Developing A Course of Multimodal Creative Writing

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Abstract

The paper reports the development of a course of multimodal creative writing at an English Letters Department, Universitas Ma Chung, Indonesia. It involved 56 students who were taking Creative Writing course. Prior to the teaching of multimodal creative writing, they were tested for creative writing ability and their knowledge of creative writing. They were also asked how the teaching should be carried out. ADDIE was used to design the multimodal course. The course introduced the students to incorporate several semiotic modes, which included photographs, video clips, and podcast materials, into their written essays. Models of essays incorporating each of those elements were presented and explained before the students were assigned to produce multimodal essays independently. By the end of the semester, they were again tested for their abilities to create multimodal essays and their knowledge about multimodality. There was a marked increase in their scores from their previous scores in the pre-test. Overall, the respondents showed positive attitude toward multimodal creative writing. Further development should emphasize the seamless connection between the visual and aural elements and the written essays, which as a whole should work harmoniously to create enjoyable pieces of multimodal essays. Along with that, the evaluation should also assess elements other than those which have been conventionally assessed in creative writing.

Keywords: creative writing, multimodality, semiotic modes, podcast, video

Introduction

Teaching media have long been around for teachers and students to use. The number and variety of media have been increasing since the advent of the digital age. However, probably not many educators know the potential they harness for making the learning environment more engaging, fun, and yet still effective. In many parts of the world, teachers still use conventional media like whiteboards, markers, pens, LCD and Power Point slides to deliver their teaching materials. Even the written discourse that students produce contains mostly writing and only a few visuals (Hippala, 2016). Written messages, being one of several communication modes, do convey information but more can actually be done to make the information richer, more detailed, and even deeper. The time has come for educators to embrace digital literacy, which according to Jewitt and Kress (2003) refers to the ability to compose, understand, produce and interact with multimodal texts. Multimodality, in turn, is defined as the use of several semiotic modes in a sociocultural context that gives rise to a semiotic activity (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). In its later development, this was then applied to pedagogy. According to Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016), multimodality stemmed from Functional Systemic Linguistics, social semiotics, and conversation analysis. Multimodality theory, therefore, states that different modes of communication work together to convey messages.

Multimodality, therefore, is an appropriate enhancement to creative writing, which according to Anderson (2013), is a creative process of generating fictions, poems, and even life experiences. It draws heavily on the writer's sensory perception, memories of experience, and imagination. Multimodality augments this experience for the readers by supplying even richer details that heighten their imagination as they read or watch a piece of creative work.

As a relatively new approach, multimodality in writing has been constantly studied in recent years although the effort to define it dates back as early as 2009. Walsh (2009) defined

multimodal class as a teaching where the teacher and the students make use of various semiotic modes to execute different teaching-learning functions. The earliest study, at least to the writer's knowledge, was done by Shin and Cimasko (2008), who examined how freshmen students taking an ESL composition class utilized available modes in writing argumentative essays. The findings showed that the students were inclined to employ mostly linguistic modes. They used non-linguistic modes to express cultural and national identities and maintain emotional connections with their topics. Similarly, Beckley (2014) found that adding nonverbal element like drawing pictures heightened the students' motivation in a writing class. From teachers' side, Walsh (2010) found that because basically teachers were prepared to combine printed materials with digital materials in their instruction, what they needed was a definite conceptualization of multimodal teaching and a more detailed direction of how to blend different semiotic modes coherently and attractively.

Another recent study by Cortiana (2017) turned out a different picture. The multimodal approach applied to a group of students in Italy had not been able to change their habits and their perception about writing activities. Most of them held on to their conventional beliefs about writing activities. Even when they used multimodal elements, they just added the elements to their written essays with little consideration about the coherence and the attractiveness of the multimodal elements. Cortiana (2017) attributed this to the unshaken and rigid convention in the formal education context about academic writing.

A study by Lirola (2016) consisted of teaching with multimodal approach to 98 ESL students who were learning writing, speaking, listening, and reading. Mostly, they made videos to engage in various instructional activities. As many as 98.30% felt that the multimodal approach motivated them, and 72.88% admitted to have better critical thinking, leadership, group work, and writing. As many as 57.32% improved their learning autonomy, and the rest felt improvement in their writing skills.

A more recent study was done by Jiang (2018) who studied different attitudes of EFL learners in China toward multimodal writing. In the first pattern, the student transformed himself from a resistant writer to an active composer, while in the second, the student changed from an exam-oriented writer and textbook-decoder to a multimodal designer. Still, the last case seemed to resist the change and did not register any transformations. These cases showed that students have different attitude and readiness, and that they were shaped by "larger ideological structures associated with the high-stakes testing regimes" (p. 60).

The next study was conducted by Vandommele, Van den Branden, Gorp and Maeyer (2017). They taught multimodal writing to a group of students and compared their performances in several aspects to another group who received no instruction on multimodality. Their analyses indicated that the former group showed growth in several measures, namely complexity, text length, communicative effectiveness, content, and lexical diversity. The out-of-school writing by the former group also indicated greater gains in complexity, content, syntactic complexity, lexical diversity and text length. They concluded that multimodal writing task was useful for developing the writing skills of language students, and also suggested that writing development should be measured with multiple measures and multiple tasks.

Another recent study was conducted by Lim and Polio (2020), who interviewed seven professors from various disciplines about the multimodal writing assignments and then analyzed 104 multimodal writing tasks. They reported that parameters used in multimodal tasks were (1) the objective and instruction of multimodal writing, which determined whether it was disciplinary or creative expression; (2) the linguistic mode in multimodal texts, which determines whether it was written or spoken words, and (3) tasks of multimodal writing, which falls into individual and collaborative work. A similar work by Choi and Yi (2015) identified technological support as a vital element in a multimodal class, a factor that Edward-Groves (2010) also considered important.

The digital age has opened up many possibilities that benefit many areas, including education. Thanks to its sophistication and versatility, digital technology can now present materials in multimodal manner, that is, by combining different semiotic resources into one package that caters for the receivers' visual, auditory, and verbal senses. Accordingly, literacy, once defined as the ability to read and write, has now been redefined as the ability to understand and produce a combination of linguistic or verbal elements and non-verbal elements like visuals and sounds. Creative writing, a form of literacy which according to Dawson (2005) is a set of educational methods to teach fiction writing, can now be accompanied by video clips, pictures, charts, and even music (Miller & McVee, 2012). Coupled with the fact that millennials are inclined more to visual stimulus than verbal stimulus, this state of progress has afforded teachers to present multimodal materials in their lessons and even teach their students to generate multimodal works. Gone should be the days where they only rely on Power Point slides and written textbooks. Their teaching repertoire should expand into the utilization of their smartphones in the spirit of making the teaching learning activities more fun, more flexible, more engaging, and supposedly more effective. Students, too, seem to find the application of multimodality appealing in their learning tasks. A few empirical studies bore this out. Nielsen, Hoban and Hyland (2017), for example, had pharmacological students present their ideas by combining several different modes, and concluded that the technique enhanced their multimodal awareness and communication skills. Kuo, Yu and Hsiao (2013) saw increased learning performance from ESL students who adopted multimodal presentation. Sankey, Birch, and Gardiner (2010) even conducted an experimental study to see if multimodal techniques had a positive impact on the subjects' learning outcome. Although the immediate effect on their learning was not substantiated, their subjects reported to have perceived the multimodal elements favorably because they assisted greatly in their comprehension and retention of learning materials. Hafner (2013) had some science students report the results of

their experiment using multimodal approach to gain viewers' attention on Youtube. He found that the students were capable of using a range of modes, with language being the most important one, to achieve the purpose. Allen (2019) conducted a survey to secondary teachers who used podcast in their teaching and concluded that the use of podcast served a wide range of instructional purposes. Three reasons were prominent, namely to engage the students affectively, to link their studies to real-life conditions, and to promote pragmatic accessibility. While her study focused on teachers' perspective, the current study reported the perception of podcast from students' vantage point.

Thus, against the background above, the writer set out to achieve a research objective, namely to develop a multimodal lesson in a creative writing class. The effort entails identification of the learners' needs and current abilities, their opinions about the ongoing creative writing class that assigned them to create multimodal works, and their overall achievement after taking the class.

Materials and Method

Participants

The development study involved 56 students of the class of 2017 of English Letters Department at Universitas Ma Chung. On average, they were twenty two years old. Seven of them were boys and the rest were girls. They were taking Creative Writing course in the odd semester of 2019.

Materials

The study distributed questionnaires at different stages, and conducted interviews with students and their lecturer. Two pre-tests and post-tests were also given to them to measure their knowledge of multimodality and quality of essays before and after the teaching of multimodal writing.

Research Method

As explained in the later section, the method used in this study was developmental research. It studied a small group of learners as they attended the lectures and did activities aimed to train them in making multimodal essays. At the end, the study evaluated their progress, assessed their opinions, and concluded the development that was achieved.

Research Design

The design of the study was developmental research. The reason for this design was that the integration of creative writing and multimodality was still relatively new in TEFL; thus, a developmental study was deemed most appropriate to identify its potential as well as strength and weaknesses. As Richey and Klein (2005) stated, the design includes stages of analysis, development, try out, and evaluation. More detailed steps in this design are presented in a section below.

Data Analysis

To know whether the students made a noticeable improvement of their multimodal essays by the end of the semester, the essays in the pre-test and the post-test were scored by using an analytical scoring technique. The scores ranged from 1 to 5, with scores assigned for the content, organization, language style and the quality of multimodality. The lecturer and another senior lecturer rated the essays by referring to the analytical rubric (with their inter-rater reliability of 0.81). The tables below present the descriptive statistics of the scores:

Table 1

Pre-Test Scores

	Mean	SD	Mode	Median
Content	6.6	3.2	5	5
Organization	6.67	3.28	5	5
Language Style	7.27	4.45	2	6
Multimodality	1	0	1	1

Table 2

Post-Test Scores

	Mean	SD	Mode	Median
Content	10.31	2.4	8	10
Organization	9.69	2.89	7	8
Language Style	9	2.92	8	8
Multimodality	10.69	1.59	10	10

The scores in each of the aspects were then compared using T-Test for paired samples, and the results are presented in the following table:

Table 3

Result of T-Test

	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Content	-3.52	0.003	Significant
Organization	-2.36	0.033	Significant
Language Style	-1.64	0.938	Not significant
Multimodality	-24.07	0.000	Significant

Procedure

Because the multimodal creative writing was essentially a form of teaching method and comprised a series of instructional steps, ADDIE was used as the instructional design. As David (2014) stated, ADDIE starts with the following steps: (1) analysis, during which the instructional objectives, the leaners' needs and their current knowledge and skill, and the teaching methods they want are identified; (2) design, during which the instructional objectives and the learning content are determined; (3) development, which consists mainly of collecting learning materials, and (4) implementation, in which the new approach is implemented, and

finally (5) evaluation, which covers formative and summative tests to determine the impact of the entire teaching process. The table below summarizes the steps and the outcome of each step:

Table 4

The Stages of ADDIE

ANALYZING STAGE	
Source of data	Outcome
The first questionnaires	Designing the materials and interesting instructional acts; instructions that combine one-way lectures and practices and individual work as well as group work;
Questionnaires from the second stage	Explanation followed by individual exercises. Gathering more video materials accompanied by examples, texts, and lecturer's explanation.
Pre-test on multimodal concept	Almost all of the students did not know what multimodal is.
Pre-test of writing	Almost all of the students wrote essays that lacked quality and lacked multimodal elements.
DESIGNING STAGE	
Source of data	Outcome

Source of data	Outcome
The first questionnaires	Presenting models of multimodal essays on Edmodo entitled "The Last Flight" and "The Fall I Fall", and one with podcast entitled "Where is that Lovely Randy".
The second questionnaires	Assigning them to create essays with video and photos as the multimodal elements.

IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

Source of data	Outcome
The first questionnaires	Assigning students to create a multimodal essay with videos; assigning them to create essays with podcast; assigning them to create essays with videos, photos, and podcast combined.
The second questionnaires	Assigning students to create essays with videos and photos as the multimodal elements.

EVALUATION STAGE

Source of data	Outcome
The first questionnaires	Assigning students to create essays with videos and photos.
The second questionnaires	Assigning students to create essays with podcast as the multimodal element.

Interview at the second stage	Attending to misunderstanding that occurred about the assignment.
Pre-test and post-test	Attending to students' pronunciation and language style; confirming the positive results of the multimodal creative writing technique.

The Design of the Multimodality

The design of the multimodal approach was done following 5 principles suggested by Rubene (2018), namely (1) multi-modality, which is the use of pictures and verbal elements, (2) coherence, which is the link between the learning material in one stage and that in the previous stage or subsequent stage, (3) modality, which is the use of audio, visual, kinesthetic elements in the learning process, (4) space division, which is the presentation of the multimodal elements in one space, and (5) shared time, which is the presentation of verbal and visual elements at the same time. The design itself was accomplished in several stages as explained below. In the analysis stage, preliminary data were collected by using questionnaires to identify the respondents' knowledge about the concept of multimodality and their expectation about multimodal teaching. A writing pre-test was also administered to see the students' initial ability prior to being taught multimodality. In the development stage, the lecturers started collecting the materials that fit the instructional objectives. Semiotic elements like pictures, video clips, podcast were collected in addition to verbal elements. Along with that, teaching techniques were designed so that the teaching materials could be used to achieve the objectives. Next, the techniques were tried out in the class. As the class was engaged in the activities, further data were obtained through questionnaires and interviews. Evaluation was carried out at the end of

the semester in the form of the lecturer's and students' written opinions, and scores of a post-test of multimodal essays.

It is important to note that all of the models and submission of assignments were conducted through Edmodo learning platform. Offline classroom sessions were conducted to clarify the models and examples, to ask and answer questions and for the students to engage in group discussion about their multimodal assignments.

The selection of the materials was based on a principle proposed by Bearne and Wolstencraft (2007), which essentially states that the material should include printed materials and visual materials. Moreover, the visual and verbal elements should be combined in such a way so as to make the information more diverse and encourage deeper interpretation.

The responses to the questionnaires at this stage also indicated that most of them wanted to attend a lesson which starts with the lecturer's explanation and then proceeds to group discussion and group work. Many also wanted to listen to explanation accompanied by examples, then engage in individual writing exercise. Thus, they seemed to want a lesson which could strike a balance between one-way lecturer's explanation and individual exercises.

Results

The first question to be answered is whether there was a change in the students' knowledge about multimodality concept after having been taught multimodal creative writing. The analysis of the respondents' answers at the beginning of the class revealed that most of them did not know about multimodality. Their average score was only 0.406 on a 5-point scale. This was evidence that they were ignorant about such a concept. In contrast, near the end of the semester when they were once again asked what multimodal was, their average was now 4.187. This was taken as proof that they did learn effectively the concept of multimodality in the course of the semester. The following are the results of the pre-test and post-test:

Table 5

The Descriptive Statistics of the Two Tests

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	0.41	4.19
Standard Deviation	0.61	1.41
Mode	0	5
Median	0	5

The T-Test for paired sample showed a t value of -14.00 and p value of 0.000. Clearly, there was a significant difference between their understanding of multimodal at the beginning of the course and their understanding of the concept by the end of the semester.

In terms of what teaching method the students expected, the questionnaires at the beginning of the semester showed that the respondents wanted to have direct explanation from the lecturer before they were assigned to do group work and group discussion. Many also wanted to see plenty of examples before being assigned to produce works themselves.

At the end of the second stage, a short interview was conducted to identify their opinions. The following table sums up their responses:

Table 6

Opinions on the Creative Writing Course

Question 1.	**Has this Creative Writing class met your expectation?**
Answer	Yes. The course has taught us how to write fiction and other literary works in a variety of ways. The class has enabled us to create something based on our imagination.
Question 2.	**What do you think of the teaching techniques used in the class?**
Answer	It was very clear because the lecturers explained and gave examples. But there should be a clear link between the multimodal elements (video, podcast, and photos) and the main essays.

Question 3.	**Was the multimodal concept clear, interesting and has it enabled you to produce a multimodal essay independently?**
Answer	The teaching has made it clear and interesting, but there should be more explanation on the assignments and the relation between videos and the whole essays.

A separate interview was conducted with the lecturer. Below is the summary of the lecturer's responses:

The teaching of multimodal opens up a new perspective for the students and the lecturer alike. For students, this approach lets them practice something fun, and this motivates them to complete the assignments that I give. To me as the lecturer, the teaching of multimodal requires me to understand the concept and seek for examples of multimodal works and then prepare the teaching.

Discussion

The analysis of the second stage showed that most of the respondents preferred videos. Understandably, they liked videos because the media could present a more vivid, more lively, and more dynamic images which as a whole could trigger a more vivid imagination in their mind. Videos which started a travel report enabled them to feel more intensely what was put in writing. This is in accordance with what Williams (2014) stated that students' opinion in the digital era about writing was very much shaped by the massive pop culture that they enjoyed on a daily basis. Because most of the pop culture was presented through videos, they found that a narrative was more enticing when presented through videos. This tendency seemed to be promoted by features of a video which made it more lively, more dynamic, more vivid, and as a whole trigger more enticing images in their mind. Another study relevant to the use of videos was done by Yeh, Heng, and Tseng (2020). They found out that EFL students who used videos during their writing course learned to be inventive and skillful at writing with different modes.

The use of videos heightened their awareness of diverse contexts for their writing. In other words, the use of videos changed the way they approached a writing task. By showing that the students favored video making, the current study seemed to corroborate this notion.

At this stage, it seems appropriate to bring up again what Shin and Cimasko (2008) found in their research. As mentioned before, their respondents used mostly written texts to convey their points in their essays, and used other semiotic modes to express their emotional relation with their ideas. This is not much different from the result of this present study. The respondents produced a substantial amount of written narratives, and used voice, still photos, and videos to make their stories more vivid and captivating. Another study by Jun (2017) who implemented multimodal teaching to students learning business correspondence also corroborates this idea.

A particular stage in this study was to upload a model essay preceded by a podcast on Edmodo, and have the students watch it. Later, they were asked to state their opinions about the presentation. In general, the respondents found the podcast model appealing and helpful in understanding how to create a podcast that later was embedded into an essay. Their comments were in line with the conclusion, but there was one comment that stood out as particularly important. It said that the combination of podcast and written essay was interesting but instead of being the introduction to the story the podcast should tell the listeners part of the story, which then was continued to the written story. In brief, they stated that the use of podcast promoted better understanding and more enjoyment of the story, something that is indeed the purpose of incorporating podcast into stories.

The high enthusiasm about podcast was also identified by Vogt, Schaffner, Ribar and Chavez (2010) as well as Bamanger and Alhassan (2015). They noticed that respondents who were given the opportunity to listen to podcast material showed high enthusiasms for the

lecture. It seemed that podcast that was integrated into the entire creative work was met with students' positive responses.

A study that presented a rather different picture was the one by Phillips (2017) who investigated students' opinions on making podcast. Many of the respondents felt that the podcast production was time consuming, and they were not comfortable hearing their own voices. Despite the opinions, many of them also admitted that the podcast production improved their self-confidence to speak the target language.

Overall, the students found that the use of different semiotic resources in their creative writing was as exciting as it was enriching. The lecturer, as the interview above shows, seemed to share the similar feeling. Indeed, at least two recent studies by Lim (2018) and Zhang and O'Halloran (2019) supported this notion. In their study, they introduced multimodal approach to writers who regularly wrote in the conventional manner. Upon learning the multimodal technique to present their works, there was a noticeable shift from what was once conventional writing practice to a feeling of empowerment to produce refined arguments and better clarity in their writing. In a way, the students and the lecturer in this current study seemed to also have derived a sense of gaining new perspective and new spirit to produce a multimodal essay. The new approach potentially transforms the conventional approach to creative writing as new semiotic modes are infused into a creative essay. Lynch and McGowan (2017, p. 104) sums up the shift in the following lines:

> The increased complexity of overlapping and interacting semiotic modes extends creative writing practice. It creates greater opportunity to affect tone, mood, a sense of place, and a developing relationship with characters.

The enhancement of story elements in creative writing is underscored by Morley (2007). He argued that because creative writing always strives to create impressive characters

and realistic setting, multimodal approach could serve to make these elements even more refined.

The responses form the students in this current study were thus different from those in a study by Cortiana (2017), who found that her respondents' tendency to adhere firmly to their old belief about academic writing had made their works dry and formal. Different results in her study would have been obtained if the respondents were taught creative writing instead of academic writing.

Put more simply, the multimodal approach to creative writing calls for renewed attitude and techniques in weaving ideas by combining language, visual, and aural elements. Not only do creative writers have to create interesting plot and unique characters but they also have to generate coherent and seamless transition from one semiotic mode to another. Indeed, this can be perceived as a new demand on today's writers. As Skains (2017) noted, although many creative writers are starting to use digital tools in composing their works, many still lack the ability to adapt their composition process to the new demand. Certainly different skills are needed to blend different semiotic modes into a unified and appealing creative multimodal work. This is also a point made by Hundley and Holbrook (2013), who maintained that teachers, too, should adjust their mindset from teaching conventional writing to multimodal writing.

Along with the shift from conventional creative writing to multimodal creative writing, the evaluation of students' multimodal work warrants further discussion. Hafner and Ho (2020) conducted a study by interviewing teachers about how they conceived of assessment of multimodal work. They argued that it is important to assess the process, the design activity, and, most importantly, the orchestration of multimodal features. As such, the assessment should be carried out in different stages of the design activity, drawing on formative and summative tests. Thus, assessing a piece of multimodal essay should cover the planning phase,

the stages during the creation of different semiotic modes, and the final product which results from the blending of the different modes. This was also advocated by the professors in the study by Lim and Polio (2020), who essentially suggested a wide range of parameters in the assignments in a multimodal class. The current study, however, fell short of applying those principles and instead relied on a simpler scoring rubric which had yet to cover all of the aspects mentioned above.

As Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 above show, the students made a significant improvement in content, organization, and multimodality of their essays. This was similar to the result of a study by Vandommele et al. (2017) that was discussed earlier. The necessity to create multimodal essays might have made them attend to the content of their stories and the use of different semiotic resources to present their stories in a different fashion. Meanwhile, their language style did not improve significantly from the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester. The lack of differences in this area might be caused by the students' still developing language style. Being students in the fifth semester, their written language style was still far from being solid and permanent. It was still in a state of constant change, and the students had yet to establish language styles which suited the creative essays they had to write. Their styles might have been too academic for creative writing, and learning creative writing in the course of one semester probably was not sufficient to make them skillful in demonstrating a language style which suit the genre of creative writing.

The current study was limited in several aspects. First of all, it did not carry out a full experimental design to ascertain the students' gains in the creative writing skills. The study only assessed the effectiveness of the multimodal teaching by running a quasi-experimental design that did not involve rigorous random sampling, the presence of a control group, and robust statistical analyses. However, the findings, despite the limitation, should serve as preliminary results that further studies in the same area could use as a starting point. Secondly,

the study was only conducted within one semester, which was divided into 15 meetings. Extended time would have been able to generate a more elaborate outcome that described more thoroughly the implementation of the multimodal techniques.

Conclusion

The development study was primarily aimed to design a course of multimodal creative writing. The course was designed with ADDIE, with pre-test and post-tests given to know if the new approach to creative writing impacted the students' abilities and opinions. Overall, the results indicated students' and lecturer's favorable attitudes toward multimodal creative writing. The results offer an insight into how today's EFL learners perceived multimodal creative writing, inform teachers what aspects they consider important in making a seamlessly woven piece of multimodal writing, and how EFL teachers should carry out the teaching of multimodal creative writing. Nevertheless, given that this current study was limited in some ways, further developmental study should involve more students with a built-in rigorous experimental design. Notwithstanding the limitation, the results should inspire conventional creative writing classes to begin introducing multimodality approach to the course participants. In doing so, the teaching efforts should be focused on how to craft various semiotic modes and incorporate them coherently so as to create captivating essays.

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