

A Multimodal Approach to Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) in the Digital World

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates a cohort of bilingual Chinese teachers' use of a multimodal approach in their Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teaching. The data include the participants' CFL teaching practices and their reflections on multimodal teaching as recorded in their theses and a focus group discussion. The theoretical underpinning of this paper is based on Paivio's dual coding theory (DCT) and Kress's social-semiotic theory (SST). This research found that the teachers' multimodal use in CFL teaching demonstrated their research-informed committed endeavour in designing content specific activities to achieve pedagogical purposes, utilizing some digital technologies as a resource. The uniqueness of the written form of the Chinese language availed these teachers the opportunity to engage the multiple modes and advance their own understanding of multimodality as a concept. This research also found the teachers' meaning making through the multimodality did not always equate to that of their students' due to their social and cultural differences.

KEYWORDS

Chinese as a Foreign Language, Chinese Language Teaching, Digital Technology, Dual Coding Theory, Multimodal Pedagogy, Multimodality, Semiotic Theory, Social-Semiotic Theory

INTRODUCTION

The call to engage student language learning through a multimodal approach is not new (New London Group, 1996; Wess-Powell et al., 2016; Yi, 2014). The call to implement digital technologies to engage students in language learning is not new either (Rance-Roney, 2010; Smythe & Neufeld, 2010; Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016). However, during the intervening years, it has been argued that the term "digital technology" and associated terms like "multimedia" have attached themselves interchangeably with multimodal and multimodality as Early et al. (2015, p. 454) alerted, "With

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.322026

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emerging media and technologies, multimodality is often considered as digital, but ‘multimodality is not synonymous with the digital.’”

This argument appears to have continued post-COVID 19, which saw the critical importance of digital technologies in the education of Australian children during lockdowns. In some cases, this tendency to blur the boundaries between digital technology, multimedia, and multimodality has created contention around “what is” multimodality and the forms of its practical realities in classrooms.

While second language education hinged on implementing digital technologies is receiving traction in the current literature (Jiang & Ren, 2021; Xu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021), re-establishing the essence of multimodalities and multimodal pedagogy should be kept in sight. In defining what constitutes a mode, Lee et al. (2021) contend that:

Five main modes are identified as crucial for designing the meaning making outcome, ie. [sic] linguistic, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural, and any combination of the five elements is considered multimodal. (p. 66)

The points of reference are that multimodality refers to meaning accessed through these modes, whereas multimedia is the technology or digital platform (channel) that enables the multimodal “text” to be presented in an interesting, engaging, or interactive format. The multimodal phenomena exist (in terms of lesson planning and preparation) and have existed (across time) before digital technology and modern multimedia was created and enacted as the presentation method. The research reported in this article is situated within this premise. Multimodality is clearly distinguished from digital technologies, multimedia, and associated presentation formats, platforms, and terms.

In reviewing second language education literature containing the key terms “multimodal” or “multimodal approaches,” the studies revealed two major trends – investigating teaching and learning strategies that involved a predominantly digital approach and a prevailing research methodology based on collecting data related to the participants’ opinions. In Chinese as a second language (CSL) and English as a second language (ESL) research with a title or key focus on “multimodal,” a literature search resulted in publications predominantly related to digital technology. Similarly, the term “multimodality” appears to be synonymous with digital technology and digital literacy. There appears to be a paucity of research focused on Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) practice and/or interventions implementing a multimodal approach in contrast to the trending of those with a focus on digital technologies.

Digital Technology-Assisted Language Teaching and Learning

Several studies were found on digital technology and multimodality; these considered multimodality as background knowledge rather than a research focus (Hafner, 2014; Smythe & Neufeld, 2010). For example, Hafner’s (2014) research considered digital multimodal composing. Students were given the opportunity to collaborate with peers through mobile devices, apps, and online resources to compose digital videos, podcasts, and webpages (Hafner, 2014). However, it did not explore how the multiple modes were used in their compositions or what this meant for their multiliteracy achievements. Similar research was conducted on pre-service language teachers’ perspectives of multimodal pedagogy (Li, 2020). In this research, students were provided with online digital tools and tasked with creating a multimodal project like digital books, flashcards, YouTube videos, and electronic posters using PowerPoint, Prezi, Storybird, and WeVideo. Rather than analyze the students’ final products, the research gauged the participants’ perceptions of the experience. It did not explore how each of the multiple modes was integrated into their project presentation. Another similar study explored the cognizance of college lecturers in respect of multimodal technologies and video games for language instruction (Dos Santos et al., 2020). This research reported the challenges created by the technology skills of individual teachers. These studies put technology as their research focus using “multimodal” and “multimodality” as descriptive words.

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