EFL Learners' Perceptions and Attitudinal Fluctuations Toward Digital Multimodal Composition:
A Longitudinal Approach

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate multiple digital multimodal composition (DMC) tasks effect on EFL learners' attitudes toward DMC. The sample consisted of Arabic-speaking students (n = 40), enrolled in an English language program at a Saudi university. Data comprised multiple sources, including five online tasks, five questionnaires, reflections, and focus group discussions. The findings show that students maintained positive attitudes toward DMC, suggesting that such attitudes are not a consequence of the novelty effect, postulated in previous cross-sectional research. Furthermore, there is a significant attitudinal fluctuation observed in attitudes toward how DMC facilitates meaning communication. Meanwhile, major themes emerged that explain positive attitudes, including enjoyability, communication, motivation, Second language and writing development, and satisfaction. Conversely, the availability of nonlinguistic components might pose negative effects on learners. This paper sheds light on pedagogical implications and avenues for future research.

KEYWORDS

Digital Multimodal Writing, EFL Learner Attitude, L2 Writing, Multimodal Essay, Multimodality

INTRODUCTION

Newer forms of communication and knowledge representation have pervaded the digitally mediated twenty-first century, demanding broadened notions, reconceptualization, and reconsideration of what constitutes literacy. The epistemological and trending shift from literacy to multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996), which ensued from the prevalence of recent developments of communication technologies, has accentuated the need to subsume digital multiliteracies under educational practices, including second language (L2) education. Literature has suggested that multimodal literacy is of pertinence to multiliteracies, in which the former "refers to meaning-making that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to and producing and interacting with multimedia and

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digital texts" (Walsh, 2010, p. 213). Recently, there has been a surge of research interest in digital multimodal composition (DMC) in the realm of L2 education (Hafner, 2015), as a contributory practice not only conducive to promoting language learning but improving learners' multiliteracies due to being centered around various representational modes (Belcher, 2017). Such a burgeoning interest emanates from the need to view communication and meaning-making from the multimodality framework lenses (Kress, 2010) as well as the increasing use of meaning-making and text production technologies in L2 educational settings (Elola & Oskoz, 2017).

According to the New London Group (1996), the concept of *multimodal* is defined as "combining modes of meaning into a single composition" (p. 84). As a rhetorical and composition practice, DMC comprises multiple semiotic resources that integrate different modes (e.g., linguistic, visual, and audio). From an instructional strategy perspective, DMC is in harmony with *a pedagogy of multiliteracies* propounded by the New London Group (1996), entailing the term *design* that both refers to semiotic tools and the manner in which they can be employed (Tan & Matsuda, 2020). L2 writing research has therefore sanctioned DMC as an integral component of writing instruction, as it is crucial to expose L2 learners to the constituents of technology-based literacies, such as producing multimodal essays (Miller-Cochran, 2017).

In attempts to explore and elucidate the effect of DMC in L2 educational contexts, several studies have been conducted to discern the potential of DMC in L2 writing settings, including attitudinal-based studies. Investigating attitudes toward multimodal-based products is pivotal in order to understand their effects on L2 learners (Vandommele et al., 2017), and to scrutinize learners' willingness, feelings, and satisfaction concerning DMC processes and products. Nonetheless, most previous research was cross-sectional in scope, yielding findings that might have been impacted by the novelty effect— interesting because it is a new experience—instead of actual long-lasting perceptions. Therefore, the present study utilized a longitudinal approach to explore L2 learners' perceptions and attitudes toward successive DMC tasks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

A framework of pertinence to and which guides the present empirical study is the social semiotic theory of multimodality (Kress, 2010). It posits that language is not exclusively the primary resource through which communication can occur, as other available socially based semiotic resources can be tapped into for meaning-making. Miller (2013), accordingly, argued that complex resources for meaning representation are represented by multimodal composition (MMC). According to Smith (2017), "multimodal composition involves the fluid interweaving of visuals, sounds, movement, and text to create synergistic messages" (p. 259). Therefore, DMC tasks in this study are grounded on the multimodality-based perspective of intersemiotic complementarity that refers to producing meaningful MMC through the integration of a variety of semiotic resources that complement and relate to each other (Royce, 2002).

DMC and L2 Learning/Writing

Monomodal, text-only writing is still pervasive in EFL contexts (Lee et al., 2021). Writing instruction in such contexts, according to Manchón (2011), should be geared toward writing to learn L2 and learning to write in L2, and MMC has the potential to support these interwoven approaches (Belcher, 2017). The integrated linguistic and nonlinguistic components of DMC can support both the improvement of L2 writing and new emerging literacies, which is considered a main objective in foreign language instruction (Haffner & Miller, 2011). Previous research has investigated multiple forms of MMC including, but not limited to, video projects (Jiang, 2017, 2018; Yeh, 2018) and multimedia essays (Gunsberg, 2015). Research has shown that while involved in multimodal composition, L2 writers can

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