for their own learning, and to be flexible and adaptable in developing new knowledge and skills. All this is needed because of the explosion in the quantity of knowledge in any professional field that makes it impossible to memorise or even be aware of all the developments that are happening in the field, and the need to keep up to date within the field after graduating.
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> (Bates, 2019: 70)

Our students have more access now, openly and freely, to academic content, which is just a click away, so what they actually need from their teachers and institutions is support with their learning, rather than delivery of content. Methods such as scaffolding should be used in order to enable students to understand the information to which they already have access and to use it in the development of new ideas. This puts a greater focus on teaching skills and less on subject expertise.

Technology also plays an important part in content delivery. A course starting with an image or a video, containing flexible, adjusted content, hyperlinks or attractive layout provoke interest. Students admitted that multimodal course handouts are more appealing and persuasive. They mainly appreciated when the lecture was interrupted by a video illustrating the topic under discussion and wrote in their feedback forms that such videos contribute to the better comprehension of course content.

Suggestions were also made on how to structure specialised information, which should be gradually introduced, bundled up into chunks, related to other chunks, so as to create some sort of modularization of knowledge that could be transferred across a range of media formats, including mobile phones.

3.3 Development of 21st century skills

Another implication of incorporating technology in L2 setting is linked to the development of 21st century skills. Reddy et al. (2020) stated that all learners need a wide range of abilities, competencies and skills to cope with technological era, since, with the outbreak of the pandemic, the educational system has shifted from bricks to click classrooms.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in traditional classroom settings used to deliver their content in lecture format. This method is not participatory and could hardly ensure active participation, negotiation and critical thinking. The students listened to the teachers' lectures and made notes as a means of learning.

This created a huge gap during the online activity, because students were not only compelled to get acquainted with all the technical benefits brought along by technology-mediated teaching and learning, but they also had to prove to be skilled critical thinkers, good communicators, flexible team companions, able to deal with stressful situations in order to cope with radical changes (Meirbekov et al., 2022).

All the above-mentioned skills are even more critical in L2 teaching and learning context, especially in FL teacher training (Tilea et al. 2017, Reșceanu&Tilea, 2019, Tilea et al. 2021). The extended classroom borders created online communicative possibilities, making the classroom a global learning environment. Moreover, for our students, who study more than one foreign language, the virtual space allows them to be in direct contact with their peers all over the world (especially in games)[7], making them citizens of a globalised world in dire need of 21st century skills[8].

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[7] Another interesting and useful resource that helps "empower classrooms to understand and act collaboratively on the world's greatest challenges" is TakingITGlobal for Educators (TIGed). It is one of the world's leading networks of young people learning about, engaging with and working towards tackling global challenges. The aim of this network is to create more friendly learning spaces and prepare students for the world by using technology in order to engage them as learners and leaders in three key areas: global citizenship, environmental stewardship and student voice. Additionally, it supports educators to utilize technology to create "transformative learning experiences for their students, who become actively engaged and connected in shaping a more inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable world" (https://www.tigweb.org/tiged/).

[8] The Future of Jobs report maps "the jobs and skills of the future, tracking the pace of change. It aims to shed light on the pandemic-related disruptions in 2020, contextualized

Conclusions

Based on our direct experience in teaching L2 related content and in using L2 as a medium of instruction (in our case, English), as well as on the semestral feedback provided by the students, the following conclusions can be drawn:

● Multimodal interaction and digital communication are dominant means of knowledge transfer in post-modern world, and dominate almost every aspect of our lives, especially since multimodality has always been the "normal state of human communication" (Kress, 2010: 1).

● Teaching, planning, evaluating, carrying out online class activities is challenging, but it can be made more effective by engaging students in multimodal classes, where their active participation is stimulated and encouraged.

● Now that the pandemic is over, the use of technology (i.e. computer applications, online resources, interactive whiteboards, physical digital technologies, mobile technologies, etc.) should not be optional anymore. The pandemic has proven the indispensable presence of technology in teaching/learning activity so we cannot simply go back to the 'no technology' type of courses. It is true, though, that for an effective inclusion of technology in L2 setting and in teacher training programmes, there is the need for further professional training and up-to-date infrastructure and logistics. There are still many inadequate spaces for the implementation desired and many budget limitations as well.

● However, institutions and academic staff need a strong framework for assessing the value of different technologies, new or existing, and for deciding how or when these technologies make sense for them (and/or their students) to use. They also need to be provided with access to these resources and specialised training in order to include suitable digital technologies in their teaching, adequately linked to appropriate content, and skills within their area of study.

● Soft skills should be prioritised, especially critical thinking, and then curriculum can follow.

Overall, all these will have an impact on teaching/learning context, teacher education, assessment practices, learning context creating the conditions for successful multimodal learning in L2 contexts.

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within a longer history of economic cycles and the expected outlook for technology adoption, jobs and skills in the next five years"
(https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/).

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