



Engaging EFL student writers in social advocacy through digital multimodal composition and critical pedagogies

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Abstract

This study investigates the viability of DMC and critical pedagogies in teaching writing to undergraduate EFL students enrolled in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at a public university in Türkiye. In the English in Mass Communication course offered in the Spring semester of 2023, fifty-four ($N = 54$) students completed four major course assignments: 1) rhetorical analysis of a campaign website, 2) a campaign proposal to raise public awareness about a social problem, advocate change, or generate interest in a community service project, 3) a digital zine to communicate the proposed campaign to a broader community beyond the classroom, and 4) a campaign website synthesizing all prior course work. Data obtained from reflections, assignments, and an end-of-semester survey demonstrated students' engagement with writing as a tool of advocacy and their perceptions of multimodal text production. Contributing to the growing body of research on DMC and critical pedagogies, this study offers practical implications for teaching writing in EFL contexts.

Keywords: critical pedagogy; digital multimodal composition; EFL writing; social advocacy

Introduction

Writing instruction in many EFL contexts emphasize monomodal and fixed conventions of writing, also known as conventional print writing. This leaves little or no room for dynamic composing practices that involve diverse semiotic resources beyond the alphabetic system. Despite the ongoing digital transformation of communication in the 21st century, “the verbal is often prioritized over the visual in writing pedagogy” (Archer, 2010, p. 211), indicating strong adherence to static pedagogical approaches. However, learners' experiences with writing have progressively been multimodal with the advances in technology and increasing access to diverse modes of meaning (Marissa & Hamid, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Consequently, there has been a conflict between learners' print-only experiences within educational settings and multimedia driven

writing practices outside school (Jiang, 2018). A shift towards digital multimodal composition (DMC) pedagogy is therefore necessary to address English language learners' communication needs in the digital world (Hafner, 2020), bridging the gap between technology-mediated outside-school and print-centric in-class writing experiences (Jiang, 2018; Zheng & Warschauer, 2017).

Extant scholarship has established the pedagogical value of DMC for: 1) improving learners' multiliteracy, language, and communication skills within an increasingly technological environment (Dzekoe, 2017; Gonzales, 2015; Kim et al., 2023; Vandommele et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2024), 2) fostering autonomy, motivation, and engagement (Abdelhalim, 2024; Akoto, 2021; Darrington & Dousay, 2015; Garcia-Pinar, 2024; Hafner & Miller, 2011; Hauck et al., 2021; Jiang & Luk, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2012), and 3) promoting authorial voice and identity (Cimasko & Shin, 2017; Danzak, 2011; Hafner, 2014; Marissa & Hamid, 2022; Wilson et al., 2012). There is yet much work to do in the realm of EFL writing education where emphasis is often placed on conventional print writing. Adding to the existing literature, the present study offers a specific classroom ethnography that brings DMC through a critical approach into an online elective course offered in the English Language Teaching (ELT) department at a public university in Türkiye. Examining the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate Turkish EFL students about multimodal writing practices to advocate change within their local communities, the study demonstrates the implementation of DMC and critical pedagogies in an educational environment embedded in traditional frameworks.

Multiliteracies and Multimodal Composition

The rapid digitalization of communication has been transformational for discourses of English education in the past few decades. Writing is no longer bound to single language/modality perspectives, but hybridity and fluidity. The new media paved the way to new literacies, facilitating the urgency of pedagogies responsive to the changing currents of writing. This inspired the New London Group (1996), a group of dedicated scholars from a variety of disciplines, to invent the notion of *multiliteracies*, emphasizing the meaning-making potential of diverse semiotic resources in text creation. Reconceptualizing *writing* as *designing* and *writers* as *designers*, the New London Group (1996) put forward various design elements (i.e., linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal) to employ in communicating a message. As part of multiliteracies, multimodality is deemed the most important, "as it relates all the other modes in quire remarkably dynamic relationships" (New London Group, 1996, p. 18). Since its inception, multimodality has informed the composition theories, scholarship, and praxis toward a pedagogy of multiliteracies.

In the literature, definitions of multimodal composition include "texts that engage verbal, visual, written, and other modes of meaning making" (Pandya, 2012, p. 181), "texts that exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound" (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 1), "communication that purposely employs multiple modes intended to work in combination to create meaning in a text" (Lutkewitte, 2014, p. 2), and "the use of different semiotic resources (e.g., audio, visual, gestural, and/or spatial resources) in addition to linguistic text for making meaning" (Lim & Kessler, 2024, p. 183). These definitions commonly describe an amalgamation of various semiotic resources to enhance communication in written discourse. Seemingly easy, this work requires critical awareness about the rhetorical choices one has and the importance of these choices from selection of a particular feature for a particular purpose and audience to the employment of it within the conventions of a specific writing situation (Archer, 2010). As Zheng and Warschauer remark (2017), "being

literate today involves knowing how to read, write, and communicate with others using digital technologies” (p. 67) and given that our students’ “future communication environment will not be less digital than it is today” (Belcher, 2017, p. 82), it is crucial for teachers of writing to facilitate students’ engagement with multimodal forms of communication to prepare them for the technology-driven world they live in.

A review of the literature demonstrates the pedagogical potential of DMC in diverse educational settings. One strand of research has shown that working with multimedia can promote L2 learners’ written communication skills in a wide range of contexts from K-12 to higher education (Dzekoe, 2017; Gonzales, 2015; Kim et al., 2023; Vandommele et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2024). For instance, Vandommele et al., (2017) experimentally compared the effects of in-school and out-of-school multimodal composition activities on L2 writing skills development and observed positive effects regardless of the setting. Elsewhere, Kim et al., (2023) compared the writing development of Korean EFL writers in traditional and DMC conditions finding improvement in both groups, with the latter demonstrating greater gains. Meanwhile, Gonzales (2015) conducted focus groups with self-identified L1 and L2 college composition students and found that the communicative affordances of multimedia were rhetorically empowering for both groups of students who “had trouble translating their ideas into writing” (para. 31). Similarly, Dzekoe’s (2017) study showed that undergraduate ESL writers at a North-American university perceived the integration of multimedia into the composing process to be helpful in conveying their ideas. Adding to previous research, Zhang et al. (2024) revealed that in EFL teachers’ views, multimodal composition promoted Chinese college students’ written communication and digital literacy skills. These studies commonly suggest that DMC is a powerful way to facilitate L2 learners’ rhetorical engagement with writing and expand their multiliteracy skills in preparation for composing in an increasingly digital world.

Research has further documented how DMC can be motivating and enhance learner autonomy (Abdelhalim, 2024; Akoto, 2021; Darrington & Dousay, 2015; Garcia-Pinar, 2024; Hafner & Miller, 2011; Hauck et al., 2021; Jiang & Luk, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2012). Multimodal projects can be more motivating for students to write (Akoto, 2021; Darrington & Dousay, 2015; Jiang & Luk, 2016) and recent studies by Abdelhalim (2024), Garcia-Pinar (2024), and Hauck et al. (2021) showed that multimodal communication practices can enhance learners’ self-efficacy and autonomy by enabling informed and motivated use of digital tools for meaning-making. Reporting on the implementation of a digital video project in an English-medium instructed course at a Chinese university, Hafner and Miller (2011) documented the potential of technology-mediated classrooms for facilitating autonomous language learning. Extant scholarship has further fortified our knowledge about the ways in which DMC can facilitate voice, identity, and agency in L2 writing (Cimasko & Shin, 2017; Danzak, 2011; Hafner, 2014; Marissa & Hamid, 2022; Wilson et al., 2012). For instance, Cimasko and Shin (2017) demonstrated a college ESL writer’s negotiation of authorial agency while working with multimedia, which offered access to diverse semiotic resources expanding authorship. Marissa and Hamid (2022) suggested that integrating students’ out-of-school digital literacy practices into the classroom through multimodal composition projects can promote authenticity and writing with a sense of identity. Additional studies reported on the potential of multimodal composition in providing opportunities for L2 writers to express their identities in their works (Danzak, 2011; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Wilson et al., 2012) and adopt discursal identities responding to rhetorical situations (Hafner, 2014). Consequently, the existing literature establishes that the affordances of DMC are various and offer unique opportunities for communication, engagement, and agency in L2 teaching and learning environments.

Critical Pedagogy

DMC forms the central framework of this pedagogical inquiry. However, it is implemented through the principles of critical pedagogy as it aligns with the social advocacy theme of the course analyzed in this study. Grounded in Freire's (1970) liberatory work that challenged the oppressive ecologies surrounding education, critical pedagogy facilitates literacies for social justice and advocacy. Shifting the view of students as passive recipients of knowledge to responsible citizens, critical pedagogy aims to cultivate teaching and learning environments where students can critique information, recognize social issues, and take action. In a classroom around critical pedagogy, students position themselves as critical thinkers and writers, engaged citizens concerned about issues tied to their local communities and/or beyond, and advocates for social justice and change.

Yang (2020) argues that critical pedagogy in L2 contexts should validate learners' identities and outlines the critical pedagogy framework for L2 writing instruction around four key components: relationship, agency, identity, and power. Relationship emphasizes dialogic, reciprocal teacher-student interactions that foster trust and collaborative learning in the classroom. Agency encourages learners to make purposeful choices in their writing, positioning them as active participants in constructing knowledge. Identity highlights the importance of allowing students to express their multilingual, cultural, and personal identities through writing. And power focuses on helping students recognize and challenge dominant discourses, empowering them to use writing as a tool for social change. Although challenges exist in regard to implementing critical pedagogy in EFL contexts (Qoyyimah et al., 2022), studies like Yang (2020) and Alateeq (2020) document the possibility of critical pedagogy for developing L2 writer agency and identity. While the literature shows critical pedagogy's transformational potential in L2 writing settings, further work lies ahead to understand its outcomes and applicability in diverse educational contexts, particularly those embedded in traditional and conservative frameworks.

Studies of DMC and critical pedagogies have been conducted in the extant scholarship, with the latter being a less pursued area of research. Empirical inquiry is even more limited when it comes to the pedagogical combination of these frameworks in EFL writing instruction. Despite stemming from different epistemologies, the two pedagogies are aligned in that they both challenge existing frameworks, one traditional approaches to composition and the other dominant power structures in the society. By combining DMC and critical pedagogies, I intended to expand students' semiotic repertoires in writing while at the same time facilitate their critical thinking and civic engagement. By doing so, I aimed to address students' real-world digital communication needs as they become responsible citizens. In this study, my goals were to demonstrate the implementation of DMC through critical pedagogy in teaching writing to EFL learners and examine their perceptions of multimodal writing practices. While the results of this study are confined to Turkish educational landscapes, broader implications of the study can inform English writing education in similar EFL contexts.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the methodological framework of this study:

1. How do EFL learners perceive their DMC experiences in the English in Mass Communication course?
2. What do their assignments reveal about their engagement in DMC and critical pedagogies?

Methods

Researcher's Positionality

I self-identify as an insider within the context of this research as I completed my K-12, undergraduate, and master's degrees in Türkiye. While I am familiar with the discourses of ELT curricula in the Turkish educational landscape, I also acknowledge a parallel perspective as an outsider, having been exposed to DMC and critical pedagogy studies during my doctoral education in the Composition and Applied Linguistics program at a public research university in the United States. With an urge to facilitate opportunities for my students to develop critical awareness of multimodal writing as a powerful tool of advocacy, I brought DMC and critical pedagogies into my teaching and examined how students responded.

Participants and Course Description

In this research, I used a convenience sampling method in the selection of participants who were enrolled in the courses that I taught in the Spring semester of 2023. I taught two sections of English in Mass Communication, an elective course offered in the undergraduate ELT Department at a public university in Türkiye. Of fifty-four ($N = 54$) sophomore students, 24 (9 Male, 15 Female) were enrolled in Section A, and 30 (15 Male, 15 Female) in Section B. All students were aged between 18–24 and it was their second year in the ELT department.

As the instructor of the course, I focused on the theme of “change”, aiming to develop students' ability to write in a variety of mass communication genres in print and digital environments through the practice of a community-engaged literacy project. To this end, students completed four interrelated major course assignments, three of which required multimodal elements: 1) They wrote a rhetorical analysis essay analyzing the rhetorical situation (purpose, audience) and appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) of a campaign website, inserting at least one example of visual and/or textual rhetoric from the website into their essay to strengthen the main topics being discussed. 2) They wrote a campaign proposal to raise public awareness about a social problem, advocate change, or generate interest in a community service project. 3) They developed a digital zine to share their position on a social issue, drawing on their proposed campaign in the previous assignment. 4) They remixed all their works into a campaign website, adding their zine and applying the writing strategies and knowledge about rhetorical design into their website. In addition to these major course assignments, students wrote semi-semester-long blogs and reflections on their experiences with multimedia projects (i.e., rhetorical analysis, digital zine, and campaign website). Students were allowed, but not required, to work collaboratively on major course assignments¹. The initial course delivery mode was face-to-face; however, it was carried out in a synchronous online format due to the massive earthquake that occurred in Türkiye during the winter break prior to the Spring semester.

¹ Collaboration Statement: You can work in a team of 2–3 students to collaboratively produce your major course assignments. However, collaboration is not easy and not all people are enthusiastic about group work. For this reason, the decision is yours to make whether to collaborate or to work independently. If you choose to collaborate on an assignment, I will ask you to develop an action plan in which you reflect on the roles and responsibilities of each group member, identifying processes and action steps for successful collaboration. I will assess collaborative works in the same way I assess individual works. I will assign grades based on your product and the group members will receive the same grade, regardless of individual contribution.

Data Collection

The data set consists of a variety of primary sources:

1. Students' reflections on their writing: As part of the coursework, students reflected on each major course assignment in guidance of the following prompts: Have you ever written... before? If yes, when, where, why? What were the easiest and hardest parts of writing...? How was your overall experience with writing this assignment?
2. Qualitative survey: After publishing final course grades at the end of the semester, I sent an email to students inviting them to participate in an online survey administered via the Survey Planet. Of 54 students, more than half ($N = 30$, 55% – 14 Female, 15 Male, 1 non-binary) completed the survey.
3. Student assignments: Students submitted all assignments via the course learning management system, Canvas Instructure, which are analyzed to demonstrate student's engagement with multimedia and social advocacy.

Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis to the data sources, which were qualitative in nature, applying codes to their content and meaning. This process was as follows: 1) I prepared all data for analysis, combining student reflections on multimodal major course assignments in a Word document and importing responses from the Survey. 2) I, then, read the data thoroughly to familiarize myself with the content and gain an initial understanding of the data. 3) I generated codes, breaking down the data into smaller meaningful units by identifying important words, phrases, or ideas. In light of Saldana's (2009) coding manual, I applied descriptive coding to the segments of data that "summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 70). Once done with the overall coding process, I reviewed the emergent codes and ensured that no more codes emerged from the data. 4) Next, I searched the patterns across data, and grouped related codes together to identify themes. 5) Finally, I selected quotes from the data that best represent each identified theme. To illustrate, I coded the following as *communication skills*: "the activities in this course definitely improved my ability to share information with people", whereas next as *rhetorical awareness*: "I learned how to analyze a website; what their purpose or who their target audience is". I later combined these codes under the theme *benefits*.

Reflections: Perceptions of Multimodal Assignments

In what follows, I report on the analysis of student reflections on multimodal assignments, which revealed two main themes: perceived challenges stemming from lack of prior experience with multimedia projects and digital tools, and benefits including the development of rhetorical awareness, multiliteracy, and critical thinking skills.

Challenges

All students reported that they composed a rhetorical analysis essay and zine for the first time in this course. It was also a first-time experience for most students to develop a website ($N = 50$, 93%), except for a few students who experienced it in contexts outside the ELT department. Consequently, "the challenging part was doing it for the first time" was among the most common patterns in the student reflections. However, descriptions along the lines of "challenging but rewarding experience" were also recurrent, meaning that students experienced a sense of accomplishment due to completion of an arduous task, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

At first, I felt unsure about the task, as it was my first time writing a rhetorical analysis essay. However, as I dove into research and began to form my arguments, I started to feel more confident in my ability to analyze and critique the webpage effectively. By the time I finished the assignment, I felt a sense of accomplishment. This experience taught me valuable skills in critical thinking and persuasive writing, which I believe will be helpful in my future academic and professional pursuits.

My experience with writing this assignment was beneficial and thought-provoking. It allowed me to think about societal matters and engage with them through the creation of a zine. I put a lot of effort into crafting useful and meaningful content, and although I encountered difficulties along the way, the satisfaction of attempting to create something worthwhile outweighed the challenges.

One other challenge for many students ($N = 35$, 65%) was working with multimedia itself – in other words, orchestrating multimedia or *designing* the composition. As a student wrote: “The hardest part was the visualization. It was very difficult to make the page layout, find the right pictures and add them and align them.” This experience was affirmed by another student as in the following comment: “Adjusting the color harmony and page layout, and choosing the best font, in short, the visual parts, was the most challenging part for me.” Design decisions did not seem to be a simpler task for those working collaboratively on their projects, as presented in the excerpt below:

The most challenging part is to decide what to use to make the zine eye-catching. We consulted each other to decide which images, caricatures, fonts, and page colors we should use, and this prolonged the process, and we felt lost from time to time.

Finally, some students ($N = 9$, 17%) agreed that lack of experience with the technological tools that they used in composing their multimodal projects was an obstacle to overcome, as seen in the following comments: “my ability of technology was insufficient but I tried to overcome it”, “I didn’t know how to use some programs or websites which I should use while doing my homeworks but I learned how to use them thanks to Havva hoca”, “it took me an hour to understand how to use the tool”.

Benefits

Of particular interest within the context of this research was the finding that in many cases, the assignments cultivated students’ rhetorical awareness ($N = 26$, 48%), as seen in comments including “if I wish to contribute to or subscribe to any campaign website, I am aware that every website has evidence that the website is rhetoric or not.” Similarly, another student said they learnt “how to navigate through a website, being able to tell whether a site is suitable for donation or not.” Increased understanding of the rhetoric of texts is best demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Before beginning this assignment, I had never heard of the ideas of ethos, pathos, and logos, which are essential components of persuasive writing. But,

with significant research, I was able to obtain a deeper knowledge of these principles and apply them to this post. Throughout this process, I realized how important it is to develop a convincing argument by combining emotional, intellectual, and ethical arguments.

Students also agreed on the usefulness of multimodal assignments for developing multiliteracy skills ($N = 16$, 30%). For instance, a student wrote: “zine preparation has been a beneficial learning experience for me since it has allowed me to enhance my research, analytical, and persuasive writing skills, as well as my design abilities”. In another reflection, a student noted:

Although the assignment was a lengthy process, I found enormous satisfaction in the process of creating a website. The combination of overcoming obstacles and enjoying times of ease made the process enjoyable. I developed new abilities, improved old ones, and learned important skills in designing.

Additionally, some students ($N = 8$, 15%) noted that the multimodal assignments they completed in the course contributed to their critical thinking skills, which can be found explicitly in the student statements such as “forced me to think critically”, or “develop my critical thinking and writing skills”, as well as “a tremendous amount of labor, analysis, critical thinking, and design was required”. This is also evinced in the comment below demonstrating the student’s critical thinking process:

Pathos refers to the use of emotional language, imagery, and storytelling to elicit an emotional response from the audience. There are various visuals in the Trees for Cities campaign. These images mostly include people who are happy while planting trees. However, as everyone knows, we have been in trouble with forest fires all over the world, especially in recent years. The fact that it was not mentioned at all made me think that they were not quite successful in the effective use of pathos. But does using pathos well mean exploiting feelings? Is it necessary to talk about negative things? Doesn’t showing people’s happiness in planting trees also refer to pathos? I had a lot of indecision about this. As a result, I concluded that if fires were mentioned, they would be more successful, but with the current version, they are still good at the use of pathos.

Survey: Course Evaluation

Thirty students participated in the survey, which revealed that students learnt about the rhetorical situation and appeals and received multimodal writing instruction for the first time in this course.² Most students ($N = 23$, 77%) used their laptops to complete their multimodal assignments, while the rest worked with a desktop computer ($N = 3$), phone ($N = 2$), and tablet ($N = 1$). Two themes emerged in the analysis of student responses to survey questions that addressed their perspectives on the course design: 1) positive attitudes toward multimedia projects, 2) academic and professional development.

² Some students noted that they completed multimodal projects such as PowerPoint presentations and storytelling podcasts, however, they were not necessarily taught how to work with multimedia.

Positive Attitudes

Students generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward the course, describing their overall learning experiences as “beneficial”, “motivational”, “enjoyable”, “helpful”, etc. A student responded: “It was a great course that taught me a lot of handy tools and new skills that I can implement in my life in future.” Students’ positive feelings were associated with the fun they had in composing multimodal projects, which promoted their interest in the assignment and motivation to write. For instance, a student highlighted:

I had a lot of fun doing these assignments. Preparing different things with technological tools was much more interesting for me, among other homework. I am motivated by work where I work harder for something in which I am active rather than theoretical content. Because of this aspect of mine, the homework given in the course seemed very entertaining to me.

Furthermore, engaging in multimedia projects seemed to promote students’ creativity, agency, and autonomy, as exemplified in the comment: “the applications that I did not know and learned thanks to the course helped me to be more creative. It was a lesson in which we could contribute something of ourselves and we created products with our own efforts.” Similarly, another student opined:

It was very nice for me to be able to produce a lot of material on my own and to be able to use it as a means of expressing myself in a way based on my own ideas. I didn’t even know that there was such a thing as a zine before, but it was a really interesting experience for me to be able to use it in a creative way to communicate my ideas to others. It was also nice to finally be able to use our creativity in an almost unlimited way.

Students also maintained a positive stance toward the course as it facilitated meaningful learning experiences through technology-mediated tasks that respond to the exigencies of 21st century communication. To illustrate, a student said:

If I say sincerely, I love it. Writing a blog made me more curious and inquisitive about what I have to write. I really had a feeling of achievement when I shared it and see somebody read and leave a comment on it ... Clearly, I saw the course homeworks not just a homework. I see them real life tips in these tech world all around us. For me, I really enjoyed and find this course pretty beneficial.

The meaningfulness and relevance of the coursework to students’ lives was further illustrated in the comment below:

I wanted to print it and actually give it to some of my friends, as one of the purposes of a zine is to give it to other people to share your idea. So, I printed some samples on my printer and made a small booklet. I gave a few of them to my friends, and I kept one to myself as a reminder of how I conquered the unknown.

Academic and Professional Development

Survey results supported the data from student reflections on multimodal assignments because for many students (N = 18, 60%), the English in Mass Communication course around DMC

facilitated opportunities for students to improve their literacy, language, and technology skills, as commented explicitly by a student: “The assignments developed both our English skills and technology skills.” Similarly, another student affirmed: “I believe I have improved myself in writing and I am a much more better communicator now. I really enjoyed designing and developing a campaign ... I feel like every session was a break time from all of the stress of life.” One other student explained:

The use of applications and websites added a lot to me about design, I felt like a writer. We have done studies that will expand our vision, studies and products that can help us become better educators. This was a proud experience indeed.

The course also contributed to students’ professional development as prospective teachers of English. Analysis of survey responses revealed that all but one student (97%) showed interest in applying what they learnt in the course to their English teaching job in the future. A student, for example, stated that their learning experiences in the course encouraged them “to prepare an interactive course and to actively use the technological skills I learned through the course in my lessons”. Likewise, another student opined:

Mass Communication course was great, to be honest most of our other courses are not really helpful neither for personal development or to be a teacher. But in Mass Communication our assignments, especially the website assignment was a golden experience. I believe most students underestimated this course, but things we learned in this course can be helpful in both our personal lives, careers, and as a teacher. I consider this course to be the most informative one for me.

Increased awareness of new media in assignment development was another finding related to the transfer of learning experiences to professional life. A student commented: “My core ideas of assignments have definitely changed. I think I will be much more creative home-work assigner because of this course.” Similarly, another student said: “Since I gained new experiences thanks to these assignments, I think I can nourish the creativity of my students by giving them such assignments.” Illustrating the types of assignments to incorporate into their teaching, a respondent suggested “students can share blog posts each week to write how they feel or how was their experience in class.”

Besides assignments, course design and material development were among the possible future applications. One student projected, “I am thinking of preparing magazines for my students that will attract their attention on the subject.” One other suggested: “I can prepare a zine before teaching any subject to my students, or I can prepare a website for my students while assigning homework, so that my students can be more informed.” In fact, developing websites for course delivery was a common idea shared by many as seen in the following two comments: “I would apply it to my English teaching job in terms of developing a website for the students or giving them online activities instead of traditional ones.” and “I can build my own website to have my own students do homework or projects on.”

Assignments: Writing to Advocate

All major course assignments in the course were interrelated and each scaffolded the next. In what follows, I analyze samples from each major multimodal course assignment to demonstrate

students' engagement with DMC for social advocacy. Figure 1, for example, demonstrates snippets from two students' rhetorical analysis assignments.

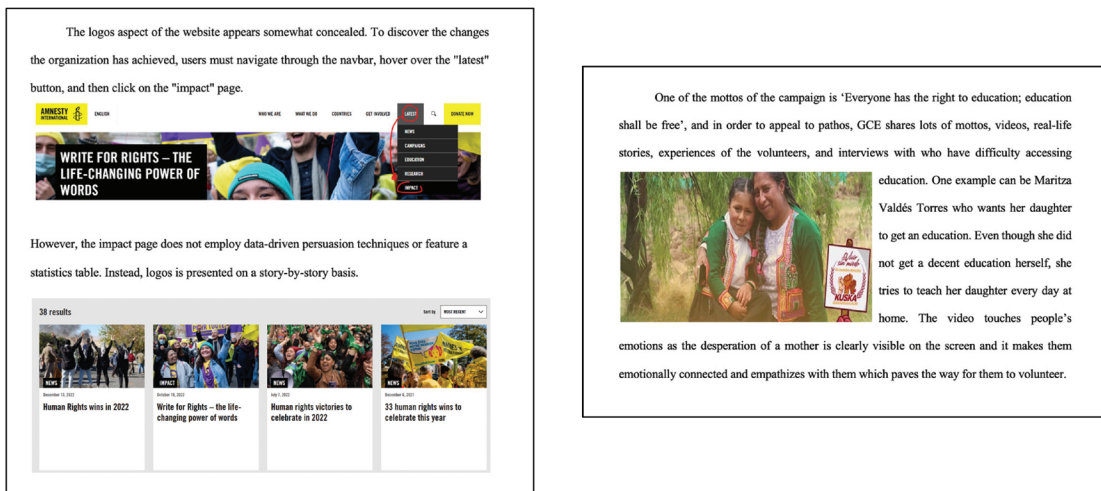


Figure 1. *Snapshots from two rhetorical analysis essays.*

The rhetorical analysis assignment served as an introduction to multimodal composition, where students were to analyze a social advocacy website for its use of rhetorical strategies and incorporate a visual from the website into their essay for argumentation. Most assignments demonstrated student's incorporation of pictures into their texts as in the first snapshot. They directly inserted the media into their text, placing them in the middle, separating media from the text. Meanwhile, some students could wrap text around their pictures, without separating the text from the picture as in the second snapshot.

Students' engagement with multimedia for social advocacy can further be seen in Figure 2, which illustrates selected pages from a student's digital zine assignment.

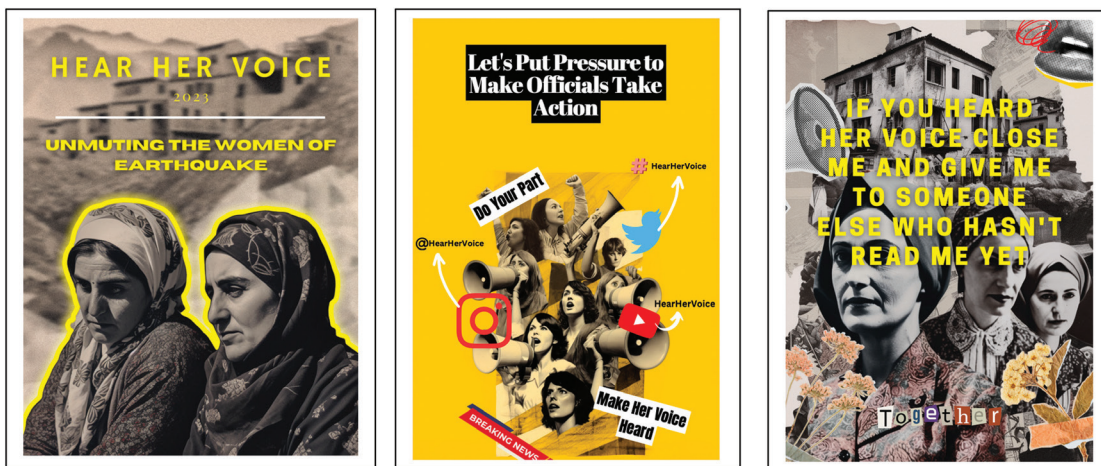


Figure 2. *Sections from a student's digital zine.*

In this zine that originally included eight pages (cover, sixth, and last pages from left to right), the student addressed the recent earthquake that occurred a couple of months before the classes started. Calling attention to adopting “gender-sensitive disaster management strategies”, the student cited sources presenting how women were significantly affected by the disaster, losing access to basic human necessities such as sanitary pads, tampons, etc. The student initiated a campaign titled “Hear Her Voice” to raise national awareness of the issue toward meeting the needs of women in the earthquake area. The student designed a striking cover page portraying two women casualties with a yellow marker highlighting their body lines, which is in harmony with the title of the campaign. The page in the middle demonstrates effective employment of linguistic/nonlinguistic modes, with attention to semiotic details such as the use of a hashtag (#) for the blue bird, which represents the social media platform Twitter where posts are categorized through hashtags. The last page is an exemplary multimodal production where student combines words with images in the background including women, houses from the earthquake area, a diaphone that reminds the audience of the call, etc.

Finally, students’ synthesized multimodal writing practices can be found in their website assignments, as presented in Figure 3.

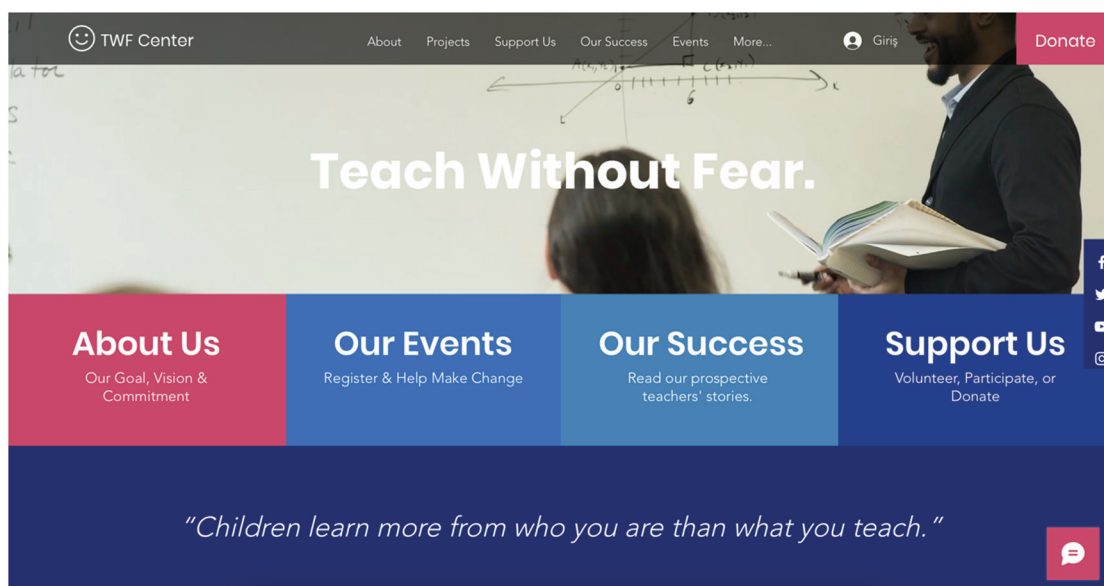


Figure 3. Homepage of a student’s campaign website.

The student author of this website proposed the establishment of a “Teach without Fear” center to serve pre-service teachers who experience teaching anxiety. The proposed center is for promoting prospective teachers’ confidence in teaching through a variety of services including counseling, support group meetings, role play sessions, social time, etc. Analysis of the student’s website reveals the effective use of rhetorical appeals to persuade the audience toward donation. For example, a strong sense of ethos, or credibility, is demonstrated through the “About Us” page, where student introduces the organization including a team of scholars from different universities, which establishes trustworthiness of the website, and describing their goal “to make a positive impact on education and contribute to the betterment of society”. The student further uses logos and pathos, appealing to the logic and emotions of audience, by sharing narratives and statistics that evince the success of the center. The student employs visuals

that characterize happy teacher images to support content in these narratives, which align as well with the happiness emoji presented with the “TWF Center” on the homepage, successfully combining various semiotic resources in their website.

Discussion

In the English in Mass Communication course, students completed a series of inter-related multimedia projects to identify, explore further, and address a social problem tied to their local communities and/or beyond. By working with diverse semiotic resources beyond the alphabet, students produced a variety of multimodal texts, employing rhetorical strategies effectively, to develop a social advocacy campaign and communicate it to broader audiences. Results indicated that engagement with writing for a cause facilitated meaningful learning experiences for students, developing their “goal-oriented capacity to act” (Yang, 2020, p. 110) – that is agency. Students could develop critical perspectives on their environment and society and recognize the role of writing as a social act, reaping the outcomes of critical pedagogy (Yang, 2020).

Results further revealed that students generally came with little or no experience of multimodal text production, just as in Hafner’s (2014) study with Chinese EFL learners. They perceived DMC to improve their digital writing skills, lending support to the previous research showing that DMC can enhance language learners’ linguistic/nonlinguistic and technological communication skills (Dzekoe, 2017; Gonzales, 2015; Kim et al., 2023; Vandommele et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2024). Results also aligned with past research documenting the role of multimodal composition in supporting learner motivation and autonomy in writing (Abdelhalim, 2024; Akoto, 2021; Darrington & Dousay, 2015; Garcia-Pinar, 2024; Hafner & Miller, 2011; Hauck et al., 2021; Jiang & Luk, 2016; Yang & Wu, 2012); students highlighted in their reflections that working with multimedia promoted their engagement with the assignments in diverse and meaningful ways that conventional print-centric writing would not. Adding to the literature, results showed that multimodal composition tasks developed EFL writers’ rhetorical awareness, critical and creative thinking skills while at the same time contributing to their professional development as prospective teachers of English.

Unlike previous research that implicated L2 writers’ limited acceptance of modes beyond words in college composition, this study established that EFL writers’ engagement with multimedia can be powerful and purposeful. In their analysis of the multimodal texts produced by freshman ESL students in a US college composition classroom, Shin and Cimasko (2008) found that students prioritized linguistic modes and a conventional print approach in their design choices, with limited employment of multimodality, which seemingly resulted from the print-centric instructional contexts in which students studied writing. In the current study (although the context is different as English is not used as a second language but foreign language, the word-dominated educational discourse is similar) students activated diverse semiotic modes to communicate their messages to specific audiences. This does not mean, however, that students have not perceived any challenges. Aligned with Hafner’s (2014) finding of Chinese students’ perceived rhetorical challenges related to multimodal orchestration, most students found the writing as design work difficult, yet they experienced what Darrington and Dousay (2015) describe as follows: “the challenge of a task can be motivating. If students feel like they are being challenged by a writing task, yet they are still able to achieve that task, they will find the task more motivating” (p. 30). The results of this study established the motivational effects of challenge on EFL writing.

These results raise several implications for EFL/ESL writing education: 1) In teaching writing to language learners, teachers can facilitate opportunities for students explore the transformative power of writing to address social issues within their communities. Principles of critical

pedagogy can be incorporated into the language and writing classroom to help students “scrutinize assumptions behind conventions, develop critical perspectives on knowledge and reality, and deploy the English language for their own voices” (Yang, 2020, p. 111). 2) Teachers can encourage students to work with diverse semiotic resources including multimedia in text production. However, it is important to be attentive to students’ needs while assigning multimodal projects. As Darrington and Dousay (2015) suggest, teachers should maintain a balance between the assignment requirements and student skills/resources to set realistic goals for students. Prior to assigning a project that requires employment of technology, internet, certain applications or software, teachers should survey students’ access to these tools and act accordingly. For instance, in cases where students report lack of access to computers with an Internet connection, teachers should consider giving lessons in a computer lab, if available. 3) When assigning multimodal projects, teachers should support students with resources such as readings (e.g., Carroll, 2010 – for a rhetorical analysis assignment), and/or self-made or outside tutorial videos (e.g., NEIU Center for College Access and Success, 2020 – for zine making) to provide guidance on working with multimedia. To pedagogize the use of diverse modes of meaning, teachers of writing can integrate technology in the classroom, using digital tools like Canva, Padlet, etc. for class writing activities or introducing platforms to publish and share student works. Explicitly teaching how to combine modes effectively in text production can also contribute to students’ understanding of design principles in writing. 4) Teachers should reconsider their assessment practices when implementing multimodal approaches to writing in their classrooms, developing rubrics that evaluate not only linguistic communication but also rhetorical awareness, multimodal coherence, and design features. 5) Following assessment, teachers can consider using video, audio, or a combination of digital software and tools for giving feedback on student works as a way of modelling multimodal communication for students. By adopting these pedagogical strategies, EFL writing teachers can promote students’ growth as 21st century communicators and critical thinkers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the integration of DMC through critical pedagogy into an undergraduate EFL course where students explored the power of writing in working toward a cause by completing a set of multimodal assignments. Results revealed that engagement with multimedia can transform students’ writing practices, allowing them to explore the affordances of digital tools in maximizing communication. Meanwhile, the critical pedagogy framework enhanced students’ understanding of writing as a tool of change in addressing social issues tied to their local communities and/or beyond. While students faced challenges with multimodal tasks, they embraced these challenges, adapted, and experienced achievement and success. Results of this study established the potential of DMC and critical pedagogies for facilitating meaningful learning experiences within EFL settings where multimodality and criticality have not yet received much attention.

Most empirical inquiries have limitations, and this study is not an exception. To start with, the study looked at one specific case, an online course offered in the ELT department at a small public university in Türkiye. Due to the ethnographic nature of the study, the results cannot be generalized to other educational settings governed by diverse institutional and instructional policies. An additional limitation of the study is that it did not triangulate data with interviews, which could have provided deeper insights into students’ rhetorical choices in composing their multimodal pieces. Although reflections and the qualitative survey demonstrated students’ overall experiences with producing multimodal texts, one-on-one conversations would have enriched the data to explore the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of particular features employed in texts.

Finally, this study took place in an online classroom setting due to unexpected events within the geographical context of the study, which may have somewhat interfered with the results – e.g., most students in the survey reported that they would prefer to collaborate with their classmates if the course was delivered face-to-face. This phenomenon can be of particular interest for future research. Although students were provided the opportunity to work collaboratively, the majority chose to work individually due to the perceived difficulty of collaborating online³. While the exploration of students' collaborative behavior in multimodal projects was beyond the scope of this study, these comments lead to the exigency of research on the intersections of collaboration, multimodal writing, and course delivery methods.

Disclosure

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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³ Of 54 students, 17 (31%) worked collaboratively in small groups of two or three on the rhetorical analysis, 13 (24%) on campaign proposal, 15 (28%) on digital zine, and 11 (20%) on the campaign website assignments.

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