
MAXIMIZING MULTIMODAL EXERCISES IN THE WRITING CLASS

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ABSTRACT

In line with the current trend in multimodality, this essay presents a survey on the various multimodal exercises in various writing textbooks used in Indonesia. This essay also shows that while language learning theories consider writing as a productive skill, the multimodal practices found in the textbooks seem to incorporate the receptive skill more than the productive one. Consequently this analysis will reveal the various degrees of productive and multimodal levels in those writing drills. Finally, it recommends how to be creative in maximizing multimodal writing if the writing instructor wants to be consistent with the theory of multimodality.

Keywords: monomodal and multimodal composition; writing exercises

INTRODUCTION: MULTIMODALITY

Multimodality suggests that modes “rarely, if ever, occur alone” (Jewitt & Kress, 2003: 2) and it indicates complex relationships among and between modes in constructed texts. Sales Promotion Girls (SPGs) are very good at applying this to win over consumers. The other day I was walking around the mall when a young pretty energetic SPG came over to offer her skin cream product. At first she showed me a brochure explaining the chemical composition of the cream and the benefits it would give me. Seeing that I wasn’t much attracted, she switched to another mode of persuasion. She took hold of my arm and had me sit on a chair. Then she massaged the cream on my arm while explaining all the good it would do. The delightful massage was more persuasive than the brochure, but seeing that I was still reluctant to buy, she switched to still another mode of persuasion. While massaging she let her long thick black hair fall on my arm and it caressed the whole length of my arm. That did it. I bought three jars of the cream. Her victory came about through a combination of three different semiotic modes – i.e. the brochure, massage, and the caressing hair. Together these modes modulated into a very subtle but forceful persuasion.

Such a multimodal approach will be applied in this essay on how to teach writing. Firstly it presents a survey on the various multimodal exercises in various writing textbooks used in Indonesia. Secondly it shows the problem that while language learning theories consider writing as a productive skill, the multimodal practices found in the textbooks seem to incorporate the receptive skill more than the productive one. Thirdly, this analysis will consequently reveal the various degrees of productive levels in those multimodal writing drills. Finally, it recommends how to be creative in maximizing multimodal writing if the writing instructor wants to be consistent with the theory of multimodality.

VARIETIES OF MULTIMODAL WRITING EXERCISES

Multimodal writing exercises obviously involves more than one mode of communication. Usually it combines the textual, sound, and visual modes through low-tech, medium-tech or hi-tech multimodality. The most basic writing drill, dictation, is of course the use of low tech sound consisting of a recording or the teachers own voice which the student has to transcribe. In medium-tech multimodality, the student has to write what he sees in a picture or graph so the student is working with a visual which he/ she has to transform into a written text.

Sample of Multimodal IELTS Writing

IELTS Writing Task 1, on the Academic version of the exam, involves writing a report based on information contained in one or two visuals (such as tables, charts or graphs).

The table below shows the proportion of income spent on 4 common items in the UK in 1998.

The proportion of income adults and children spent on 4 common items in the UK in 1998

	food	electronic equipment	music	videos
adults	25%	5%	5%	1%
men	14%	10%	5%	2%
women	39%	1%	5%	0.5%
children	10%	23%	39%	12%
boys	9%	18%	38%	18%
girls	11%	5%	40%	17%

TABLE 1. The Proportion of Income Spent on 4 Common Items in the UK in 1998.

(<https://www.ielts-mentor.com/writing-sample/academic-writing-task-1/2655-academic-writing-task-1-income-adults-and-children-spent-on-4-common-items-in-uk>)

Student's Authentic Attempt with All her mistakes

There is a table that shows the proportion of income spent on 4 common items in the UK in 1998.

In 1998, there were 4 common items that adult, men, women, children, boys, and girls mostly spent on, which were food, electronic equipment, music, and videos. 39% of women mostly spent their money on food which was the highest proportion of all, but not in video

because it was the lowest proportion which was about 0,5% only. The older people did not enjoy music very much. The average proportion between adult, men, and women on music was only 5% when the younger age had the highest proportion in music which was between 18% until 23%, except for the girls because it was only about 5%. Women has no interest in electronic equipment than the others, that is why women has the lowest proportion in the electronic equipment. When adult enjoy spending money on food, the younger age prefer spending money on videos.

In conclusion, older people in 1998 mostly spent their money on food, but younger people prefer spent their money on videos and music.

Unlike the IELTS Writing Test, the integrated writing test of TOEFL iBT uses three modalities, namely a visual reading text, listening text, and writing text. The TOEFL iBT Integrated Writing Task requires the student to read a passage that is about 250-300 words long. He/she then must listen to a lecture that is 2 to 2.5 minutes long. The lecture will challenge or disagree with the ideas in the reading passage. Finally he/she must write a summary of both the written and listening texts and explain how they are related.

Sample TOEFL iBT Integrated Writing Task Practice

Directions: Give yourself 3 minutes to read the passage.

Changes in Charitable Giving

Donating part of one's income to public causes, known as charitable giving, used to be a common practice/ but, in the United States charitable giving has declined substantially in recent years, and, for several reasons, it is unlikely to increase in the future.

One reason that charitable giving has fallen is simply that there is less need for charitable giving, because the United States government now provides most of the most of the important public services. The government assumes much of responsibility for feeding the poor, providing health care, and taking care of the victims of natural disasters-functions those charities used to perform. These government institutions of social welfare are permanent, and so the diminished need for private charitable giving will also be permanent.

Another reason people are, will be, giving less to charities is that in the past few years there have been highly publicized disclosures that the managers of some prominent national charities were receiving huge salaries and other benefits as large or larger than salaries of heads of major for-profit corporations. These salaries and expenses for travel, fancy offices, and advertising significantly reduced the percentage of donated money that went to charitable purposes. Naturally people have been turned off by these excesses and inefficiencies.

Finally, beyond the shortcomings of legitimate charities, there have been an increasing number of fraudulent solicitations by organizations or individuals who merely pose as charities. As a result, people are now becoming skeptical even about what are in fact legitimate appeals for support. So potential donors are starting to give less and give less frequently. And since the incidence of charity fraud seems to be increasing, we can expect further declines in charitable giving as people become more concerned that they are being taken advantage of (Solórzano, 220).

Directions: Now listen to part of a lecture on the topic you just read about.

(Listening Script)

There's no doubt that giving to charities has declined in recent years, but there are good reasons to think it'll soon begin to go up.

Consider, for example, the fact that the number of elderly and retired people in our society keeps growing. Right now, elderly citizens who can't afford health care often rely on government programs to pay for it. But as the elderly population grows, government programs probably won't be able to cover the health care of those who need help. When there's a need for charitable assistance, Americans respond to that need. And since the need will be increasing, we should expect to see charitable giving rise accordingly.

There's another reason to be optimistic about the future of charitable giving. The disclosures of waste and bad management at major charities, and people's anger at this waste, are producing significant reforms. Overpaid managers have been forced to resign by the bad publicity. Charities are reducing their expenses and are now subject to closer public scrutiny. As a result, people are regaining confidence that the money they donate will support the causes they care about.

People's reaction to charity fraud is also evolving. In the short run, people don't want to donate because they're concerned with whether charities are honest. But in the long run, such skepticism makes people careful, not stingy. For example, many people now refuse to give money when they're asked to do so over the telephone. They insist on receiving proof and documentation before they donate. Just as people learn how to be careful consumers, most people are acquiring the skills needed to guard against charity fraud without stopping their support for worthwhile causes.

Directions: Summarize the main points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they challenge the specific points made in the reading passage. You have 20 minutes to plan and write your response. Your response will be judged on the basis of the quality of your writing and how well your response presents the points in the lecture and their relationship to the reading passage.

Student's Authentic Attempt with all her mistakes

The writer in the passage thinks that there is a decline in charitable giving and the lecturer as sees on that. One of the reasons in Government now provides public services so there in less need in charity and that the writer thinks there will be permanent decline in it. The lecturer thinks that there could be on increase in charity because the number of elderlys are who can't afford health are increasing, and the government won't be able to cover that. Another reason why the writer thinks that the decline in charity will keep going is because the managers of the national charities are being power excessively. But the lecturer thinks that there will still be an increase in charity because these bad managers are getting fired and people are regaining their confidence. Lastly, the writer thinks that as long as there is an

increasing number of fraud organisations who poses as charities, people are afraid of giving to the wrong people so they are giving less and less. The lecturer however thinks that there won't be a decline in charity because people now are being more careful because of the frauds, they will make fine they are giving to the right people.

Those are some of the strategies used nowadays to maximize multimodality in the writing class. Multimodal writing exercises are a current trend that the teacher needs to adjust to, though obviously there have been some criticism against this multimodal approach which the teacher should be aware of and try to find solutions about.

Criticism against a Multimodal Approach in the Writing Class

Criticisms mostly focus on the question whether writing exercises should be mostly productive rather than receptive. English Language Teachers like to divide language into the receptive skills (i.e. listening and reading) and the productive ones (i.e. speaking and writing). It is the belief that writing is a productive skill but the sample writing exercises presented earlier clearly show that they involve the receptive type multimodality more than the productive one. Dictation, for example, requires 50 % receptive drill in listening while the productive writing is only less than the remaining 50 % since the student does not generate any original ideas of his own. In the IELTS writing exercise, the students also needs to spend his/her energy on the receptive effort of figuring out the visual information on the table while the productive writing work is actually less than the remaining 50 % since the student is not required to come up with original ideas. The TOEFL multimodal exercise has 30 % of receptive reading work, 30 % of receptive listening work, and about 40 % of productive writing because here the student is asked to compare or contrast the ideas in the reading and listening text.

The question is whether a multimodal approach to writing is justifiable as writing is actually expected to be mostly, if not fully, productive. In the IELTS and TOEFL iBT writing tasks, binary relationships between receptive and productive exercises put these two modalities as separate from one another, typically tying the receptive exercises to the visual artifacts such as graphs or reading texts while the productive to the writing activity. Working under this multimodal relationship between the receptive and productive, students in a composition course might be prompted to analyze an image and then write—produce a text—about that visual image. Actually this separation of the receptive from the productive does not allow students to become 100 % active producers in the writing class. In fact, the visual images in IELTS or TOEFL iBT composition textbooks tend to stress more on heavy receptive comprehension of visual and other multimodal artifacts rather than privileging productive drills (Wysocki, “Multiple”; Wysocki and Lynch, “From First-Year Composition”). The IELTS and TOEFL iBT testmakers must have been aware of this problem and decided to ask the students to write a completely monomodal essay besides the integrated writing test. That, however, does not address the question whether the students have been asked to do a fully multimodal productive writing. The next section will try to discuss this.

Maximizing Multimodal Writing

Before setting out on a fully multimodal productive exercise, the teacher should try to free him/herself from the binary opposition between the receptive and productive drill and consider dictation, IELTS writing, and TOEFL iBT writing in a new light. It is better to see them as a linearity rather than a binary opposition. Steve Westbrook, for example, in his 2006 analysis of visual and multimodal composition in writing instruction, offers one such linear relationship between the receptive and productive by stating that students should author multimedia texts—particularly by sampling and transforming existing material from the public sphere . . . Students' contributions to visual culture as producers or reconstructors may or may not necessarily be dramatic or effective, but their activities at least position them not simply as viewers of culture (and its evolution) but as participants in the continual re-creation of this culture (466).

Westbrook's is a strategic example of linearity, in that students' receptive comprehension of visual and multimodal artifacts functions as a kind of *scaffolding up* to their productive writing of such texts. Students ought to participate in a range of receptive and productive activities like in dictation, IELTS writing, and TOEFL iBT writing as "re-creation" and "sampling and transforming existing materials" and become "reconstructors." In this sense the multimodal exercises in IELTS and TOEFL iBT are acceptable as a scaffolding before they produce new and original visual and multimodal artifacts of their own—artifacts that may not necessarily include "sampling" or "re-creating" of existing material.

In his foreword of the book *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, Browyn Williams points out that "We must recognize that English Departments no longer sustain culture behind impenetrable walls of print. Culture, the product of our human relations, now produces texts in multiple, often overlapping forms. If it has become acceptable to recognize the work of scholars in English Departments who use cultural studies approaches to texts in everything from film to clothing to museum exhibits, it should be part of an English Department's mission to regard its students as capable of composing intellectual work in forms other than traditional print essays. And we should also recognize that other disciplines across campus are increasingly moving to multimodal texts in their courses and that our students need to know how to write to learn and write to inform and persuade in these forms as well as they do in print. We need to teach the forms of literacy that are producing the culture on our campuses and in our communities."

The question is whether our students are indeed capable of composing intellectual work in forms other than traditional print essays. In fact they are. This comes out when they have to write out a Power Point presentation. Power Point compositions, which are always multimodal in their visual images and written captions are not only concerned with the visual mode of expressing meaning; but the visual images often also concerns the relationship of the visual mode to other modes, especially the verbal or linguistic or textual mode since a Power Point composition includes the oral, aural, audio, and even gestural and spatial modes as well. Richard Marback, Gunther Kress, and others have described multimodal composition as inherently synesthetic, wherein composers experience or substitute one mode for another. Visual images might be the dominant mode of the synesthetic at work in a multimodal Power

Point composition. For example, Susan Delagrange, in her 2011 ebook *Technologies of Wonder: Rhetorical Practice in a Digital World*, positions visual rhetorical concerns within multimodal composition: “It is always the case that visual representations are inextricably linked to the densely multimodal semiotic landscape from which they emerge” (2). Ours is, as Delagrange explains of multimodal pedagogies, an ocularcentric era. Hence Power Point text is an ideal writing exercise in which students express themselves productively by integrating their written text with highly visually mediated modalities such as photos, images, graphs, maps, cartoons, videos, and more.

The rationale behind assigning students to work on Power Point presentations is the fact that Power Point avoids the binary oppositions between the receptive and the productive, and treat them as a linearity. In this sense the multimodal exercises in IELTS and TOEFL iBT are acceptable as a scaffolding before the students produce new and original visual and multimodal artifacts of their own in a Power Point presentation.

Sample of Multimodality in Power Point Composition

FIGURE 1. Hagia Sophia

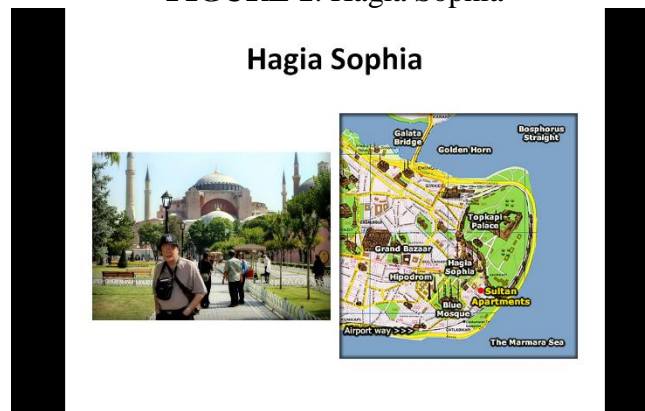


FIGURE 2. Mosaic of Virgin Mary and the Child Surrounded by Moslem Religious Calligraphy

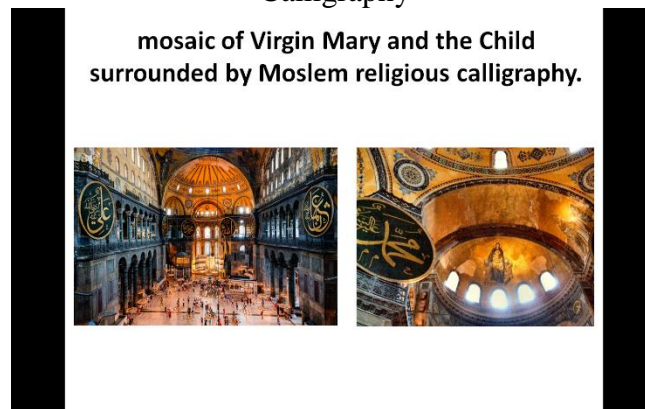
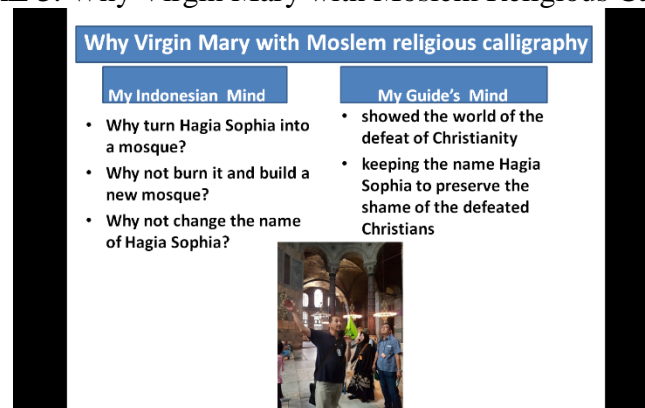


FIGURE 3. Why Virgin Mary with Moslem Religious Calligraphy

(Wardoyo, 2017)

These sample slides only show an integrated text of images and words but during the real presentation, I also used videos and, of course, my own speaking voice to describe Hagia Sophia.

CONCLUSION: MULTIMODALITY FROM DICTATION TO POWER POINT

The overall findings show a gap between theories and practices associated with multimodal exercises because the current trend of multimodality writing exercises in Indonesia are mostly modeled as either dictation, or IELTS (Task 1), or TOEFL iBT (integrated writing). These standardized drills obviously promote receptive drills more than the productive ones, while multimodal writing theories claim the importance of productive drills. However these practices are very good step by step movements from receptive to productive, particularly in preparation for producing a fully multimodal composition such as preparing Power Point texts which embody various multimodals such as images, videos audios, and written texts as well. Though this paper stops with Power Point, it is recommended to continue writing more complex digital multimodal texts like web pages and films.

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