Multiliteracies in College English Pedagogy[*]

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Due to the expanding variety of modes of communication and tools for meaning-making, multimodal representation and multiple forms of text have been a common occurrence. It is essential for today's reader/viewer to foster the capacity to critically deconstruct and reconstruct multimodal texts. And it is a must to expand traditional conceptions of literacy to multiliteracies. This paper, from the perspective of both theories and practices, explores and analyzes visual literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, critical literacy, and postmodern literacy in college English pedagogy, so as to fully develop the learners' multiliteracies.

Keywords: multiliteracies, multimodal texts, college English pedagogy

Introduction

Nowadays, due to the multiplicity of communications channels and the expansion of mass media, multimedia, and the Internet, dramatic changes have taken place in the ways how young people read and write with words and images. There seem to be few ways of escaping the fact that we are living through a moment in which literacy practices are being fundamentally altered...these changes, rapid, and unpredictable as they can be, offer all of us exciting opportunities to rethink how we communicate in words, images, and sound (Williams, 2008). Rather than an encompassing single literacy, English teachers of the 21st century must accept the changing and flexible nature of literacies that address areas as diverse as technology, multimedia, relationships, and culture (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008).

Multiliteracies

Since human beings make meaning in a variety of ways, and language learners today need to be able to cope with different kind of texts, monomodal or multimodal, linear or nonlinear, on paper or on screen, the traditional conceptions of literacy continue to expand in multiple directions, moving far beyond former emphasis on reading comprehension and writing ability. A contemporary definition of "literacy" is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Hobbs, 1997, p. 7). Rethinking the concept of literacy as one of multiliteracies focuses teaching on the modes of representation which are much broader than language alone. "Multiliteracy implies the development of functional, visual, and multimodal literacy, plurilingual awareness, critical thinking, and digital competencies" (Elsner, Armbrust, & Lohe, 2011, p. 34). The

concept of multiliteracies is based on two key premises relevant to the current, global educational and social context: (1) the expanding variety of modes of communication and tools for meaning-making, including the mass media, multimedia, and electronic hypermedia and (2) the growing importance of cultural and linguistic diversity as our communities become more globally connected (New London Group, 1996). Their research on multiliteracies further highlights the importance of creating learning environments to engage students in a wide range of literacy practices that are creative and cognitively challenging and that bring together text-based and multimedia forms of meaning making. Digital-age literacy requires students to make meaning in multimodal ways, using basic, scientific, and technological literacies; visual, gestural, and spatial literacies; information and multicultural literacies and global awareness (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Multiliteracies focus on multimodal representation and multiple forms of text. Therefore, being multiliterate requires not only the mastery of communication, but an ability to critically deconstruct and reconstruct a range of texts and other representational forms which often involve the social responsibilities and interactions .

This calls for the creation of a multimodal classroom that draws on linguistic, visual, spatial, and digital texts to support the multiliteracies, such as visual literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, critical literacy, and postmodern literacy. For example, communication technologies offer numerous digital texts for the English classroom, including online newspapers, magazine articles, audio programs, narrative films, television documentaries, blogs, and other visual, electronic, and digital media (Hobbs, 2006). Multiliteracies for the students involve not only making sense of these multimodal texts but also trying to express themselves by composing their own digital texts. During this precess, they should be told that composition does not necessarily always mean writing, and they may form their own ideas, make full use of what they have known about multimodal texts, and then "think about which media and modality best represent their ideas and how to format their pages in ways that invite their readers to select those links leading readers to relevant information" (Doering, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007, p. 43).

Visual Literacy

Anthony Pennings (2002) argues that "visual literacy is an emerging area of study which deals with what can be seen and how we interpret what is seen. It is approached from a range of disciplines that: (1) study the physical processes involved in visual perception; (2) use technology to represent visual imagery; and (3)develop intellectual strategies used to interpret and understand what is seen"[1] while Chauvin (2003) states that "visual literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in any variety of form that engages the cognitive processing of a visual image" (p. 119). Here visual images may involve body language, motion, dance, two and three dimensional works of art, photographs and clipart, films and video, museum exhibits and dioramas, advertisements, illustrated written or verbal discourse, architecture, hypermedia and visual reality experiences, and so on. Based on the above two definitions, we can see what visual literacy is:

Visual Perception → Visual Interpretation → Visual Representation

That is, the students should be guided to notice what are there in the visual images: the visual and design elements (e.g., pattern, line, shape, color, typography, and texture) presented in the multimodal texts. And then

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[1] See http//www.marist.edu/pennings/viswhatis.htm.

lead them discuss what these objects and elements mean. The visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) provides the teachers with various perspectives for attending to and interpreting visual images. For example, how various objects are organized and located in the visual image and how they interact and coordinate with other elements to make meaning, and so on. The purpose of visual literacy is to facilitate communication; the students are also supposed to be encouraged to compose their own multimodal texts, to "write" or represent their ideas in multimodal ways.

Some activities and assignments designed in English class may well enhance the students' visual literary skill. For instance, a digital image may be chosen, and the students are required to engage their visual literacy to read the image as a text and extract meaning, that is, to interpret (in written form) the image denotatively and connotatively, especially its ideological meanings constructed in particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. And they are then required to revise the image in Photoshop at their will and write a reflective paper about what they change and how it changes the message of the image. During this writing assignment, students are engaged to creating their own abstract art pieces. Students' work with an image, no matter the interpretation, the revision, or the reflection, provided them with "a different experience of learning foreign language", for young people are usually excited to work with technology when the opportunities arise. Other activities and strategies may include the following: (1) having students create titles which can only be a word or phrase for untitled pictures; (2) asking students to fill in written dialogue or speech bubbles for the characters in pictures; and (3) inviting students to use technology rather than drawing pictures by hand to illustrate a written dialogue. These activities will not only promote English language development, but also offer students the practice in integration of written text and pictures to develop multimodal meanings.

Media Literacy

The aim of media literacy is to facilitate the students to understand and enjoy how the media (television, radio, newspaper, magazine, movie, etc.) work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they reflect social reality and promote the students' active, critical engagement of media messages and media culture. It is a process of meaning construction and deconstruction with an interaction between audiences/consumers. Shepherd holds that,

> Media Literacy is an informed, critical understanding of the mass media. It involves an examination of the techniques, technologies and institutions that are involved in media production, the ability to critically analyze media messages and a recognition of the role that audiences play in making meaning from those messages.[2]

Here we can see that media literacy mainly focuses on three major aspects: mass media, how and for what purpose messages are constructed and consumed by the masses.

Mass Media → Media Messages → Audiences

Media literacy is the application of literary skills to mass media. It concerns with the mass media which may be visual in nature such as television, magazines, and may be outside the scope of visual experience such as radio and recordings. While it puts emphasis on meaning making and information/message communication, that is, how to construct messages through various media, whom these messages target at, etc., what we read on the page

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[2] See www. media-awareness.ca.

is not inherently different from what we paint in the picture or what we make in the movie; it is always the matter of message transmission. The nature of information is constantly changing; the mass media serves as an media for the masses to critically gain information they need.

As for English class, the teacher may provide opportunities for the students to get to know the mass media production in their life, and purposefully choose some teaching materials from these media, and guide them how to address the messages the media contains. For example, the class may be started by watching a video clip or looking at an image, the students visibly enjoy the clip or the image before moving on to a discussion of the creator, audience, and message as related to the topic to be talked about. Suppose the intensive reading task is about the life of trashman, the students may be required to conduct an interview of the trashmen on university campus: The whole class are divided into several groups; the interview task is supposed to be completed collaboratively (interviewing, camera shooting, post production, etc.); the interview video should be presented in class; comments and suggestions are given by the whole class. The interviews not only provide the students with the opportunity to incorporate varied linguistic modalities and languages (i.e., they used spoken and written English in class to present the interview, but spoke Chinese to ask interviewing questions to the interviewee), but also enrich their experiences of making multimodal texts cooperatively.

Newspaper and online news are very good materials for language learning and teaching, not only because of its idiomatic and updated language, but also its integration of various modes, such as video, pictures, etc. The students may be assigned a task to expressively and impressively report news in turn as warming-up exercises before each English class, the news they present with PPT are not merely duplicate of the newspapers or Internet from which they may gather their ideas, but made by themselves. And the teacher's comments are essential as an effective way to support and develop the students' media literacies.

Digital Literacy

Digital or technological literacy is a term which refers to a person's ability to use, manage, assess, and understand technology (ITEA, 2007, p. 9). In a certain degree, digital literacy is the capacity to acquire the knowledge and skill related to the digital world. Most students are more motivated to read multimodal texts from a computer or smartphone screen than pure texts without images from books at hand, and they feel far more comfortable working on a keyboard or touch screen than writing in a notebook. It is no denying that the knowledge from Internet teaches the students both traditional practices of reading and writing and new literacy practices such as appropriation of media content, networking, negotiation of social contexts, and working with multiple media (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006). The students have often been told that their online activities are a waste of time and sitting at their computers for hours on end is always socially isolated, but we have come to accept that the interactive nature of online reading and writing not only enables them to learn about traditional literacy concepts, but also the essential social skills they should have, such as collaboration and knowledge sharing, and they may very well be communicating with people they know in a variety of different social contexts and locations with a variety of literacy practices.

Although traditional print-based texts are multimodal in the sense that they combine written words with visual pictures and design elements, it is digital technology, which integrates text, graphics, visuals, sound, animations, etc., that has dramatically expanded the meaning making potentials for the creation of complex

web-mediated messages. The web page designer must not only create effective messages that fulfill readers' information needs and realize the intended communicative goal but also make it usable, meeting readers' expectations regarding user-friendly design, hypertext navigability, skimmable content, and so on.

For instance, the teacher may ask students to create a class website (English version) collaboratively, such as how they will choose to represent the class, how they will determine audience concerns, how best to combine various modes such as visual images, written language, design elements and other semiotic resources, and so on. Certain instructions may be provided by the teacher, for instance, the webpage readers are usually impatient, and process information in chunks, skim and skip the text, expect essential information up front, and so on. In the final stage, the student groups may demonstrate their finished website sections in PowerPoint presentations, during which they explain their choices regarding the content, design, information relevance and clarity, navigation, interaction, and balance between text and visuals. The students from other groups then could give their comments and contribute to the works in the class, building their collaborative literacy skills. A number of aspects will be considered in the assessment of the website section: for example, whether the language used is created or copied, grammatically acceptable or not; whether the color scheme and layout are appropriate or not; whether the images used are created or borrowed; whether the visuals complement, illustrate, and support the textual elements or not; whether the buttons and hyperlinks function well or not; whether the length of loading time is reasonable or not; whether the website section is easy to navigate or not, and so on.

It is safe to say that readers, viewers, and listeners today are "drawn in" by the new technologies as they become active partners, users, and producers of communication, due to the possibility to publish anything they like on the Internet (Rosenberg, 2010, p. 8). In this sense, an online community or QQ Group for English learning may be created according to the teacher's proposal. It serves as a forum for the members of the group (all the students are required to join in the Group) to discuss what confuse them in English learning, and share their English learning strategies and experiences in which language learning synergies may occur as well as expertise from teacher and successful learners can be disseminated. A moderator of the community or group may be designated or volunteered to supervise the members to produce and comment on the texts in English, and initiate an interesting topic in the Group Announcement on a regular basis. And assessment is given by the end of the term in terms of the quality and quantity of each member's posted texts.

Just as Gee (2004) argued, literacy skills are learned more thoroughly through this kind of experience and acquisition than through direct instruction. Then it is essential that we pay more attention to how to guide the students to take advantage of the platform of Internet and improve their language skills through online reading and writing.

Critical Literacy

The term critical literacy refers to use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life (Luke, 2004). And most often, it is to interrogate the textual representations and reveal their underlying ideological, social, and cultural meaning. Lewison, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) hold that critical literacy is characterized by four related components: (1) disrupting the commonplace; (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints; (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues; and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. Critical literacy aims to

develop both critical understanding and active participation, so as to enhance people's critical and creative abilities, particularly, how to use multiple texts to represent and analyze social fields and heir systems of exchange—with an eye to transforming social relations and promoting social justice. Critical literacy entails a process of naming and renaming the world, seeing its patterns, designs, and complexities, and developing the capacity to redesign and reshape it (New London Group, 1996). Critical literacy practices often involve students' taking an skeptical and evaluative stance and acting upon these stances as they confront what happened in their lives and in the world around them. That is, the teachers are supposed to encourage students to sensibly challenge whatever they perceive, tell them seeing is not always believing, everything needs to be taken in critically, and what counts is to have their own thinking and form their own ideas. Especially in this digital world, without the necessary critical literacy skills to evaluate web-based information, young people will be seriously disadvantaged, misled, and probably confused by what they locate online. So critical literacy is an essential practice for students as the Internet is largely unregulated; they need to be instructed in how to look at available resources critically and how to assess various texts as reliable in this age of digital literacy (Lund, 2006).

In English class, for the text analysis, the students are supposed to be inspired to have their own voices as to what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, and what kind of textual evidence can support them; how specific individuals, ideas, or events interweave and interact to develop the central idea; how to evaluate the effectiveness of the structure and the rhetoric the author uses in his/her exposition or argument, etc. Based on independent thinking and collaborative discussion, the students are required to present their own ideas clearly and persuasively either in class or out of class through E-mail. During this process, different ideas are encouraged and welcomed. The students may also be assigned a term task as a supplementary activity to foster their critical literacy: My view on… The topic should be confined to the hot social issues, and the idea should be original and persuasive. It is not an isolated writing task, but a multimodal product. The students may choose the topic based on their own interests, and submit their works anytime within the semester through Internet in the form of WORD or PPT. Excellent or typical works which involve critical but convincing ideas and a fine combination various modes to convey meaning may be presented in class to stir students' interests and engagement. This kind of multimodal learning practices also allows the students to critically examine how different texts convey meaning, how the modes convey meaning differently, and how texts evoke different responses from the reader or exactly, the viewer.

Postmodern Literacy

Young people today are postmodern, no longer striving for stable, self-shaped futures; most of them are disconnected from family and social institutions, live amid constant change and ambiguity, and hang out in such nonplaces as cyberspace (Bean & Moni, 2003). And in the new media age, where the screen is the dominant form of communication, linear textual structures have almost faded away, young people are becoming adept at reading in "non-linear reading paths" (Kress, 2003, p. 160). That is, youngsters are supposed to move quickly across media, jumping from print to digital text to video to audio and become sophisticated readers of postmodern literature in the new time.

Picture books have always been an important reading resource in language learning, and traditionally seen as the province of the young, inexperienced reader. However, contemporary picture books which contain theme,

issues, artwork, and quality writing are no longer just for young kids. Drawing upon meta-fictive and postmodern writing techniques, contemporary picture books, in which author and illustrator consciously employ a range of devices that are designed to interrupt reader expectation and produce multiple meanings and readings of the book, appeal to the readers with a much wider age span and range of reading abilities. The postmodern picture books may pose a challenge to the readers for their distinctive features: indeterminacy in written or illustrative text, plot, character, or setting; unusual design and layout; contesting discourses between illustrative and written text; intertextuality and the availability of multiple readings and meanings.

The contemporary picture books may provide the readers with the access to complex writing techniques and literary elements, such as imagery, central tension, flashback, metaphor, and so on. The artistic techniques such as postmodernism, cubism, surrealism, and impressionism contained in the illustrations and visual elements of the picture books may also increase the readers appreciation of art itself. Young people in today's society experience more variety and complexity in the texts and visual media, and the postmodern picture books may well serve as a bridge between traditional written text and new multimodal texts. Due to the non-linear structures and complex visual designs, the picture books contain multiple perspectives and require the readers to make their own decisions how to navigate the texts and how to explore, construct meaning as they experience the story presented.

English postmodern picture books may serve as a good support for students to learn English as well as their development of multiliteracies. Teachers need to get over their biases about this literary format and take advantage of picture books to facilitate their teaching. For example, a task concerning picture books may be assigned to the students: "My Favorite Picture Book" which requires them to find and read the available English picture books, print or digital, and give a brief introduction to and appreciation of the favorite one with PPT presentation. The multimodal works are supposed to include: the information about the author and illustrator and the insight learned from these information; the language and artistic technique analysis; the interplay between the texts and the illustrations; the personal response brought forward during the reading; and the sociocultural context. It is a no-easy task which involves much multimodal work, but it is during the process that the multiliteracies, let alone the postmodern literacy, have been well developed.

Design in Multiliteracies

An essential concept of multiliteracies is design, which equips the learners with the capacities of not only making meaning with traditional patterns and conventions, but also being active designers of new meanings. The six design elements developed by New London Group in the meaning making process are linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal patterns of meaning which involve one or more of the other five modes.

According to New London Group (1996), the framework of multiliteracies pedagogy involves: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice, which may occur simultaneously, randomly or be "related in complex ways…each of them repeatedly revisited at different levels" (New London Group, 2000, p. 32). The framework means in the pedagogy of multiliteracies, the students' meaning making should be situated in real world contexts, and the teacher's guidance with an explicit metalanguage of design is essential. The students are supposed to interpret and construct the designs of meaning in the social context, and constantly transform existing meanings to design new meanings.

So the ideal classroom should make learning shared, distributed and provide the students with opportunities for collaborative designing of texts that are sufficiently scaffolded by experts such as capable peers, teachers, or books, and Internet. An example in this case is that, in English class, the students may be assigned a task of role play. The whole class are divided into two or three groups, each group are supposed to work collaboratively: Who serve as the playwright to adapt the text into the script, who act as director to assign the roles, who are in charge of the props, costumes, background music and scenery, who are the make-up man, who gives the soliloquy, when to rehearse, etc. Before the implementation of the task, an overt instruction may be given by the teacher, which involves the basic knowledge of drama and the steps in the roleplay designing. With an aim to apply a pedagogy of multiliteracies throughout this learning process, the teacher may state the requirements of the role play, and stress that multimodal patterns of meaning making , such as linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and so on should be given special attention, so as to scaffold the students to make intuitive links with existing knowledge, and transform them to the design of new meanings.

Conclusion

A key aspect of multiliteracies involves the integration of multiple modalities and media into literacy practices. In English classroom, anything that can convey meaning is a text, providing the teacher with a variety of literacy activities, and the students with an access to multimodal texts. Supporting the notion of becoming literate instead of being literate (Unsworth, 2001), a discerning English teacher should embrace the constantly advancing technology in his/her teaching to create multimodal texts and align his/her pedagogies with the digital world and context that surrounds them. And more importantly, with his/her professional ingenuity, the teacher should afford a voice to students who are frequently silenced in the traditional English classroom and enable them advance confidently in their language and literacy abilities.

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