

Multimodality into the EFL context: from theory to practice

ABSTRACT

Among the many facets of human communication, multimodality seems to have become fundamental in the past few years. The arrival of the internet and different technological tools has brought new possibilities for the use of multimodal activities in foreign language classes, these becoming pedagogical resources that foster the processes of teaching and learning a foreign language in different ways. In this vein, studies on Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have been providing teachers and learners of English as a foreign language with opportunities to experience the creation of *digital stories*, these being multimodal activities that have the potential to promote foreign language learning (CASTAÑEDA, 2013; ROCHA, 2019). With this in mind, the present article is aimed at discussing the construct of multimodality within the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) by reflecting on its relevance for language learners and teachers, as well as focusing on the multimodal character and nature of digital storytelling activities in the EFL classroom. By discussing, reviewing, and drawing parallels among some studies in the area of multimodality, the present piece of study suggests that the benefits of making use of digital stories within EFL contexts may go beyond the development of the target language at issue, allowing students to improve some other relevant skills – such as video making, video editing, critical thinking, interpersonal and collaborative learning, and so on – that may be fostered through learners' engagement in multimodal tasks of digital story creation.

KEYWORDS: Multimodality. Digital stories. Foreign language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The current world is now facing an era in which communication has become increasingly multimodal. In this context, it is quite relevant to devote some attention to how semiotic resources have been used in the classroom since they may impact students' identities as well as support them to position themselves socially. When considering that schools are expected to play a crucial role in people's individual, social, and cultural development (BEZERRA, 2011), it becomes relevant for schools to start to develop a multimodal competence in students by making use of multimodal resources in classes.

When it comes to that, technology has brought new possibilities to the use of multimodal tools in class. The arrival of CALL (computer assisted language learning) into the educational scenery has contributed to the development of a variety of multimodal activities used for language learning purposes. According to Levy & Hubbard (2007), CALL may be generally defined as "the area of work concerned with the development and use of technology applications in language teaching and learning" (p. 143). Thus, CALL and the access to the internet have brought endless possibilities to language learners and teachers.

The development of digital stories is a good example of how to use technology to propel students' L2 development. Throughout this process, learners have opportunities to develop the four main skills (reading, speaking, listening, and writing) by making use of multimodal resources, such as digital images. Besides that, working with digital stories is a good way to make students aware of the three meta functions proposed by Halliday (quoted by Bezerra, 2011): Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual.

With this in mind, this article intends to briefly discuss multimodality within EFL contexts and its relevance to language learners and teachers by showing the way digital stories work as multimodal means to foster students' L2 development. In order to do so, the following section presents a brief discussion of the article's theoretical background, followed by the discussion of an activity proposal involving multimodal resources to EFL.

THE RELEVANCE OF MULTIMODALITY WITHIN EFL CONTEXTS

Learning a foreign language may be a long process that involves the ability to master the four main abilities (writing, speaking, reading and listening) required to effectively communicate. In order to better comprehend how to teach/learn a foreign language effectively, research has been developed so that methods, approaches, and tools could be developed to better support learners and teachers during this process.

Also, learning a foreign language involves the development of communicative competence which, according to Hymes (1972), can be defined as the competence that allows us to convey and interpret messages, as well as to negotiate meaning. Learners should develop the skills to comprehend oral and written texts as well as to make appropriate use of linguistic aspects such as lexis, grammar, syntax among others (HEBERLE, 2010).

The theories of multimodality highlight that meaning may not be attributed only to linguistic signs but also to visual ones, gestures, colors, signs, sounds among others (BUCHER, 2017). Considering that, it would be possible to assert that learners may benefit from the use of multimodality to the development of their communicative competence in a foreign language context. Multimodal communicative competence encompasses all the aspects involved in the use of language such as audio and spatial dimensions of communication, which includes computer mediated communication to meaning-making (HEBERLE, 2010). With the advancement of technology into modern life, it is possible to highlight that students are surrounded by digital multimodal experiences (websites, social networks, e-books, etc) most of the time, which makes this experience quite usual to them.

Nowadays, most people have social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Blogs and so on which enable them to communicate with others not just by using words, but by making use of all the tools they have at their disposal online, such as digital pictures, songs, videos, etc. Having this in mind, trying to use those multimodal tools in a language classroom seems to be profitable to learners in terms of language development, as reported by a study recently developed in Saudi Arabia (AHMED, 2016). In this study, 1.200 undergraduate students improved their writing performance with the use of Facebook by engaging in collaborative writing, discussing in peers, giving peer feedback, and commenting on other writing activities either synchronous or asynchronous. The study shows that using tools learners are already acquainted with might be profitable for them in terms of knowledge development, and that the popularity of smartphones and the internet may provide endless possibilities to propel such development.

It seems that the idea of multimodal communicative competence is rooted in the current world and it is already a crucial part of people's lives. Using these tools within the context of teaching a foreign language seems to be enchanting, but the question is whether this would be relevant and not just interesting. In relation to that, as previously pointed out, multimodal theories highlight that meaning is not attributed just through linguistic signs, but also through other aspects such as visual ones, like colors, pictures, among others (BUCHER, 2017). Considering all the aspects that meaning is supposed to be built on, it is possible to establish a link between this idea and the Multimedia Learning Theory proposed by Mayer (2009), who asserts that individuals may learn more effectively from a combination between words and pictures. In order to fully comprehend the theory, it is relevant to have in mind that multimedia learning actually takes place once learners establish a mental representation of words and pictures and that they actually build more meaningful connections once they have access to words and pictures than they could have with words or pictures alone (SORDEN, 2016).

When trying to put into practice multimodality theories and multimedia learning theory within EFL contexts, it is possible to point out that learners may certainly establish meaning from aspects that go beyond the linguistic aspects - as a picture or a song, for example - and it is also worth mentioning that the combination of all the aspects previously mentioned, which would likely have words and pictures altogether, may contribute positively to the learning process, as proposed by Mayer (2009). Considering the language learning context, it is possible to observe that the books carefully designed for this purpose are composed of words and pictures in order to help learners develop aspects, such as vocabulary, in the target language. It is also common that these kinds of books also bring some audio material, which may include conversations and also songs which have the potential to enhance learners' developmental processes in terms of pronunciation.

Bezerra (2011) states that in the current world we live, "communication is increasingly multimodal" (p.167), and this new reality demands actions from teachers and also from students in the sense of better understanding how verbal language and pictures may represent our experiences within the social context we are part of. Multimodal texts can be used in language classrooms not just to develop reading skills, but also writing, speaking and listening skills, which are required competences to effectively learn a foreign language (D'ANDREA, 2010, apud BEZERRA, 2011).

Bezerra (2011) also asserts that by understanding the challenge the new multimodal world would bring to teachers and also to students, The New London Group published an article in the Harvard Educational Review in which they present "a theoretical overview of the connections between the changing social environment facing students and teachers and a new approach to literacy pedagogy that they call 'multiliteracies'" (p. 168). This new pedagogy suggests four components to be worked on with students: situated practice, over instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice.

Situated practice involves locating the student within the process by approaching any meaning-making resource as a starting point from students' personal experiences. Over

instruction is the moment in which students have access to the metalanguage required to develop further investigations. Critical framing, as the nomenclature suggests, is fostered considering students would be critically interpreting the activity and also deconstructing what is provided to them, which could be a written text, a picture, an image, etc. The last component is the transformed practice, which suggests that students, based on the knowledge acquired in the other components, start designing their own practices (BEZERRA, 2011).

The four components briefly mentioned seem to fulfill the idea of involving learners into the activity under development, then providing instruction so that in the last step those learners could show in practice what they have learned. Understanding how multimodal our world has become and applying those aspects into EFL classes by making use of multimodal tools seem to be beneficial experiences to learners and teachers in terms of language development.

Considering how relevant it is to support students in terms of multimodal competence development, it is important that teachers understand that making meaning is directly related to communication and that visual structures play a role as relevant as the linguistic signs in terms of meaning-making (HEBERLE, 2010). Visual structures can also provide students the opportunity to make different interpretations based on their social experiences. In order to implement these visual structures with meaning-making purposes in the classroom, it is important for teachers to become familiar with the three metafunctions proposed by Halliday: (1) ideational; (2) interpersonal; and (3) textual (HEBERLE, 2010). Briefly speaking, language is used to talk about our experiences of the world including our inner world and also to describe events based on our own experience (ideational function); language is also used to interact with other people so that social relations can be established as an attempt to express opinion on a topic (interpersonal metafunction); and the last metafunction (textual) represents the idea of using the language to organize the message by making use of textual elements in order to produce coherent and connected discourses (HEBERLE, 2010).

Taking into account the relevance of supporting learners in terms of multimodal literacy development, it is even more meaningful to teachers and also to EFL learners to be familiar with the metafunctions proposed by Halliday, considering they can be valuable assets when dealing with multimodality in the classroom. The next section aims at presenting a meaningful proposal of a multimodal activity that may be developed in an EFL context.

DIGITAL STORIES: A MULTIMODAL ACTIVITY TO EFL DEVELOPMENT

Multimodality has become present in learners' lives, especially after the advance of technology. Therefore, it seems that trying to use those tools learners feel already acquainted with in educational contexts may be a profitable experience to teachers and also to learners. It is hard to deny that the advance of technology into modern life is changing our students. Technological knowledge has been influencing them not just in terms of fashion style but it is reflecting on different aspects of their lives, including the way they study and learn. Prensky (2001) states that people born in the late 90s are digital natives, which means they are fluent in digital language (i.e. video games, computers, internet, etc). Considering this new era, many resources have been incorporated in language learning, including the use of videos. Having a multimodal nature, a video may be defined as an audiovisual resource that combines different semiotic forms with the aim of delivering a message (TUMOLO, 2014). There are many possibilities of using videos for educational purposes such as the development of a digital story, which, according to Tumolo (2015), may be defined as a digital resource with which learners can use their creativity to tell stories by selecting digital images, writing a text, and also choosing a song to create a video that can last from two to ten minutes at most.

In order to develop a digital story, there are some steps to be followed to better organize the flow of the production. At first, it is important to have in mind what will be shown/discussed in the video, so brainstorming activities in which learners are stimulated to think and to develop their ideas are certainly relevant. The topics to be chosen by learners should be personal, for instance, learners can tell a personal story about something that happened in their lives or even choose a very familiar topic to deal with something they consider enjoyable (JAKE, 2009). In a study developed with undergraduate students at UFSC, some participants decided to talk about very personal events as an adoption process while others decided to talk about women who inspired them to be a better person (ROCHA, 2019).

Once the topic is chosen, the second step is to write a script. It is important to consider the audience and write a text as clear as possible so that the message is properly delivered. During this step, it is likely that students need some assistance from teachers, who are expected to read and provide written feedback so that learners can improve their texts (JAKE, 2009). After the script development, students are required to create a storyboard in which they organize the flow of the video in order to make a direct connection between the script and the visual resources they intend to use. Once this phase is completed, learners may use online research tools, such as Google, to select the pictures or whatever visual materials they utilize. Another relevant aspect to mention about this inclusion of resources is that they are there to provide meaning to the story and not just to make it interesting, so all the images, songs, and other means chosen need to have a direct relation to what was written (JAKE, 2009).

After the storyboard development, students are required to create a digital story using a computer software able to provide video editing, such as IMovie for Macintosh and Movie Maker for Windows. In this step, learners record their voices, which could certainly help them with pronunciation, as reported in a study developed by Castañedas (2013) in which participants acknowledged that recording their voices (as many times needed) helped them to feel more confident about their pronunciation. The last step of the digital story production is to share what was produced (Jake, 2009). In case of any problem to find an available lab where students can use a computer software to develop the video, teachers may ask them to download an app called "Speaknphoto" (SpeakingPhoto Inc., 2011) in their smartphones. The app provides all required tools to produce a digital story. Developing a digital story seems to contribute to learners' language development as further explained in the following table:

Table 1: Digital stories contribution to learners' language development

SPEAKING / PRONUNCIATION	Students are required to record an oral narration.
LISTENING	Students would have to listen to their oral text as many times as they need in order to make sure their pronunciation is understandable.
READING	Depending on the topic chosen, students would need to read about it in order to enrich their texts with new information.
WRITING	Students would receive written feedback from the teacher on their script. After receiving the feedback they would need to review their text in order to improve it.

Source: The authors

The process of developing a digital story seems to provide students with opportunities to develop the four main skills required to effectively speak a foreign language. The first step is to decide which story they want to tell, so if they decide to provide their own perspective about a certain topic, they might need some reading on this topic to better position themselves. Once the topic is chosen, they would need to write the script and consequently receive feedback from the teacher, which seems to contribute to their writing skill development, as reported in a study developed with undergraduate students at UFSC in which participants acknowledged written feedback contribution to their language development (ROCHA, 2019). Finally, they are expected to turn their written text into an oral text by recording a narration, which tends to improve their pronunciation considering that they would certainly need to record as many times as they need in order to be understood by anyone who watches the video.

Several studies have suggested that engaging learners in the creation of digital stories may assist in L2¹ learning (e.g., LEE, 2014; NGUYEM, 2011; NISHIOKA, 2016; PARDO, 2014; RAZMI; POURALI; NOZAD, 2014; TREVISOL, 2019; TREVISOL; D'ELY, 2021, among others). In a study conducted in an intact (i.e. an already formed group that is used in order to represent a population) EFL classroom in Brazil, TREVISOL (2019) has found that learners were able to improve their L2 oral production considering mainly the L2 dimensions of accuracy, fluency, and lexical density. These dimensions have been traditionally investigated in the field of task-based language teaching (TBLT; ELLIS, 2003; GONZÁLEZ-LLORET & ORTEGA, 2014), area in which the study is grounded, though this is the first study to integrate digital storytelling with the task-based approach to investigate L2 speech performance in a Brazilian classroom context. In general terms, the study aimed to unveil whether the byproduct of a digital storytelling task cycle would impact learners' L2 oral production — or, in other words, whether L2 oral productions would differ after the task cycle with digital stories. Fourteen undergraduate learners participated in the study — they were all from a public university in the northeast of Brazil, enrolled in the Letras-Inglês (English Teaching) Program and their proficiency levels ranged from basic to intermediate.

TREVISOL's (2019) study followed a pre-post test design, in which oral data from participants were gathered, via WhatsApp² recordings, in three different moments: before the task cycle commenced (pre-test), right after the digital stories produced were displayed to colleagues in class (immediate-post-test), and one month after the experiment was concluded (delayed post-test). The digital storytelling task cycle consisted of three weeks of classroom work in which L2 learners had to follow the general process of digital story creation (e.g., writing the script, recording their voices to narrate the story, selecting images, and editing the video at the end) whose final outcome was a video displaying their individual 'L2 learning journeys'. Data analysis consisted in assessing L2 oral productions by using a total of nine measures pertaining complexity, accuracy, fluency and lexical density. Overall, results for the three-week experiment with digital storytelling suggest that every learner seems to have benefitted from creating a digital story in English, considering all L2 productions showed some type of enhancement in at least one of the dimensions (or one of the nine measures) after the digital stories were concluded. In other words, L2 productions were perceived to be "better" — more accurate, more fluent, or more lexically dense — in either the immediate post-test (right after the experiment was concluded) and/or in the delayed post-test (one month after the classes had ended³).

The enhancement observed in L2 oral productions was triggered by the fact that learners felt the need to rehearse and review their L2 performance — mainly while recording the audios to be included in the digital story — because their final videos were to be 'publicly displayed' to their colleagues in class later on. This public display — known to be beneficial in the TBLT area (e.g., SKEHAN, 2009) — thus prompted learners to engage in task repetition (BYGATE, 2001), also known to be of assistance for improving L2 performance. According to Skehan (2009, p. 56), when public performance (for a given audience) is offered as a post-task activity, for instance, "a concern with syntax and analysis can be infiltrated into the task work without the heavy-handedness of teacher intervention

or error correction". This way, by repeating the task (recording their audios more than once and listening to such recordings afterwards to analyze them), learners were able to notice gaps in their own speech (SWAIN, 1995; SWAIN; LAPKIN, 1995), reflect upon aspects related to language itself and focus on form (LONG, 1991), thus reviewing and rearranging whatever they felt the need to. This way, the process of performance revision through digital story creation allowed L2 learners to raise awareness on aspects of their own productions they would not have noticed otherwise — and all of that possibly assisted them in fostering L2 development in general terms, as reported by learners themselves in the study⁴. Furthermore, going beyond language development, participants in TREVISOL (2019) also reported having been able to develop digital skills, since for most of them this was the first time they were engaged in video-making and video-editing, and they were motivated to 'learn by doing' for completing their digital stories. Taking all that has been said into consideration, results from this study are extremely relevant considering they show the potential of using digital storytelling in the classroom in order to enhance L2 (oral) production and create additional opportunities for L2 development. This seems to be quite important, especially considering contexts such as real intact L2 classrooms, which tend to be quite organic and multifaceted, and even more nowadays, in which remote teaching and learning has become the norm due to the new necessities raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, studies such as the one just described may inform us on the potentials of engaging L2 learners in multimodal creations such as digital storytelling, which may not only impact L2 learning and production in general, but also foster the development of digital skills (e.g., video making and video editing), as well as critical thinking and interpersonal/collaborative learning (NISHIOKA, 2016), among other elements.

Developing a digital story also supports students in terms of multimodality competence considering that the main objective of creating a story like this is to deliver a message, and in order to do that, students make use of different multimodal resources so as to tell a meaningful story. They actually make meaning through the digital pictures, the soundtrack, and also their voices when telling the story. In other words, students are supposed to choose multimodal elements that convey meaning to the story they are telling.

The steps required to develop a digital story also fit the four elements to work with students proposed by The New London group, as mentioned in the previous section. The first element is "situated practice", which means students should be placed into the process. Considering that they choose their topics, it is possible to assert that they are playing an active and relevant role during the whole process. The second element is "over instruction", which means they would be receiving some instruction in order to better develop their project. Throughout the process, teachers are expected to provide instruction to students, in a digital story production, the written feedback received during script development being a good example of instruction. "Critical framing" is the third element, and it could also be observed during script development because it is in this step that students decide how critically they intend to approach the story to be told. The last element is "transformed practice", in which students can put all they have learned in practice by creating the video using a computer software and the oral narration.

The meta functions proposed by Halliday may also be recognized within this process of developing a digital story, as explained in the following chart:

Table 2: A parallel between Halliday's metafunctions and the development of digital stories

IDEATIONAL	The ideational metafunction is related to experience. During the development of a DS, students may choose a topic related to their own life experience.
INTERPERSONAL	The interpersonal metafunction is related to interaction. The basic idea of developing a DS is to deliver a message to others. In other words, students may interact with each other by using their own video productions.
TEXTUAL	The textual metafunction is related to the idea of using language to organize the message by making use of coherent and cohesive elements. Throughout the development of a DS, students are required to write a script in which they are expected to make use of those elements.

Source: The authors

As pointed out by Prensky (2001), our digital native students are quite different from the previous generation, so trying to use all this technological knowledge for educational purposes seems to be an efficient idea to propel language development. Nowadays, students play an active role in their own language learning process, considering all the technological knowledge they seem to already have and the access they have to the target language through the internet. Then, engaging them in meaningful interactional practices in the classroom seems to contribute to their language competence in the foreign language (HEBERLE, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

In the present time, most people have multimodal experiences, on a daily basis, throughout social networks, videos, and many other tools present in modern life, which is a sign of how multimodal the world has become. Considering how familiar people are becoming to multimodality, the idea of using this familiar context to foster language learning seems to be quite profitable.

Foreign language teaching and learning has been changing drastically with the advance of technology and the internet. Nowadays, teachers and students have access to an endless variety of resources that may be used to support them in terms of learning and teaching a foreign language. Trying to use resources that are already familiar to students and also to teachers may be an efficient way to teach and learn a foreign language in the present days when taking into account how multimodal the current world has become.

In this context, it is essential to have in mind that the multimodal idea of making meaning does not occur solely by making use of linguistic signs, but also throughout visuals, songs, etc. (BUCHER, 2017). Considering that the internet provides teachers with endless possibilities of multimodal tools that may be used in language classes, the time has come for us to use this sort of multimodal activities in EFL classes, which has proven to be a fruitful path for meaningful learning (HEBERLE, 2010).

The use of digital stories to foster foreign language development pops up as an alternative in this context as a means to have students tell stories by using multimodal resources. This is also beneficial if one considers that students seem to adopt a more active

role, since they are expected to choose the topic to be approached and also to produce the videos themselves. In short, besides allowing students to combine different ways of storytelling when making digital stories, thus giving room for multimodality to be enacted and become part of the classroom environment, teachers also place students at the center of the teaching-learning process by proposing activities of a multimodal nature.

Multimodalidade no contexto ILE: da teoria à prática

RESUMO

Dentre as diferentes facetas da comunicação humana, a multimodalidade parece ter se tornado fundamental nos últimos anos. A chegada da internet e de diferentes recursos tecnológicos trouxe novas possibilidades para o uso de atividades multimodais em salas de aula de língua estrangeira, tornando-se recursos pedagógicos que fomentam os processos de ensino e aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira de diferentes maneiras. Nesse sentido, estudos na área de Aprendizagem de Línguas mediada por Computadores (CALL) têm permitido que professores e aprendizes experimentem a criação das histórias digitais – atividades que possuem o potencial de promover a aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira (CASTAÑEDA, 2013; ROCHA 2019). Dito isso, o presente artigo busca discutir o construto da multimodalidade dentro do contexto de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (ILE), refletindo a respeito de sua relevância para professores e aprendizes de línguas e dando enfoque para o caráter e natureza multimodais de histórias digitais na sala de aula de ILE. Ao discutir, revisar e traçar paralelos entre alguns estudos na área de multimodalidade, o presente estudo sugere que os benefícios de usar histórias digitais em contextos de ensino e aprendizagem de inglês como língua estrangeira podem ir além do desenvolvimento linguístico, possibilitando que os aprendizes desenvolvam outras habilidades relevantes – como a criação e edição de vídeos, pensamento crítico, aprendizagem interpessoal e colaborativa, entre outras – que podem ser fomentadas através do engajamento dos aprendizes em tarefas multimodais de criação de histórias digitais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Multimodalidade. Histórias digitais. Aprendizagem de língua estrangeira.

NOTES

1 - L2 stands for second language. In this article, this term is used interchangeably with foreign language and additional language.

2 - Learners produced an oral recording in English (1 to 5 minutes) replying to different task proposals (e.g., Talk about their journeys as L2 learners, Being a candidate for a Teaching Assistant job, Being a candidate for a Fulbright Scholarship in Latin America).

3 - More information about the study can be found in TREVISOL, 2019; TREVISOL; D'ELY, 2019; DELATORRE; TREVISOL, 2020; TREVISOL; D'ELY, 2021.

4 - Learners also responded to several questionnaires reporting their perceptions throughout the task cycle as a whole and regarding each of the tasks they engaged during the digital storytelling construction. See the complete study (TREVISOL, 2019) for a detailed appraisal of such issues.

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