

Article

The Future of TESOL with Multimodality

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Abstract

The future of TESOL must engage critically with the multimodal turn, acknowledging the shifting landscape of communication in a digital age where meaning-making extends beyond linguistic forms to encompass a range of semiotic resources, such as images, gestures, sounds, and spatial designs. This paper argues for a twofold agenda: augmenting English language learning with multimodality and broadening the scope of literacy education to include multimodal literacy. This involves leveraging multimodal resources not merely as supplementary tools but as integral components of language instruction, thereby enriching learners' communicative competence in authentic and diverse contexts. The paper calls for a strategic and systemic response from the TESOL community, advocating for research-informed pedagogies, policy frameworks that recognize the importance of multimodal literacy, and targeted professional development for teachers.

Keywords

Multimodality, digital technology, semiotic modes, literacy, multiliteracies

1 The Multimodal Turn

TESOL, as an international association, was founded in the United States in 1966 with the goal to advance “professional expertise in English language teaching to speakers of other languages in multilingual contexts worldwide through professional learning, research, standards, and advocacy” (TESOL, n.d.). English language teaching and learning in the last 50 years has been shaped by development in linguistics concepts such as communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and the view of language as a resource for meaning-making (Halliday, 1978). In recent decades, TESOL has also expanded its definition of the English language to include World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Kachru & Nelson, 2006), emphasizing cultural sensitivity, acknowledging the diverse contexts and varieties of English used globally. In tandem with the advances of technology for learning in the digital age, TESOL has also incorporated digital tools and resources as well as online teaching as part of English language learning, with the international association hosting communities of practice that include Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Intercultural communication (TESOL, n.d.). It is heartening to observe

that TESOL has been both responsive and inclusive in engaging with the contemporary English language learning demands over the years.

In responding to the timely theme of the special issue on the future of TESOL, my paper presents an argument for the value of TESOL to recognize the increasingly multimodal nature of contemporary communication, as well as the new language and literacy demands on learners today. These demands emerge as they navigate blurred boundaries between the physical and online worlds, characterised by the prevalence of social media and the increasing integration of generative AI in communication. I argue that the future of TESOL with multimodality must involve augmenting English language learning with multimodality as well as broadening literacy learning to include multimodality.

Multimodality is about attending to the full range of semiotic modes in communication. Semiotic modes are socially shaped and culturally given resources for meaning-making (Kress, 2010) that include speech, writing, sound, music, images, colours, layout, and gestures. The English language is always situated in context with other multimodal resources. For example, in both print and digital texts, words are expressed with colours and fonts that adds a layer of meaning to the semantics of the language. Words are frequently situated with images and are often embedded within multimedia presentations.

The ‘multimodal turn’ (Jewitt, 2008) marks a fundamental shift in our understanding of literacy and can be traced back to the multiliteracies manifesto put forth by the New London Group (1996). In their seminal work, the traditional notion of literacy—centred around the mastery of reading and writing in a standardised, prestige variety of language—was challenged. The New London Group (1996) argues that meaning is constructed not solely through language but also through visual, auditory, gestural, spatial, and multimodal modes. As such, multiliteracies represent the broadened conceptualisation of literacy which accounts for multimodality.

This broadened conceptualisation of literacy is accentuated even more so in the digital age, where advances in technology have afforded unprecedented opportunities for multimodal communication (Kress, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2017). The literacy practices amongst our young and ourselves today involve viewing a myriad of multimodal texts as we scroll through our mobile devices to browse social media, share multimodal posts we create to represent our ideas, experiences and identities, and exchange emojis, GIFs, and stickers in our communication with each other. As such, the singular focus of literacy as solely language learning is becoming increasingly unrealistic and untenable. English language teaching and learning is part of literacy and our conceptualisation of literacy needs to be expanded to include meaning-making across a range of semiotic modes.

The definition of what constitutes a “text” has expanded dramatically. In the past, text primarily referred to written language, but now it includes digital and multimodal texts, such as infographics, memes, and social media posts. Not only are we consuming these texts, but we are also creating our own—through blogs, podcasts, and multimedia projects (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023). In this sense, the multimodal turn challenges educators to move beyond the narrow focus on language and to consider how other semiotic modes contribute to the co-construction of knowledge, the design of pedagogical engagements, and the shaping of learning experiences. The multimodal turn expands our perspective on language teaching and learning, with the recognition that multimodality is central in contemporary communication.

Several education systems worldwide have, over the years, responded to the multimodal turn. This paradigm shift has reformed the literacy curricula worldwide to include multimodality (Zapata et al., 2024). The literacy curricular in education systems, such as in Australia, Singapore and China, now includes a focus on multimodal communication in addition to language learning. Focusing on one aspect of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015), scholars have used the term ‘multimodal literacy’ (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023) to describe the knowledge and skills as well as a semiotic awareness to view and represent with multimodal texts in contextually appropriate and culturally sensitive ways.

In light of the multimodal turn, this paper argues that the future of TESOL must engage with multimodality by augmenting English teaching and learning with multimodality. This involves bringing and building on multimodal resources from learners' lifeworld to support their learning of the English language. TESOL must also broaden the understanding of literacy beyond language learning to include multimodal literacy. The English language is always nestled within other semiotic modes, and it is important for learners to develop multimodal literacy to engage skilfully and appropriately with the ways meanings are expressed in multimodal communication in their daily literacy practices. To make explicit the differences between the two ideas, augmenting language learning with multimodality regards multimodality as a means to the ends of learning reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as subject content knowledge and disciplinary literacy. Broadening literacy learning with multimodality regards multimodality, that is multimodal literacy, as one of the ends of literacy learning. While many current initiatives by TESOL teachers, often ground-up and driven by intuitive responses to evolving literacy practices in today's communication landscape, are promising, this paper calls for a more strategic and systemic approach.

2 Augmenting Language Learning with Multimodality

The practices in augmenting English language learning and teaching with multimodality are not new. It is also likely to be common in many TESOL classrooms around the world. However, these are often done incidentally and based on the intuition of teachers on the need to include multimodal resources in TESOL to engage learners with texts and artefacts from their out-of-school experiences. Augmenting TESOL with multimodality is a call towards the institutional recognition and more robust understanding of how multimodality can support English language learning and teaching in more intentional ways—going beyond the use of multimodality to engage the learners towards understanding of how it can deepen learners' learning.

Augmenting language learning with multimodality involves understanding how language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking can be better developed with the strategic use of multimodal resources. This has been described as “multimodality for learning” (Lim, 2024) or the “weak version of multimodality” (Grapin, 2019), where multimodal resources are considered as supplementary, serving primarily as a way to improve language learning. The use of multimodal resources for English language learning and teaching has been reported in many classrooms around the world such as the United States (Grapin, 2019), Indonesia (Nabhan & Hidayat, 2018), Serbia (Stankić & Jakovljević, 2022), and Singapore (Lim et al., 2022).

Grapin (2019) also introduces the “strong version of multimodality” where multimodal resources are not just supplementary tools but integral to meaning-making for language learning and within specific disciplines. He notes, however, that “whereas the weak version of multimodality is the prevailing view in EL education, the strong version is more commonly adopted in the content areas” (Grapin, 2019: 34). The strong version of multimodality moves beyond using multimodal resources merely to support language learning, and instead focuses on how learners can be taught to use these resources strategically and intentionally in their learning processes as part of language learning. the learning of subject content knowledge as well as developing disciplinary literacy, that is the understanding the privileged ways in which language and other multimodal resources are used in specific subjects. For instance, in mathematics education, O'Halloran's pioneering work on multimodal discourse analysis (2003, 2008) illustrated how mathematical concepts are communicated through a range of semiotic resources—symbols, diagrams, graphs, and language. This trajectory of work has illuminated the challenges learners face in understanding these multimodal representations and highlighted the critical role of teachers in guiding learners to interpret and integrate these various resources effectively. For example, Doran (2018) examined the semiotic resources of mathematics in physics, showing how understanding the interplay of

images, symbols and language is integral to knowledge building and learning of the subject. Similarly, scholars in science education have shown how disciplinary knowledge is represented through multimodal resources, underscoring the importance of teaching learners to engage with scientific concepts through various semiotic modes (Airey & Linder, 2009; Tang & Danielsson, 2018). These studies reveal that disciplinary knowledge, whether in mathematics, science, or language, is inherently multimodal, and learning these subjects involves understanding how meanings are constructed through a combination of multimodal resources.

Research on how multimodal resources can support English language learning and teaching as well as the learning of content knowledge across subjects have also been undertaken in disciplinary literacy approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and trans-semiotising have gained traction (Lin, 2016; Liu et al., 2020) in multilingual and English Medium of Instruction (EMI) classrooms. In these approaches, multimodal resources are used strategically to support learning how to read and write in the privileged register, that is the form of English language in the context of a specific subject. For example, the Multimodalities-Entextualisation Cycle (MEC) (Sohn et al., 2022) has been developed to scaffold the learning in multilingual science classrooms, facilitating students' learning of scientific content. As such, there is value in augmenting language learning, as well as the learning of subject content, with multimodal resources in both the 'weak' and 'strong' version of multimodality.

3 Broadening Literacy Learning with Multimodality

Literacy has, in the past, been synonymous with language learning, that is the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. However, in contemporary communication, the literacy practices are often, if not always, multimodal. As such, TESOL's conceptualisation of literacy and language learning must account for the realities and literacy demands of today's digital age and be broadened by including multimodality.

As introduced in the first section, the call towards the expansion of literacy beyond language learning was first made by the New London Group (1996) in their manifesto, *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*. The agenda of multiliteracies sought to address the rapidly changing landscape of literacy in a digital and multicultural world at the turn of the 21st century, and exhorted educators to move beyond traditional notions of literacy, which had been predominantly language-based, to embrace a broader, more socially situated understanding of communication and learning. Their framework urged a rethinking of literacy education to reflect the diverse, multimodal ways in which meaning is made in contemporary contexts.

Fundamental in the New London Group's (1996) proposal was the inclusion of the prefix *multi-* and the pluralisation of *literacy*, which broadened the concept to encompass a variety of communication modes. The "multi-" in *multiliteracies* refers to the substantial differences in communication contexts and patterns, as well as the integration of multimodality, wherein meaning is created through a combination of visual, auditory, spatial, and linguistic resources (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). This concept expands literacy beyond the conventional language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, highlighting the importance of recognizing and engaging with the diverse ways meaning is constructed across cultural, social, and domain-specific settings. In this way, multiliteracies also address the rise of multimodal approaches to meaning-making, especially in the digital age.

One crucial aspect of multiliteracies is multimodal literacy, which involves knowing how to engage with the range of semiotic modes in contemporary communication (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Central to broadening literacy learning with multimodality is the notion of "multimodality as learning" (Lim, 2024) where multimodal literacy must be included as one of the learning outcomes in literacy development. Multimodal literacy involves more than just technical proficiency in working with media texts; it requires

an understanding of how different semiotic modes interact to make meaning and a savviness in the use of multimodal resources in communication. In this regard, broadening literacy learning with multimodality involves incorporating multimodal literacy learning outcomes in the curriculum and systematically equipping learners with a codified set of knowledge, semiotic awareness, and the ability to view and represent with multimodal texts in contextually appropriate ways (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023).

Pedagogical practices in the literacy classroom that involve the strategic focus on diverse ways of meaning-making, complementing the focus on language, can also develop learners' multimodal literacy. These include lesson activities that have learners critically evaluate and reflect on the meanings made in multimodal texts such as posters, websites, and videos, as well as (digital) multimodal composing activities where learners create multimodal artefacts such as comic strips, posters and digital stories (Jiang, 2017; Jiang & Hafner, 2024). In particular, digital multimodal composing contributes to the development of multimodal literacy as learners learn to communicate effectively across various visual and linguistic modes (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023; Park, 2021) and enable learners to convey their ideas and identities creatively (Gilje, 2010; Thibaut & Curwood, 2018). In addition to the learning of multimodal literacy, digital multimodal composing has been reported to improve language learning in terms of reading proficiency (Akdoğan, 2023; Yang & Wu, 2012) and writing quality (Xu, 2023; Oskoz & Elola, 2016).

Broadening literacy learning with multimodality has profound implications on TESOL. The English language is nestled with other semiotic modes in communication. As such, even as learners master how to communicate well with the English language, they must also develop multimodal literacy to be proficient communicators—discerning in their reading and viewing of multimodal texts and effective in their writing and representing with multimodal texts. This demands the focus in TESOL to broaden beyond the instruction of English Language to communication with the English Language in print and digital multimodal texts.

4 Current Developments and Future Directions

In some ways, TESOL teachers on the ground have already been responding to the multimodal turn in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought renewed interest and attention to the role of digital technology and online teaching and learning. For example, Baecher et al. (2020) published a special issue for TESOL Teacher Educators on responding to distance teaching and learning needs of teachers and English learners. The widespread use of digital tools and platforms amongst TESOL teachers such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and various educational apps have emerged in TESOL classrooms, making it possible to teach and learn in hybrid or fully online environments. These technological platforms offer affordances for real-time collaboration, immediate feedback, and multimodal learning activities, creating a more flexible and personalized learning experience. From a multimodality perspective, affordances refer to the unique possibilities and constraints of a mode to enable specific types of meaning-making, grounded in its material and cultural characteristics (Kress, 2010). For example, multimodal media resources—like podcasts, blogs, and recorded lectures—are becoming popular, and present the affordances of offering learners the freedom to learn at their own pace and own time (Lim & Querol-Julián, 2024). TESOL teachers often incorporate various multimodal media resources into their lessons, allowing learners to interact with the English language in ways that augment language learning with multimodality. Learners might be asked to analyse a YouTube video, create a digital presentation, or participate in social media discussions, blending different forms of communication to enhance their language skills. Learners might also collaborate on projects using tools like Google Docs or participate in online discussions, encouraging them to co-construct meaning and negotiate language use in authentic digital spaces. Language learning is also no longer confined to reading and writing; instead, learners are encouraged to engage with the full range of semiotic modes in communication—text, images, sound, video, and even gestures, as a way of broadening literacy learning with multimodality.

While the current developments are heartening and often made as ground-up intuitive responses from TESOL teachers recognizing the changing literacy practices in the contemporary communication environment, the clarion call made in this paper is for TESOL to advance both augmenting language learning with multimodality and broadening literacy learning with multimodality on a strategic and systemic level. This will affirm the ground-up efforts made by TESOL teachers by providing support for TESOL teachers in developing the literacy and language needs of their learners in the digital age.

In this paper, I argue that the future of TESOL must engage with multimodality and this agenda can be advanced through the following systemic initiatives of having TESOL 1) advocate and fund meaningful research that offers insights on how the learning of the English language can be augmented with multimodality, 2) institute a policy and curricular framework towards broadening literacy learning outcomes to include multimodal literacy, and 3) lead the professional development of teachers to harness multimodal resources effectively for language learning as well as to teach multimodal literacy as learning outcomes.

The first systemic initiative is for TESOL to advocate and fund meaningful research that offers insights on how the learning of the English language can be augmented with multimodality (Lim, 2024). One crucial agenda is to build the evidence base and develop practicable strategies for the use of multimodal resources as scaffolds to support the learning of language learners with high needs and special needs (Grapin, 2019). Research on inclusive pedagogies in TESOL can support the learning of the target language for learners who struggle linguistically and may be more adept in communicating with visual and embodied semiotic modes (van Leeuwen, 2017). For instance, studies can explore the use of digital storyboarding, role-play performances as well as multimedia resources as scaffolds for learners' composition writing by aiding learners in organising their thoughts and constructing coherent narratives.

Research in multilingual English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) settings, where subjects are taught in a language other than the learners' first language, such as through the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches, underscores the need to develop a deeper and more contextually-nuanced understanding of how multimodality can facilitate the learning of both content and language simultaneously (Lin, 2016; Liu et al., 2020). In multilingual classrooms, learners often face the dual challenge of acquiring proficiency in the language of instruction while also grappling with the disciplinary content. Empirical studies could investigate how leveraging various modes—such as gestures, visuals, and multimedia presentations—enhances comprehension and retention of subject matter among multilingual learners (Sohn et al., 2022). For instance, interactive whiteboards and digital storytelling tools have been shown to engage learners by merging linguistic and non-linguistic modes, thereby supporting content mastery and language acquisition in tandem (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). Such research has the potential to inform the design of multimodal curricula and pedagogical practices that are both linguistically inclusive and pedagogically effective, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for diverse learner populations.

Research in TESOL should also include disciplinary literacies, where understanding how the English language is used differently across different subjects can help learners develop and acquire the specific registers privileged for communicating knowledge within particular disciplines. An aspect of disciplinary literacy is understanding how knowledge is constructed and communicated through multimodal representations across different academic disciplines (Doran, 2018). Each subject area—whether it is the sciences, mathematics, or the humanities—utilises distinctive combinations of semiotic modes such as written text, diagrams, graphs, mathematical notations, and visual imagery to convey complex concepts. For instance, a graph in mathematics is not merely a visual aid but expresses abstract relationships, while visual models in science can convey intricate processes in ways that the written text alone cannot (O'Halloran, 2003, 2008). By elucidating how multimodal resources are privileged in discipline-specific ways, teachers can better support learners in navigating multimodal representations within specific

subjects, thus developing in them the disciplinary literacies needed to master the subject (Airey & Linder, 2009; Tang & Danielsson, 2018). Research in this trajectory could inform the development of discipline-specific pedagogies that acknowledge the affordances of various semiotic modes, enabling learners to become more proficient in the privileged ways of using ‘language’ and multimodal communication of the specific subjects.

The second systemic initiative is for TESOL to institute a policy and curricular framework aimed at broadening the literacy learning outcomes to include multimodal literacy. This shift is increasingly necessary in the digital age, where communication frequently involves an interplay of text, visual, auditory, and interactive elements (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003). The importance of integrating multimodal literacy within the language and literacy curriculum is underscored by the demands of the modern workplace, which increasingly values the ability to interpret and produce complex multimodal texts (van Leeuwen, 2017). The policy directions set out in a coherent framework will signal to TESOL educators worldwide the importance of engaging with learners’ literacy demands in the digital age and provide the impetus for language and literacy curriculum around the world to evolve towards a communication-focused curriculum that integrates multimodality with language learning (Lim, 2021).

Such a framework will address the disjuncture between the language classrooms and learners’ literacy experiences outside of school, particularly in an era where young people are actively producing content on platforms like TikTok and YouTube (Lim & Toh, 2020). These new forms of literacy practices are integral to learners’ identities and social practices (Gilje, 2010; Thibaut & Curwood, 2018). By valuing learners’ the literacy practices from learners’ lifeworld, such as their communication on social media, creation of media posts, and playing of digital games, teachers can bridge the gap between in-school and out-of-school learning, creating a more inclusive and engaging educational experience (Rowell & Pahl, 2015). As such, the policy framework towards recognizing and valuing learners’ lifeworld literacies will ensure that language and literacy learning in the classroom remains authentic, relevant, and meaningful in developing learners ready to engage with communication in the digital age.

The third systemic initiative is for TESOL to lead the professional development of teachers to harness multimodal resources effectively for language learning as well as to teach multimodal literacy as learning outcomes. In addressing the evolving landscape of curricular reforms and educational innovations, it is crucial to recognize that while curricular changes hold significant value, they are not inherently sufficient to drive deep and sustained instructional transformation (Lim et al., 2023). The effective scaling of curricular initiatives and educational innovations is contingent on the teacher’s confidence and competence to enact these novel pedagogical practices (Lim & Unsworth, 2023). As such, it is important for TESOL to lead and champion the professional development for teachers at the systemic level (Pang et al., 2015) through a focus on effective teaching and learning with multimodality in preservice teacher education, offering targeted in-service training sessions, and nurturing communities of practice that encourage sustained professional growth (Sharari et al., 2018).

5 Conclusion

As I contemplate the future of TESOL in light of the multimodal turn, it is evident that the role of English language education must expand to meet the complex communicative demands of the 21st century. TESOL is called to reposition itself within this evolving landscape. Augmenting language learning with multimodality involves a deliberate and strategic integration of the full range of semiotic modes in communication, thereby enhancing learners’ engagement and deepening their understanding of English in context. At the same time, broadening the scope of literacy education to include multimodal literacy as a core outcome aligns TESOL with the realities of contemporary communication. It is no longer sufficient to equip learners solely with traditional linguistic competencies; instead, we must foster their ability to navigate, interpret, and produce meaning across varied multimodal contexts.

The path forward for TESOL, therefore, lies in a concerted effort to fortify ground-up efforts amongst TESOL teachers toward integrating multimodality in language and literacy classrooms through the three systemic initiatives. This involves not only advocating and funding meaningful research on the effective use of multimodality in pedagogical practices but also instituting a policy and curricular framework that acknowledge the critical role of multimodal literacy in language education. TESOL is also in an empowered position to lead and champion sustained professional development for teachers, enabling them to design and implement pedagogies that progress in tandem with the rapid developments in today's communicative landscape.

Ultimately, the future of TESOL must be one that is responsive, inclusive, and forward-thinking. By responding to the multimodal turn, TESOL will not only enhance the relevance of English language education but also empower learners to become adept communicators, capable of engaging with the diverse literacies that define our modern world. In doing so, TESOL is poised to continue as a transformative force in equipping learners to thrive in an increasingly complex, multimodal communicative environment of the digital age.

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