

Mode-Switching within the “Multimodal Turn” in L2 Literacy Education

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Abstract—Multimodality as a communicative phenomenon has been theorized and introduced into L2 literacy education in response to the technology-driven divides between home and school, print and screen. This article conceptualizes the role of mode-switching in terms of language, learning, and learner in L2 settings and analyzes its employment in achieving educational equity and students’ engagement. Recommendations for future research are also given to further the ‘multimodal turn’ in the field of multimodality, language, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy.

Keywords—Multimodality; L2; Mode-switching; Literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

The phrase ‘multimodal turn’, a pun on Gee’s (2000) social turn in literacy studies and Block’s (2003) social turn in second language acquisition (SLA), characterizes the increasing attention to refute the many long-held dichotomies in human communication, such as verbal and nonverbal, linguistic and paralinguistic or non-linguistic. It is a turn to recognize the emergence of screen in addition to print in contemporary communicative and representative landscape. The beginning of the turn is observed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and it is introduced to literacy studies by New London Group (1996) to address the communicative multiplicity, linguistic and cultural diversity in today’s world. The past decade witnesses a rigorous growth in the research interests to embrace the turn in L2 contexts.

Different from early studies on multimodality and literacy in school classrooms (Mills, 2010), this article addresses the implicit concept of mode-switching within the ‘multimodal turn’ in L2 literacy education. This construct is conceptualized as an interpretation of the ‘multimodal turn’ as an instantiation of ‘social turn’ in SLA by visiting the three main subjects in the field, namely language, learning, and learner. This multimodal strand, situated within New Literacy Studies (NLS) and usually mediated by digital technologies, follows a much longer tradition of sociocultural perspective that has given rise to current understandings of language as social practice by diverse communities.

II. MULTIMODALITY AND MODE SWITCHING

‘Multimodality’ refers to multi-sensory systems for perceiving information when it is originally used by psychology of perception in 1920s and it becomes widespread in disciplines of speech perception and artificial intelligence. Its inception in applied linguistics can be attributed to the classical statement made by Halliday (1978) on the semiotic nature of language as a process of making meanings by selecting ‘from the total set of options that constitute what can be meant’ (p. 53). This idea soon inspires studies of visual grammar and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Multimodality thereby rises up as an independent field of enquiry with three main approaches: social semiotic multimodality, multimodal discourse analysis, and multimodal interactional analysis.

In 1996, multimodality is acknowledged as the ‘what’ of multiliteracies by the New London Group to address new literacies in the 21st century (New London Group, 1996). They accept Kress & van Leeuwen’s (2001) definition of multimodality as ‘the use of semiotic modes in the designs of a semiotic product or event’ (p. 20) and take mode as ‘a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning’, including audio, visual, gestural, spatial, linguistic, and multimodal ensemble of all these elements. Multimodal research in literacy education mushrooms ever after with a steady output of research into multimodal classroom interaction, multimodal curriculum and projects, multimodal resources and tools, etc.

This cohort of research consistently affirms the applicability of two key constructs theorized in multimodal social semiotics. The first is the idea of mode, which looks at communication beyond language. Bourne & Jewitt (2003) depict the multimodal deployments of different modes, including speech, writing, image, gaze, gesture, and posture by both students and teachers in enacting a classroom debate. They argue that a language-only approach will miss the meanings and connections made by the complex interplay between modes.

The second construct is the idea of motivated sign, referring to the interpretation and production of sign as an interested and partial human endeavor (Kress, 2010). This idea foregrounds human agency and considers both teachers and students as sign-makers who can choose the most apt mode to reflect a particular interest at a particular context. This is different from semiotics in Saussure's tradition. This idea also explains how existing modes are transformed and new modes are created.

Mode and motivated sign give rise to the idea of mode-switching. Mode-switching is implied in Kress's (2010) construct of modal affordance, referring to what is possible to express and represent with a mode. Until recently it has been brought to the front stage along with the application of multimodality in language literacy studies. By examining the data from 3-year ethnography of six Filipino British youth in London, Domingo (2012) claims that code-switching, referring to linguistic alternation as socio-linguistic and cognitive process, cannot fully address 'how diverse students could capitalize on the dialogic and hybrid nature of their languages and literacies' (p. 6). She therefore proposes the notion of 'linguistic layering' to identify the mode-switching practice in multimodal design and practice.

Mode-switching in multimodal communication is not new. But it is now complicated by the blending of digital technologies and multimodality in language education. A growing number of language educators have explored new ways of deploying multimodality with digital technologies for multiple literacies in language education, including visual literacy, alphabetic literacy in combination with visual literacy, digital and media literacies, literacies in video-gaming, critical literacy, and multiple literacies. In this digital cohort of studies, popular mode-switching activities include digital story-telling, multimodal digital movie composing, audio podcasting, webpage designing, slides, hip hop and drama play, etc.

III. MODE-SWITCHING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE

The coupling of multimodality and multiple literacies in L2 settings indicates a budding 'multimodal turn' in SLA after its 'social turn' (Block, 2003). This indication is embodied by the practice of mode-switching in the process of representing and communicating. Language can now be capitalized as fluid, relational, and evolving in concrete multimodal textual practices. This reinforces the criticism of mentalist-individualistic view of language. It also deconstructs the centrality of language and avoids overemphasis on language per se. Situated in multimodal semiotic landscape, language has evolved into a 'pliable form of art' (Domingo, 2012) actualized in real-time mode-switching which, compared to code-switching, offers a better possibility to envision language and culture as lived practice of creating ideas and sharing experiences. The 'multimodal turn' also shifts the focus of language learning from language as a formal system to language as meaning-making. Mode-switching opens up a new social space for the 'how' of multiliteracies, namely situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice (New London Group, 1996).

The third aspect of 'multimodal turn' in the social space of language learning by mode-switching is endorsed by the changing view of L2 learner from a deficit identity to an identity of interested and motivated sign-maker. Facilitated by digital technologies, mode-switching offers new ways of 'fashioning the self' (Lam, 2006, p. 171). The idea of mode switching, for its particular strengths, is well received by an increasing number of researchers to capitalize L2 learner's identity. The first strength lies in the modal capability to stabilize the fluid identity in multimodal identity artifacts. Leander (2002) conforms this multimodal strength in classroom interactions by students' producing identity artifacts with multimodal means. The construction process of these artifacts can then be interpreted in terms of how particular identity meanings are forged and stabilized out of all the available meanings of identity-in-interaction.

The second strength is evidenced by Cummins & Early (2011) who phrase the concept of 'identity texts', referring to the products of students' creative work or performances. In these products 'students invest their identities' in 'written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal forms' (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 3). Therefore mode-switching, compared to code-switching, offers much more flexible ways to cater for diverse needs of identity expression. Mills (2010) also explores the multimodal representations of identity to study the multimodal engagement of English-as-an-additional-language students in classrooms. She argues for the power of mode-switching in affording opportunities for creativity and agency in language learning and teaching.

In many respects, mode-switching draws closer interrelationships between multimodality, language learning and multiliteracies studies. Together they illustrate multiple ways of using language and of enacting literacy in this globalized, digitalized, and multimodal world. They also affirm a re-defined SLA as 'multimodal, multisensory, multilateral, and therefore, multidimensional' (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 923). Mode-switching therefore offers a new dimension in language proficiency and performance in this world of 'changing English' (Jewitt et al, 2009) and 'changing literacies, changing populations, and changing places' (Comber, 2011).

IV. MODE-SWITCHING AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Similar to the fruitful studies of code-switching for linguistic equity in multilingual studies, research on the role of mode-switching for semiotic equity is beginning to surge. Though the number of studies is limited, the prospect it offers for future education is appealing if we accept the semiotic nature of language and the socio-cultural perspectives of situating language in concrete literacy practices. While code-switching offers a beautiful insight into undue linguistic hierarchy that privileges students with access to dominant languages, mode-switching offers a powerful potential to empower students without access to dominant languages by acknowledging other aspects of their semiotic resources.

While code-switching convincingly advertises the importance of linguistic repertoire in the multilingual society, mode-switching affirms such importance by a more encompassing concept of semiotic repertoire in the multicultural world. This insight has been endorsed by the construct of ‘multimodal communicative competence’ proposed by Royce (2007) to incorporate multimodal literacy in L2 contexts. He argues that the traditional idea of communicative competence is linguistic-focused and thereby falls short of the multimodal requirements of communicative competence that L2 students need in the changing world.

However, different from code-switching’s concern of the disputes over English as a subject or English as medium of teaching and learning, mode-switching concerns much more about the content of English education and the ways of doing English lessons. There has been an ongoing discussion on the ‘new basics’ in English education for ‘new times’. These ‘new basics’, if not properly addressed, will continue to widen the gaps between in-school literacy and out-of-school literacy, English classrooms and students’ diverse social and cultural worlds. Mode-switching thereby has an important role to play in efforts to shrink the gaps for a more inclusive L2 education.

A more inclusive multimodal pedagogy in English curriculum has been trialed out by Stein and Newfield in South Africa. Stein (2008) brings together multimodal textual practices and social justice in the curriculum program of language, literacy, and literature. She gives credits and values to the multiple forms of meaning-making resources that students bring to classrooms, including visual, bodily, auditory, and linguistic, etc. The fruitful textual products from their different projects let them vision the power of semiotic freedom in including students with diversities in social backgrounds, semiotic resources, and English proficiencies to access and participate in the multicultural literacy practices. Stein (2008) argues that semiotic freedom is a human right and advocates the powerful use of visual modes as essential in constructing the counter-hegemonic classroom space for creative and varied textual-making practices. In addition, their work affirms Cummins and Early’s (2011) concept of ‘identity texts’ in offering educational equity for different students to express their identities out of their interests from the resources available to them. Overall, Stein’s work on modes-switching visualizes the central goal of the pedagogy of multiliteracies to ‘develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities’ (New London Group, 1996).

The power of mode-switching is further evidenced in enabling equitable access to the multimodal mixing of traditional print-based literacy and the screen-oriented multiliteracies. Zammit (2011), based on a project called ‘Identikidz Task’ in Australia, reports a high enhancement in students’ engagement in learning and also their views of themselves as co-constructors of knowledge by using ICT for authentic purposes. She also reports the merits of mode-switching in letting students develop positive feelings that their world is accepted at the school, and they have control over what counts as knowledge as they are given the power and option to decide what modes to include in representing themselves. Zammit’s (2011) reports that mode-switching not

only conveys students’ identity in meaning-making engagements, but also offers a chance for them to critique and challenge social power between migrant English learners and the broader society. Thus mode-switching opens up a new classroom space for transformation and development in the wider society.

V. MODE-SWITCHING AND ‘SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE’

The deployment of multimodality through mode-switching in language education illustrates the semiotic potential of modal affordance in creating equitable access for diverse students to multiple literacies in contemporary language classrooms. However, we cannot lose sight of the socio-political aspect of modal preference and privilege during mode-switching. Modal preference refers to the action of preferring one mode over another and it may be associated with representative and communicative style. Modal privilege refers to the phenomenon of privileging some modes by delegitimizing others in language classrooms and literacy curriculum. What usually results in is an inconspicuous form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1991). This ‘violence’ is a reflection of contending ideologies concerning ‘what counts as knowledge’, and ‘what counts as legitimate modes’ in language classrooms. In this regard, mode-switching is subject to influences from examinations, policy, and curriculum expectations, etc.

Several studies report the ‘symbolic violence’ of language over multimodality when multiliteracies is introduced into language classrooms. For instance, Tan & McWilliam (2009) find that multiliteracies are usually understood by teachers as ‘garnish’ to the ‘pedagogical roast’ of traditional code-based and print-based academic literacies in two different classes. In elite class, learning by digital mode-switching is sidelined as it is considered as ways of having fun and secondary to school performance. Being socialized into traditional print-based literacy and national testing regime, students and teachers formulate a value of diligence, which pitted against digital mode-switching. In the ESOL class for marginalized migrant children, ‘the resolute commitment to systematic code-based literacy and numeracy’ and the ‘acquisition of conventional English print literacy’ becomes ‘a hindrance when it came to productive engagement of the students in learning’ (ibid, p. 220). Print-literacy is considered as pre-literacy and the first step to develop other literacies. Thus linguistic modes are placed at the top of the modal hierarchy and other modes are invalidated and marginalized in language classrooms.

Despite the challenges, it is still possible to counter the ‘symbolic violence’ to pave the way for multiliteracies by mode-switching in English classrooms. The traditional discourses that support the conception of English literacy as ‘writing and speech’ are challenged and the competing discourses in classrooms are interrogated by Mills (2010). A metalanguage of deploying multimodality for multiliteracies has also attracted interest from Cloonan (2011). Some concrete theorization and intervention in teacher education have also been carried out to foster pre-service teachers’ knowledge and dispositions towards mode-switching and multiliteracies.

It is worth mentioning that Adami (2011) proposes one way to counter the 'symbolic violence' in her support of academic writing in digital age as multimodal re-signification. Based on her experience of teaching English in three first-year graduate courses, she interprets mode-switching in multimodal writing as the force to reshuffle the traditional hierarchy of semiotic abilities. She argues that it is not necessary to privilege one mode over another. It is better to assess students' multimodal texts through a 'multilayered process of re-signification and re-laboration of texts and contents into multiple modes' (p. 44).

VI. CONCLUSION

Multimodality in communication has been well theorized in social semiotics and it has been popular in language literacy education since its inception by the New London Group (1996). What multimodality is and what it can afford to language literacy education seem to be evidenced by the current literature. The 'multimodal turn' is a turn for multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multiliteracies in L2 literacy education. It is also a turn to bridge the gap between print and screen, home and school, students and teachers, and now and future. Research that is enveloped in such a turn has yielded a seemingly consistent answer on the 'what' and 'why' of mode-switching in contemporary language literacy classrooms, leaving the 'how' being a contesting terrain and also it remains to be seen its wash-back effect on theorizing the 'what' and the 'why'.

Future research needs to specify the 'how' of mode-switching, including how teachers perceive multimodality and negotiate its relationship with language in curriculum and classroom, how mode-switching impact on the 'textual cycle', referring to what texts enter classroom and 'what is done to them and with them' (Kress et al, 2001), how mode-switching impact and is impacted by power, discourse, pedagogy, and teachers' professional identities, and how to scaffold teachers with a grammar of multimodality in addition to a grammar of language, etc. In terms of learning, we need to know how to capitalize students' investment in identity expression through mode-switching and further engage them in the critical framing of multimodality for transformed practice in society. In assessment, is it possible to develop a multimodal assessment system to cater for personalized learning and acknowledge multi-competence? While mode-switching promises different entry points for diverse learners, it remains to be seen the future direction it will lead to and how it is to be received in L2 classroom.

Another aspect concerns multimodality and technology. While learning by multimodality enhances the use of technology in L2 education, it is unknown whether and to what extent it will help tackle the problem of 'digital divide', generally refers to the inequalities in access to, use and knowledge of digital technologies. With language learning and development as a primary concern in L2 education, this problem may be an unintended consequence out of the 'multimodal turn' in digital literacies practices in language classrooms. Although compared to code-switching, semiotic freedom promises wider access for linguistically-inferior marginal students to dominant language practices. It remains to be revealed whether the promotion of semiotic equity in digital age will bring in new forms of inequality.

Nevertheless, there is great potential to enact English literacy by mode-switching to identify factors that impinge on L2 language development in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Sustainable interventions designed with different methods across different research sites are necessary to investigate the real encounter of language and multimodality and develop models of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy to do English learning and teaching by mode-switching. As acknowledged by Cope & Kalantzis (2009), 'if the multiliteracies agenda captures some generalities of multimodality which extend beyond the contemporary moment, changes in the contemporary communication environment simply add urgency to the call to consciously deploy multimodality in learning' (p. 364). It is a time to answer such a call.

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