

Exploring Student Experiences and Perceptions of Changing Semiotic Modes

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Abstract

This RILS project examines learner experiences and perceptions of changing semiotic modes. A traditional method of summarizing a textual piece of literature is to use the same semiotic mode of writing in text. Research shows that a change from one semiotic mode to another semiotic mode offers a deeper and richer learning experience for students. The term “Multiliteracies” is a term coined to describe the enormous shifts in the modes through which people make and participate in meanings. (New London Group, 1996) This presentation will show student perceptions of this process in an EFL context in a Japanese University. In this study, the presenter will first describe the task and the finished projects produced by the students followed by the results of the interviews where the students reflect on their experience.

Background

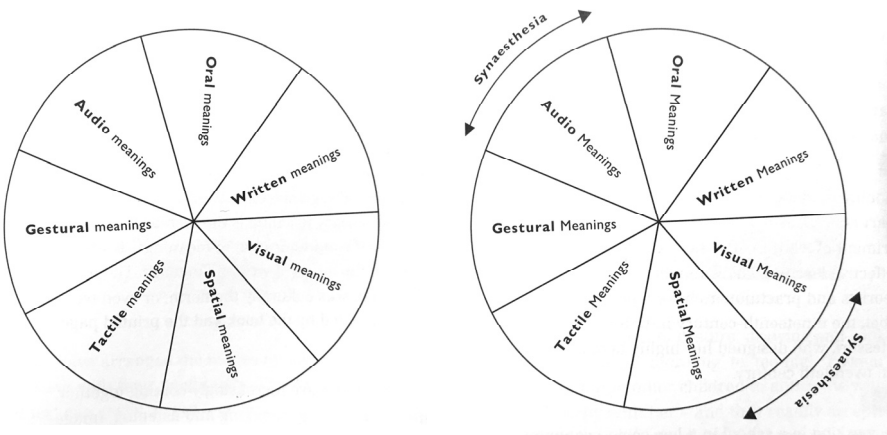
Bifurcation

In language courses, there is significant differentiation between skills acquisition and a content-centered and task-based classroom. “There exist fixed lines of demarcation between introductory and intermediate language courses and advanced literature and culture courses” (Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010) This can pose a problem where introductory and intermediate language courses offer little to no meaningful chance to participate in meaning making and redesign. Research indicates that a change from one semiotic mode to another semiotic mode offers a deeper and richer learning experience for students because “knowing how to represent and communicate things in multiple modes is a way to get a multifaceted and, in this sense, a

deeper understanding of these things.” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012)

Synaesthesia

In traditional psychology and neuroscience, the term “synaesthesia” is regarded as a “surreal blending of sensation, perception and emotion”. (Ramachandran, 2011) However, in regards to language pedagogy, “synaesthesia” is used in a broader sense as a “process of shifting backwards and forwards between different modes of meaning.” *It can be a very powerful way to support and deepen learning.* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012)



Enhanced Learner Identity

The act of meaning making also offers a student the chance to develop their L2 identities. Prior research shows that “if learners have a sense of ownership over meaning-making, they will have enhanced identities as learners and participate more actively in literacy practices.” (Norton, 2010)

Research Questions

The current study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Learners' process and experience a task of re-designing a written text into another mode.
2. What are Learners' perspectives of changing semiotic modes?

Research Design

Participants

The participants in this study were eight native speakers of Japanese at a private university in Japan. The study was conducted by soliciting volunteers who were paid for their time in participation with this study. The students were chosen based solely on willingness and availability according to the potential meeting times for the study. The study spanned seven 90 minute periods. Six of the participants were first year students at the university. Two of the students were third year students at the university. All of the students were English, International Communications, or International Business Communication majors.

The participants were given the choice of working individually or in pairs and they all decided to work in pairs, which made 4 groups. The participants chose their own partners for this project. They chose their partners based on familiarity, as many of them were from the same class in their respective concentrations.

Methodology

This study seeks to gather qualitative data from the eight participants through classroom observations of their re-design process and from subsequent interviews, where each participant was encouraged to share their thought processes and opinions freely as there was no correct or

incorrect way. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes to 40 minutes.

At the first meeting of the seven period span, the students were given a piece of written literature of meaningful ambiguity, Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art". The poem is a villanelle, a nineteen-line poem. Although ambiguous on the surface, the author's life was filled with tragedy from early childhood. She lost her father when she was eight months old. Her mother suffered a series of breakdowns until being permanently committed when Bishop was 5 years old. She was forced to move from her beloved Nova Scotia to Worcester, Massachusetts. She also suffered from poor health and abuse. (Pierpont, 2017)

"One Art" in light of the author's personal struggles in childhood and adulthood, would seem to be a sad and depressing image of the author herself, despite the ambiguity on the surface. The participants in this study had no prior knowledge of the author nor the poem. They had to interpret the meaning for themselves.

Results and Discussion

The four groups, which were comprised of two students each, created four unique redesigns of the poem, "One Art", into different semiotic modes. None of the groups worked in exactly the same mode as another. This was not instructed nor suggested. The students themselves made the decision to choose different modes from the other groups.

Group 1

The first group, comprised of 2 female freshman students, created a visual redesign using the medium of 4 A3 pieces of paper and color pencils. The color pencils belong of a student's younger brother. They are common among elementary school aged children in Japan.

The students struggled to label the medium of their redesign as it was not a traditional medium. In describing their redesign, one student said, “it’s kind of a poster . . . not poster . . . what’s this?” After some reflection, the students simply stated that they “wanted to make a story.”

For this group, one of the students had a noticeable talent for drawing, while the second student did not feel confident in her abilities to draw. Rather than suggesting or avoiding this semiotic mode, the second student felt comforted by the fact that her partner had more expertise. She felt she could rely on her partner.

The story they decided to tell starred a young boy as the protagonist. The students decided on a boy, despite the fact that they knew the author of the original poem was a woman, because “boys are easier to go on a journey.” It is possible they projected what may have been their own cultural expectations into their redesign.

Their redesign is meant to be viewed vertically. The four pieces of paper are meant to be viewed from top to bottom, with each piece of paper telling a different part of their narrative. Furthermore, they decided that each panel should symbolize a season. The first panel symbolizes spring.

“I thought it’s kind of similar to the people’s life. Life starts in the spring . . . I thought it’s kind of a metaphor of the life, the beginning. The winter is kind of a metaphor of death, or like sad, alone.”

In the first panel, the protagonist loses his mother and father, symbolized by tombstones reading “Mom” and “Dad” in the top right. It’s interesting to note that although the students explicitly

stated that the first panel was spring because life begins in the spring, they contrast this idea by showing death as symbolized by the tombstones. The protagonist waves goodbye, standing in the lower part of the panel, seemingly on top of a river. The students decided to draw a river throughout the first 3 panels, because “rivers are kind of things which influence someone”. In the second panel, the river motif comes into stronger play, as the river divides two different lands. On the right side of the panel, the trees and fields are a verdant green. On the left side of the panel, change is symbolized by yellowing fields and red and orange leaves. The protagonist is shown twice in this panel. He is shown standing on the bridge, looking down at the river where his hat and sword has fallen. He is also at the bottom near the bottom of the panel, walking towards what can presumably be the next phase of his journey in the third panel.

In the third panel, the change represented by the red and yellow leaves are taken even further. The trees are now bare and the fields are brown. Even the river changes from blue to brown as it goes from the top of the panel to the bottom. The boy is sitting near the center bottom of the panel. A red ribbon or banner provides a divide between the third and fourth panel. This ribbon acts as a narrative device to symbolize the end of the young boy’s journey. In the last panel, only the back of the boys’ head is shown as he looks back at his past. The boy’s skin and hair is colored, but everything else is in shades of black and white.

This group decided on to focus on a specific tercet of the original text.

“I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.”

The group felt drawn to this particular tercet because it seemed to be the most meaningful to them. The imagery of the “cities”, “rivers”, “continent”, and, in particular, “realms” inspired their imaginations.

“At first, I had an image ‘realm’ means like a kingdom, but in this story, we use it as a hometown.”



Group 2

The second group, comprised of two male junior students, created a redesign using original music combined with spoken word. Student 1 had no musical training whatsoever in his past, while Student 2 had extensive experience making music as a hobby. As with Group 1, the Student 1 of Group 2 felt comforted by his partners knowledge in the semiotic mode. The fact that he did not have any experience working in that semiotic mode did not discourage him from choosing it, despite the fact that they could have chosen many other possibilities.

Group 2 actually considered a lack of expertise in the semiotic mode as a benefit.

“If we both are really professional [in terms of music making], it’s going to be really....complex then....But I said opinion from nonprofessional side, so it should be more like that it doesn’t sound good to me means it doesn’t sound good to general people.”

“While he was composing music, I was always thinking the poem to create a new idea about the music. So that’s how I contributed.”

Along with the music, Student 1 with 6 volunteers gave a spoken word performance of the poem. The group solicited volunteers from friends and university staff who happened to be in the vicinity when they were working on the project. Each one of the volunteers each read a single tercet of the poem. Student 1 read the last quatrain.

The task of turning the text into an auditory medium, according to the students, forced them to think much more deeply about each word, because they had to consider what combination of sounds could convey their interpretation.

“The last line is really interesting because it may ‘though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster’...When you use ‘like’, you are hesitating to speak...you are not sure what you are going to say.”

They compared it to the traditional task of writing an essay to analyze a poem:

“I think if I write an essay, I will mention the history or background of the poet...and there is history and there is background at the time then...I will write about she is trying to get over something, something that happened to her...I wouldn’t notice the two ‘likes’ at the last line and I [wouldn’t] care about...‘joking voice’, ‘a gesture’”

Group 3

The third group, comprised of two female freshman students, composed music and choreographed a dance routine. Group 3 had a mixed combination of talents. Both of the students had dance experience, although in different styles of dance. Only one of the students had experience making music. This group approached the interpretation of the story into dance as the main task, so Student 1 simply made the music by herself without input from Student 2. In contrast to Group 2, where the audio was the centerpiece, this group viewed the music as a necessary prerequisite before the actual task of choreographing an interpretive dance.

In their redesign, Student 1 took the role of the author of the poem, while Student 2 took the role of the author’s personified heart. In their process, they focused on the emotion of the text rather than the individual words. A main theme was sadness and despair.



This group repeatedly stated the task as “difficult”:

“So difficult. It’s like an art. Art is different from some study so I used the part of my brain that I haven’t used in my life.”

“In class, the work is studying so, if I think about it, I can make something...But this is more deep. So I have to think more and more.”

Group 4

The fourth group, comprised of two female freshman students, approached the task differently from the other groups. They wanted to use an instrument they were familiar with—their iPad and the application iMovie. Upon reading the text, they felt inspiration to draw from their own personal lives. The two students in this group have attended the same junior high school, senior

high school, and now freshman university class together. With their long history as friends, they used milestone moments from their lives they connect to ideas from the original text. From the poem, the refrain, “The art of losing isn't hard to master”, drew their focus. The entirety of their redesign stemmed from the refrain.

The redesign consisted of a blend of personal videos and pictures along with other media culled from the internet. They set the video to a soundtrack of short clips of pop songs that were personally meaningful to them during their adolescence. Their videos and photos included scenes from high school graduation, beach trips, volleyball matches, Shibuya crossing, and autumn leaves. They wrote original texts over the montage:

“We always spend time”

“We always get and lost something”

“Losing isn’t negative thing because it’s proof that we are going forward”



“We collected irreplaceable moment from our friends”

As the audio for their redesign, this group used three 30 second clips of popular music. The songs were “See You Again” by Wiz Khalifa featuring Charlie Puth, “Kid In Love” by Shawn Mendes, and “Only One” by Kanye West.

Conclusion

The participants of this study produced rich redesigns of the original text. The task of changing semiotic modes requires creative output. Within the groups of participants, there were some who identified themselves as “not creative” or no having any particular drawing, dancing, or musical skills. Rather than be a barrier, the students actually viewed themselves as part of a team. Although they could not take the lead in drawing or music creation, they felt able to fulfill other areas of the redesign process.

Many of the participants described the task as “difficult”, particularly because there was “no answer”, meaning there was no definite way to accomplish the activity, as there would have been in a written grammar conjugation exercise. After some initial struggles, the groups gained momentum and confident in constructing their redesigns. Many of the participants stated the process as “fun” and “interesting” despite being “difficult”.

“I felt it’s really difficult because I’m not an artistic person...”

“[after finishing their redesign] it’s even better than we thought.”

“It was fun...but it was so difficult.”

“not academic”

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