EFFECTIVENESS OF MULIMODALITY PEDAGOGIES

IN COLLEGE ENGLISH INTENSIVE READING CLASSES

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dong Isbister, Ph.D.

The quick development of information technology has had a great impact on how people communicate as well as on classroom pedagogy. Nowadays, teachers impart knowledge by means of various modalities, including videos, animation, diagrams, and PowerPoint (PPT). Hence, developments in pedagogy have brought about the rise of multimodality pedagogy in the classroom.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of multimodality pedagogies in English-language intensive reading classes at the college level. It selects four cases from a national college English teaching contest and closely analyzes how teacher-contestants use verbal and nonverbal modalities to achieve their teaching objectives. Two standards are used to assess their teaching effectiveness: students' reactions and judges' comments. The study also discusses limitations of the scope and depth of analysis and makes recommendations for instructors who are interested in multimodality pedagogies in teaching activities.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Reading plays an important role in English learning. Only when students understand the language and read well can they continue to learn new knowledge and cultivate the other skills (e.g. listening, speaking, writing, and translating). On most English tests in China, teachers place an emphasis on English reading and they give it higher marks than the other skills.

The teaching method teachers use to teach reading classes vary. In traditional English reading classes, the teacher's job is to teach knowledge mainly by spoken language and written language. Therefore, teacher's discourse is the main teaching method, which means the teacher plays the dominant role in class. With the increasing development of information technology, multimodal pedagogy arises in the new century. The influence of information technology on people's communication, as well as on the interaction of teachers and students, is great. Currently, people send information through graphics, pictures, audio messages, and videos instead of verbal language and writing. The same changes have occurred in the classroom that knowledge can be imparted from the teachers by means of various modalities, including videos, animations, PowerPoint, or diagrams in the classroom setting.

With changing classroom settings, multimodality pedagogies have emerged and have been widely utilized in college English classes. Some instructors teaching intensive reading classes have undoubtedly integrated multimodality pedagogies into their instructional activities.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of multimodality pedagogies in intensive reading classes. It selects four cases from a national college English teaching contest in 2014 and closely analyzes how teachers use verbal and non-verbal modalities to achieve their teaching objectives. Two standards are used to assess their teaching effectiveness: students' reactions and

the judges' comments.

Statement of the Problem

Courses in college English reading in China have two major problems: one is that the traditional teaching method is simple and boring. Many teachers teach the text through grammar and vocabulary; they merely explain language fragments of discourse in detail. The other major problem is that the text reading pedagogy is tedious to some degree and fails to cultivate the students' strategies of reading (Yan, 2014). Teachers usually teach English reading by focusing on grammar and translation of reading materials. It is urgent to study the modern teaching method to enhance the students' reading skill and keep up with a fast developing learning environment.

The impacts of high technology and multimedia on the learning environment are profound. The traditional class changed with various modalities which can improve attention rates. This change attracted some researchers to study the reasons behind the popularity of multimodality application in language teaching. In the 2000s, the analysis and application of multimodality in teaching became hot topics abroad. Fisher (2003) posed questions of the PPT application in class. Guichon & Mcloran (2008) probed into the effects of multimodality on second language learners. Some scholars have explored how multimodal learning is applied in foreign language teaching in college (Zhang, 2009, 2010; Gou, 2011). They discussed the effects of multimodal teaching that used PowerPoint texts or the role it played in improving language teaching.

The problem that needs to be addressed is how multimodality pedagogies help instructors of college English intensive reading teach more effectively. This study will analyze four cases at the fourth National English Contest sponsored by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2014 and discuss the effectiveness of using multimodality pedagogies in intensive reading

classes.

Definition of Terms

Multimodality: Multimodality means the combination of different semiotic modes for example, language and music. It is defined as a product as "the material articulation of the semiotic event" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001). That is to say multimodality is the employment of some semiotic modes in designing a semiotic product or event, as well as the certain process during which some modalities work together to achieve targets of communicative process. Multimodality pedagogies used in instructional activities in the teaching refers to various semiotic modes that teachers make use of to present learning contents, such as language, images, audio, chart, and /or pictures.

Intensive Reading: The word "intensive" is used for the name as this course normally covers a limited number of texts a semester but thoroughly and slowly. In an intensive reading class, the teacher takes students through a text on a word-by-word and then sentence-by-sentence basis, explaining language points, leading pattern drills and translating difficult sentences in the text before engaging students with comprehension questions at the discourse level (Feng, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The study is designed to analyze how teachers use multimodality pedagogies to teach intensive reading classes by using verbal and non-verbal language modalities. It selects four cases from a national college English teaching contest to assess the effectiveness of utilizing multimodalities to fulfill the teaching objectives in intensive reading classes. In the end, the study offers recommendations for teachers by observing the four excellent teachers'

performances in the competition.

Significance of the Study

When teaching English intensive reading, teachers pay more attention to vocabulary, grammar, and language points, ignoring the students' learning enthusiasm and initiative, making it difficult for students' reading ability to improve. It is, therefore, necessary to study the method of teaching college English intensive reading.

As to the previous studies on intensive reading from the traditional teaching method, McCormic and Donaton studied reading skills and wrote *Toward a Model of Reading Attitude Acquisition* (1994); there was also something about the reading strategy written by Anderson: *Exploring Second Language Reading: Issues and Strategies* (2004); *Key Issues in Teaching EFL/ESL Intensive Reading: A Videotaped Self-Observation Report* (Widodo, 2009); *Principles of Multimedia Learning Based on Social Cues: Personalization, Voice and Image Principles* (Mayer, 2005). Besides, Gu (2007) discussed that multimodal teaching is better than traditional teaching for two main reasons. Firstly, multimodal resources, such as texts, pictures, and sounds together through technology, draw students' interests and stimulate students' visual and auditory senses. It is more effective than monomodality. Secondly, in terms of time, traditional teachers' oral language and blackboard-writing seems time-consuming. In multimodal teaching, teachers can use technology to present important knowledge points, which can save time.

Few of these studies discussed multimodal pedagogies in college English intensive reading classes. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the multimodality application in four selected classes at the national college English teaching contest in Shanghai (2014) and explores how effective the multimodal teaching can be in higher education institutions.

Methodology

The researcher watched twenty videos selected from the contest and selected four intensive reading classes. In particular, the researcher observed and took notes of the four teachers' instructional activities that integrate verbal and non-verbal modalities into teaching reading skills. A detailed case analysis was conducted afterwards to assess the effectiveness of multimodality pedagogies.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Chinese researchers and instructors have conducted research in the context of multimodality pedagogies and their implementation in teaching various English courses. Present studies of multimodality pedagogies in English language teaching mainly focus on English writing, speaking, listening, and reading. This chapter will address two questions and identify the gap between existing research and the proposed research focus in this study.

How Do Researchers in China Contextualize and Define Multimodality Pedagogies?

Researchers have tried to define multimodality as it is used in teaching and to bring multimodality pedagogies into use in China (Li, 2003). During the early phase of multimodality studies, Li (2003) was the first to introduce and define multimodality for Chinese readers. Multimodality is the combination of different semiotic modalities, such as language and music, in a communicative artifact or event (Li, 2003). Several years later, Zhu (2007) explored the background of multimodality use, noted that "nowadays the screen occupies the dominant media," with multimedia gradually replacing traditional images and writing, and explained how the term *multimodality* is used within the Chinese context. Both authors apply multimodality as it is used abroad to the Chinese cultural context to propose a basic theory of multimodality and initiate a new trend in pedagogy (Li, 2003; Zhu, 2007).

An increasing number of scholars have carried out research on the relationship between multimodality pedagogies and teaching. The following sections will focus in detail on multimodality pedagogies for teaching English reading in college.

How Is the Multimodality Pedagogy Used in Teaching Reading?

Some scholars in the literature who study multimodality pedagogies, such as Lv and Mu (2014) and Song (2013), put forward recommendations as to how the new pedagogies can stimulate students in their reading classes as well as enhancing students' learning.

Scholars such as Lv and Mu (2014) have researched the effect of multimodal teaching on college students' reading ability. "We all remember exciting, frightening, or dramatic events more easily" (Lv & Mu, 2014, p.131), and resources used in multiple modalities such as images, video, and audio in an actual learning environment can be attention-holding stimuli for students to learn from. The results indicated that multimodal pedagogies have positive effects on students' reading ability, suggesting that multimodality pedagogies that include words, pictures, music, and the Internet can fully mobilize students' enthusiasm and stimulate their reading. At the same time, multiple modalities with colorful images can enhance information retention.

Researchers have also studied the use of multimodal teaching of college reading in particular. Song (2013) explored multimodality pedagogies used in teaching intensive reading and addressed the question of effective application of multimodalities in the classroom: How does the multimodal design of class activities enhance the students' learning input and make the output efficient? The outcome of this research yielded answers to the research question by means of the teacher activating gestural modality to enhance the students' output. This was achieved through classroom discussion, dubbing, role play, and imitating the teacher's reading. The results implied that multimodality can be applied in English teaching to great effect. It can help students grasp the key points of course content through a design that incorporates linguistic elements, visual elements, audio elements, and gestural elements in multimodal design.

These researchers have contributed to the development of multimodality pedagogies, which

are the basis of the present study on how learners and teachers interact with multimodal materials in the English reading classroom. Previous scholars have noted that the application of multimodality has become a recent trend in foreign language teaching.

Xu and Xia (2009) have discussed how the basic reasons for the popularity of multimodality pedagogies in language teaching lie in the applicability of high technology: classrooms are equipped with multimedia devices; many students have access to computers and computer courses, and computer rooms and libraries are connected to the network and staffs of computer technicians. These conditions provide the hardware and technical support for college English teaching. Moreover, the research results indicate that multimodality plays an important role in foreign language teaching. It can be assumed from this literature that multimodality pedagogies influence English writing, listening, and reading.

Researchers who have addressed this topic, including researchers abroad (Wyatt. Smith & K. Kimber, 2009) agree that multimodality pedagogies and research into modern-day multimodal texts and practices are still in their infancy (Lv & Mu, 2014; Song, 2013), especially for the teaching of English intensive reading at the college level. Most research focuses on the method's application to language teaching, specifically with respect to listening and writing abilities, while a few studies address college intensive reading classes. Hence, it is of great necessity to probe into the multimodal pedagogies used in English intensive teaching. This thesis attempts to research effectiveness of multimodality pedagogies in a college English reading class and put forward methods to enhance the students' reading ability.

Chapter III: Effectiveness of Multimodality Pedagogy: Case Analysis

Four cases were selected to examine the effectiveness of multimodality pedagogy in English reading classes. These cases were from the Shanghai Foreign Language National English Contest held in 2014. The teachers were from four different universities. Each was given 25 minutes to teach a demonstration class on intensive reading to a group of sophomores from Shanghai International Studies University. The reading materials were handed out to the students in advance. The several judges were doctorate-holding English-language professionals affiliated with prominent universities. Each of the four contestants taught one of these four lessons: "How to fall in love with math," "The liberator: Bill Grattan," "Success," and "Are we raising a generation of spoiled brats?" The lessons were recorded on video and made accessible to researchers and educators.

Two kinds of reading objectives put forward by teachers, skimming and scanning, were selected for the following analysis. Major modalities are divided into verbal and nonverbal language modalities. Multimodality in teaching takes advantage of the various semiotic modalities that teachers make use of to present learning content, knowledge points, difficult sentences, and so on. The results have been analyzed to show how the teachers adopted multiple modalities to reach the two reading objectives in accordance with two measurements—the students' reactions and the judges' comments. In the end, the study also demonstrated the findings of the common features of effective use and put forward the implications for teachers about multimodality pedagogies in English intensive reading.

Reading Objective: Skimming in Teaching

This part analyzes how three teachers used multimodality activities to reach the reading objective of skimming. The researcher collected data by reviewing each class and assessing different modality combinations evident in the class activities.

The first teacher, a female instructor, guided students through listening and reading tasks to fulfill the reading objective. Students were asked to listen to an audio recording and complete a fill-in-the-blank exercise with detailed information. The audio modality was used to attract students' attention; its main purpose was to give students a general idea of what the beauty of math is and to supply background information on the reading topic. The students were able to complete most of the blanks; their success in finishing this task can be interpreted as a positive reaction to the modality.

Next, the teacher presented the text structure in a brief outline form, dividing the concepts into the four parts shown in Figure 1. Using a flow chart as a visual modality allowed the material to be presented more directly and clearly. She then had the students sit up straight and have a careful look at the structure chart; some nodded their heads to show they understood the difficult passage. The visual and verbal language modalities were combined to help students grasp the main themes in the teaching material by greatly mobilizing the students' enthusiasm and initiative.
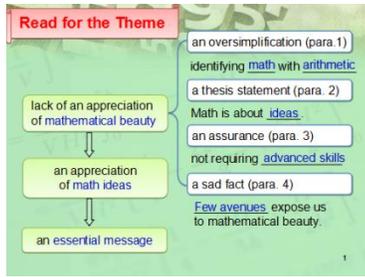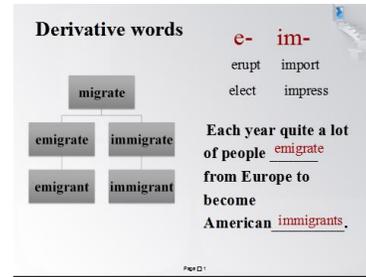
Figure 1

Figure 2

The second teacher, also a female instructor, prepared different reading activities designed to accomplish the teaching objective, with modalities including word study and question-and-answer activities for the students. After the lead-in, as shown in Figure 2, the teacher used a box-style chart to show the relationship between two new words, "emigrate" and "immigrate," and make it simple for students to understand their derivatives. Words play an important role in learning to read English, so students' English vocabulary can be expanded by the use of a directive visual modality. When this method of word study proved effective, students nodded their heads, indicating they had learned the new words, and answered the word choice questions given on the PowerPoint (PPT) quickly. That is to say, they had mastered these new words with the help of multimodality pedagogies.

In the third section of this demonstration class, students uncovered the main ideas of the essay they had been assigned, in which a former student reminisces about his professor, who he calls "The Liberator." The students did this by constructing the liberator's image through short sentences in text form, complemented by the visual modality of PPT. Both modalities can enhance students' ability to read by skimming, which was developed further through logical questions asked them about the content.

The third teacher, also a female instructor, taught about parenting using video-based text analysis as well as structure analysis. The teacher led in by offering a humorous greeting that activated the atmosphere: "After seeing two gentlemen in a row, you guys must be glad to see a fairy lady here." This greeting served an interpersonal function by narrowing the social gap between the teacher and her students. Her verbal introduction was also praised by judges, who observed that "the teacher has fluent oral English to communicate with students." In addition, the teacher frowned confusedly when students were not active.

Next, she used a video clip from a movie depicting a conflict between a son and his father over the 42-year-old son's lazy behavior with respect to his inability to find a job. The funny plot and dialog were presented in order to motivate students' thinking on the topic of parenting first, activating students' brains to prepare them for reading the difficult article to come. The next part of the class was devoted to text analysis, conducted by means of a fast-reading exercise applied by using verbal language and text modalities. Students were told to read quickly in three minutes in class and then to answer questions. Therefore, this activity was designed to make students view the big picture of the article by combining verbal and text modalities. The judges commented that the teacher was able to arrange many activities, including interesting videos and moving stories, which allowed her to teach what could have been a boring reading exercise effectively and vividly. The reading objective can thus be achieved recreationally.

Reading Objective: Scanning in Teaching

Scanning is a reading technique that is used for finding specific information quickly. The last teacher, a male instructor taught about success. The teaching passage was from a satiric novel written by Calvin Trillin on the topic of success, and it provided a means by which the

teacher instructed students to master the reading skill of scanning. He made good use of charts to illustrate the logical order of the knowledge points.

Next, four analytical questions about the text had been asked ahead of the class reading that were aimed at developing the learners' scanning skill. The details the questions called for could be found easily by scanning through the passage, which was written across three parallel text boxes on the PPT slides. The PPT chart revealed a clear and proper logic to learners, telling them to skim a passage and comprehend only the main ideas within the text. In addition, the teacher provided examples and explained tips in his own words. He told students to read quickly only for the main points and gave encouragement to the students, telling them, for instance, "You have done a good job!" Teaching language appropriately can not only make class activities run smoothly but can also benefit the students' learning.

In the comments on his class, the judges praised his good use of multimedia in support of teaching links and noted that pictures, videos, and PPT text were used properly to inspire higher participation rates in students. They also observed that the teacher adapted well to the students' different reactions. The teacher's verbal language and the PPT text modality were utilized to achieve satisfactory class efficiency and to help them grasp this reading skill.

Major Findings

After doing empirical research and gathering data, the author found similarities across the classes that were beneficial for college English teaching from the multimodal perspective. The similarities are discussed below:

1. In the classroom, teachers used a variety of modalities in teaching to help attain the teaching objective, among which the two most commonly used were visual and verbal language modalities. Other than these, classroom design, the teacher's body language, and teaching PPT

courseware constituted teaching modalities. The functions of the teacher's verbal language were significant in several domains, including greeting the students, explaining the difficulties in the material, completing the unknown information on the PPT slides, and interacting with students. Almost any teacher can teach the whole class in English, using Chinese only for translating difficult sentences. Halliday (1985) maintains the opinion that language is the product of social activities and believes the interpersonal function of language is "to express social and personal relations." The spoken language creates an English-speaking atmosphere for students to learn in a more authentic environment. Meanwhile, humorous comments can stimulate students' interests in exploring and having fun in learning.

2. In different classes, teachers used different combinations of modalities that were most suitable for their respective instructional activities. They explained picture and text modalities or audio and video modalities in the PPT courseware through language, also using body language to interact with students to improve efficiency. They usually presented these words in a box or chart to demonstrate the logic of class activities. Audio and video modalities were selected relatively less frequently.

Whatever the frequency of the different modalities used, most class activities were carried out using more than one. Audio recordings could be used to supplement text information related to the class topic and to reinforce the visual effect to present a summary. Visual modalities enhanced the effect of audio modalities by vividly propelling students' understandings.

3. Among the similarities in the use of multimodal teaching was the use of flexible combinations of multimodalities. Exquisite PPT courseware design and flexible use of PPT courseware was another similarity across the teaching demonstrations. PPT courseware can be a powerful tool to help students overcome learning difficulties. Teachers put the important and

difficult points on the PPT courseware screen, while well-thought-out arrangements in terms of size and color allow the students to obtain language and language skills. In addition, the design and selection of multimodalities are not arbitrary but should build on the content of the teaching materials. According to Zhang Zheng (2011), content and cohesion should be perfectly drawn together by the design. Teachers should select modalities that best convey the meaning of the material when designing their courses.

Some examples of body language used as teaching modalities could be observed in the teacher's gestures and facial expressions. For instance, teachers made frequent eye contact with students. The topic about loving math as a subject required the teacher to create a warm atmosphere in class, so maintaining and keeping frequent eye contact helped the teacher communicate with students effectively through body language.

Second, the most prominent body language technique lay in the teacher smiling frequently. The second teacher tended to look at students with a warm smile and spoke in a soft voice while cultivating the appearance of a gentle and good-tempered mother, all of which allowed her inspiring words to enhance the students' confidence.

The third teacher bent down to the height of the seated students and gazed at one student while listening carefully with soft eyes. Her teaching method placed emphasis on establishing communication with students. Moreover, her bending down made the relationship between her and her students more equal and made her interactions with students more effective.

Implications and Limitations

This study tries to explore the effectiveness of applying multimodality pedagogy to college classes. The empirical research provides multimodal models for the teaching of English reading in the college setting. Good reading comprehension is the goal of all students and is crucial to college success. The author hopes this research can inspire other teachers and researchers in their teaching and study in order to advance teaching developments in college English. The major findings are summarized below.

Integrated use of multimodalities. Multimodal teaching is a method in which the teacher can use multimedia to the fullest. By selecting different modalities, the teacher is able to stimulate students to use a variety of senses to acquire knowledge through reading and achieve the main goals the teaching context presents to them as objectives. It is fundamental for the teacher to design and integrate different modalities according to students' varying learning styles and their own teaching objectives.

In the first class, the teacher, Tao, designed the intensive reading for sophomore students. The first prize was awarded to her because of her ability to integrate multimodalities to achieve a highly efficient English class.

The teachers' body language was also very important, including posture, gestures, eye movements, and facial expressions. It was used to convey interpersonal meanings between teachers and students. In an example of gesture use, one teacher offered her hands to invite a boy to express his opinion with confidence. Similarly, a warm smile and an affirmative nod indicated a lot for students.

Teachers' self-assessment. Teachers are advised to improve their teaching pedagogies and to reflect on their own styles of teaching to determine how best they can integrate the application of modalities. The crucial factor in teaching multimodal evaluation is teachers' self-assessment.

First, teaching multimodal evaluation means assessing the teaching process, including the advantages and disadvantages of multimodal discourse. The foundation of successful teaching depends largely on the teacher's gradual progress and critical self-reflection. This is especially true in college classrooms that are not dictated by clear teaching aims or that are subject to a strict examination and systemic evaluation system. It is necessary, then, for multimodal English teaching, that teachers perform self-assessments. Some of the approaches by which teachers can effectively assess themselves include watching videos of themselves in the class and observing students' feedback. Through self-assessment, the teacher can find and address problems and keep up with developments in multimodal pedagogy for improving their college classes.

Limitations. First, the sample size was not big enough. Only four teachers were involved in the research, which reduces the persuasiveness of the study. There were not enough good examples for a full comprehension of multimodal teaching. Due to the limited time frames, not all competitors could present their prepared class content completely. They had only 25 minutes to demonstrate their topics and pedagogy.

Moreover, the researcher could only base her research of the different modalities on the teachers' performance and feedback from a few students. Therefore, it is better to take into consideration both students' behaviors and teachers' attitudes toward using the multimodality when preparing for a real classroom. Meanwhile, the author had questions she would have liked to ask the teachers with respect to the PPT courseware, but the author could not achieve this goal because of the case study methodology in use.

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When it comes to integrating multimodalities in different classes, the teacher should design various modalities, including linguistic elements, visual elements, and audio elements, in accordance with difficult points and major tasks that are not easy for students to understand. Teachers can also make good use of body language and PPT to teach intensive reading effectively.

The results of this study point to practical suggestions for applying multimodality pedagogy in college English classes all around the country.

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