Chapter 6

Strategies for Successful Multilingual Online Learning:
Multimodal Project Design, Peer Feedback, and Formative Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Principles of Rhetoric and Writing, a sophomore rhetoric course, is used to show how multimodal project design and formative learning and assessment strategies provided the much-needed motivation to make changes to the initial course design in order to ensure the inclusion of social justice education in an online course for Chinese native students. Multimodal projects encourage teachers to de-emphasize decontextualized standards and skills acquisition and support continuous revisions to an established curriculum and to established learning activities. In addition, formative assessment opportunities included in Principles of Rhetoric and Writing highlight the importance of incorporating text-based and multimodal composing to account for and include the national, social, cultural, racial, gendered, and educational backgrounds of students as well as the teacher.

INTRODUCTION: EXPERIENCES AND PEDAGOGIES

"You have too many layers in your sentences. You can do this in German or French, I am sure, but it is unacceptable in English. Keep them focused on subject, object, verb. It'll show more sentence control and won't tip everybody off that you are not a native speaker," said my U.S. cultural studies professor after reading my essay on Jean Francois Lyotard's 1984 *The Postmodern Condition* and his 1983 discussion of *The Differend*. I was a newly arrived international student from Austria and took a graduate course on postmodernism in the 1990s with her, and I had written a paper on Lyotard (1984) who wrote a beautifully complex sentence in *The Postmodern Condition,* with commas and semicolons guiding us through his thought process:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (p. 81)

My response to Lyotard's statement was simply that "Lyotard's discussion of the postmodern condition encourages us to rethink our reliance on meta-narratives, meta-narratives that serve to paint the past as a unified system with a future framed through a one-dimensional historical model without acknowledging the need for constant revisions to what we know and how we know it, and the need for rethinking knowledge itself." I had carefully crafted my complex sentence, and I was proud that I had enough control and understanding of English that I could create meaning without compromising my own thought processes. My professor's assessment was devastating. Red ink oozed from the pages, illuminating every grammatical and stylistic mistake I had committed in 20 pages of close textual analysis.

During those years, it wasn't only my written language that was considered faulty. My accent, like the accents of many of my international colleagues studying in the U.S., became a sticking point in my attempt to teach introductory English classes to native English speakers. PLATO, a "computer-based learning system" also called a "teaching machine" (PLATO) that was used by the university's language lab, became my partner in erasing as much of my accent as a machine could. Repeated recordings of my voice, and close comparison to a disembodied Standard English speaker, with instructions on where in your throat American sounds were formed, made it clear that none of the sounds I knew how to make were appropriate in a U.S. classroom. The ESL instructor encouraged additional phonetics exercises until only a hint of my Austrian-German accent was left, and he applauded my progress towards a standard English pronunciation that I learned to imitate but that was not my own. My writing and my speech reflected American language standards, and my linguistic assimilation was well on its way before I accepted that language was "a shaper of personal and cultural identity" (Dicker, 2003, p. 1).

In this article, I reflect on my own experiences as a second-language learner and translingual teacher to emphasize the importance of human-to-human dialogical interactions in an online environment in order to transcend preconceived notions of Lx student communication strategies as well as teacher strategies to assess acts of communication. I draw from my teaching experiences in a U.S. academic setting during COVID-19 where international undergraduate students found themselves unexpectedly in their home countries while taking a disciplinary writing-intensive online course at a U.S. institution. I use "Principles of Rhetoric and Writing," a sophomore rhetoric course, to show how multimodal design projects and formative learning and assessment strategies provided the much-needed motivation to make changes to the initial course design in order to ensure the inclusion of social justice education principles in an online course. Multimodal design projects, I show, allow us to de-emphasize decontextualized standards and skills acquisition and support continuous revisions to an established curriculum and to established learning activities. In addition, formative assessment opportunities in "Principles of Rhetoric and Writing" highlight the importance of incorporating text-based and multimodal composing to account for and include the national, social, cultural, racial, gendered, and educational backgrounds of students as well as the teacher.

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