

Title of Project: Creation of a Multicultural Environment and Development of Multiliteracies through the Use of Digital Stories in ESL Instruction

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Topic of TIRF Priority: Optimal Uses of Technology in the Delivery of English Language Instruction

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Detailed Proposal

Statement of research issue or problem and relationship to TIRF's current research priority

Multimodal discourses and new media have rapidly entered every day life. Alphabetic literacy – the ability to read, write, and understand written discourses – has been giving place to multiliteracies. This individual ability to compose and transmit information in multimodal forms, as well as understand, evaluate, and apply it, is becoming a necessary condition to access extensive and culturally diverse multimodal discourses. It requires the knowledge of and ability to work with new media which includes Internet sites and Internet-based advertising and communication (e.g., chat rooms, e-mail, podcasts, blogs, online communities and networking, Internet telephony), streaming audio and video, digital photography and video, virtual reality environments, and more.

While new media and multimodal discourses deliver large quantities of culturally diverse information, people who lack multiliteracy skills can neither gain access to multimodal discourses nor successfully navigate within them even when exposed to them. In order to provide comprehensive English as a Second Language (ESL) education, it is important to incorporate multiliteracies into the ESL curriculum. This includes the use of diverse multimodal cultural materials which promote the development of cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity while teaching students to use new media and multimodal forms. Moreover, it is crucial to create a critical multicultural environment which fosters students' self-expression and equal identity

recognition and self-recognition, so crucial for the feeling of self-worth and positive identity construction (Oakes & Turner, 1980; Taylor, 1994; Turner, 1999).

The introduction of digital stories – two to five minute long personal digital narratives which incorporate verbal, visual, and musical narrative modalities – is one way to introduce multiliteracies into the ESL curriculum. It engages students and teaches them valuable technology literacies.

Digital stories are produced using PC or Apple computers and software such as Final Cut Pro or Express, i-Movie, Windows Movie Maker, or Photo Story 3. The process of digital story production includes (1) watching existing digital stories which are available on the Internet; (2) discussing how the producers of these digital stories deliver the meaning verbally, visually, and musically; (3) brainstorming and discussing possible ideas for digital stories with classmates; (4) writing a verbal narrative; (5) selecting still and video digital images; (6) selecting musical background and using it in digital format; (7) creating digital voice recording of the verbal narrative; (8) uploading digital verbal, video, and musical files into the software programs; and (9) producing digital stories using computer software.

Digital stories become an educational tool which structure students' understanding of how cultural messages can be produced and delivered meaningfully and effectively using verbal, visual, and musical narratives. Moreover, the stories as central texts stimulate an ongoing creative process of English language acquisition in a critical multicultural environment where identities and cultural practices of ESL students are equally recognized and respected.

Theoretical background

During the past several years, researchers such as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have been discussing multimodal approaches to discourse arguing for the necessity to step away from understanding discourse as a linguistic-only medium, the medium that requires alphabetic literacy (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001; Tyner, 1998). In their works, the authors illustrate that discourse has been undergoing multiple transformations with the development of new media technologies; discourse has been taking new and numerous forms.

Meaning is no longer created only linguistically by the means of sounds, syllables, words, and sentences. Meaning is also created through visual images or musical elements, and increasingly by the whole complex of these multimodal discursive elements that are capable of carrying a message. At the same time, not only do multimodal discourses take multiple forms and means of creating meanings, they also are “multimedial” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 67) and are directed at multiple and different sensory organs (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

With the development of multidimensional discourses that take many forms and employ new media technologies, new genres arise and develop. One such genre is digital storytelling that can take numerous forms and use different ways of delivering information in linear, non-linear, or interactive ways combining visual images, verbal narration, and sometimes musical background (see Cisler, 1999; Cloninger, 2005; Gobel, Spierling, Hoffman, Iurgel, Schneider, Dechau, & Feix, 2004; Hargrave, n.d.; Lambert, 2006; Miller, 2004).

Digital stories used in education are described by Freidus & Hlubinka (2002), Hargrave (n.d.), Lambert (2006), and Rance-Roney (2008) as short, three to five minute long personal and sometimes autobiographical stories where the authors combine their verbal narration, visual images, and musical background into powerful personal narratives. Authors of digital stories use different types of visuals in their digital narratives; some use still pictures and photographs, some use cartoons, some use short digital videos, and some use a combination of visual images and

techniques mentioned above. At the same time, some authors add computer graphics, drawings, and text to the still images in their stories in order to frame their narratives, make emphasis, and draw the viewers' attention to particular elements. Thus, digital stories are multimodal discourses in every aspect of discourse design, production, and distribution. And according to Lambert (2006) and Hargrave (n.d.), digital stories have a potential of triggering numerous memories and narratives from its viewers through powerful combination of multimodal narrative forms and engaging personal content.

Castillo Ayometzi (2003) states that “narrative structure is a fundamental mode of organization of human consciousness as seen in its presence across many dimensions of human experience” (p. 6). Traditionally, similarly to viewing discourses as linguistic forms of knowledge organization (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), narrative qualities have been mainly attributed to verbal discourses (e.g., De Fina, 2003; Kohler Riessman, 1993; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Ryan, 2004; Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999). For example, Ryan (2004) stresses that a narrative has to be able to denote abstract concepts and make “propositions” (Ryan, 2004, p. 10), but doubts that visual images without verbal narration are capable of doing so. In a similar way, Harrison (2002) doubts that photographs can narrate without “recourse to words” (p. 106).

However, Jewitt & Oyama (2001), Kress (2004), and Kress & van Leeuwen (2001) disagree with this view. They also state that multimodal discourses reflect sociocultural values and ideologies of a society as well as reproduce and reinforce them. Digital stories and their discursive modes including visual images can be expected to contribute to this social reflection and reproduction.

Literacy is crucial not only in ability to understand and transmit information and access and interpret discourses, it is also crucial in the understanding of the processes of social reproduction (see Apple, 1979; Fairclough, 1989; MacLeod, 1995; Schultz & Hull, 2002). Thus, researchers (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Schultz & Hull, 2002; Street, 2003; Wiley, 1996) understand literacy as an ability to navigate within the society, interpret and transmit messages, and participate in multimodal communication. Moreover, Freire (1970) and Degener (2001) argue for the development of critical literacy skills which assist in development of critical views toward the system of social reproduction and social inequalities. Freire (1970) writes that “the learners' capacity for critical knowing – well beyond mere opinion – is established in the process of unveiling their relationships with the historical-cultural world *in* and *with* which they exist” (p. 257). Freire (1970) and Degener (2001) highlight the necessity of a critical dialogue, particularly in education discourse where students get one of their first exposures to power struggles. They believe that this critical dialogue will bring acceptance of marginal literacy practices thus involving students from marginal groups into active and more successful learning.

Critical literacy emphasizes the tight connection between literacy and discourse both of which are ideological and “embedded in social hierarchies and reflect the distribution of power” (Schultz & Hull, 2002, p. 21). The *New Literacy Studies* and Gee define discourse as the ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantaneous of particular roles” (Schultz & Hull, 2002, p. 21) by groups of people at power. At the same time, discourses are no longer either oral or written. They are multimodal and target multiple communication channels (Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Schultz & Hull, 2002; The New London Group, 1996). Thus, it seems crucial to move from viewing literacy as an alphabetic category to understanding it as multimodal. According to the New London Group (1996), multiliteracy “overcomes the limitations of the traditional

approaches by emphasizing how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our societies is central to the pragmatics of the working, civic, and private lives” (p. 60).

In addition to changing content, discourses take multiple forms and include numerous visual and audio characteristics utilizing multimodal symbolic means. These multiple transformations of discourse have been arising with the development of new media technologies (Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). But as Warschauer (2003) explains, we cannot develop information literacy just by making technology available to people. Without education and the understanding of information literacy practices, one cannot utilize information technology to its fullest capacity and establish meaningful and critical. People who do not have multiliteracy skills cannot gain access to multimodal discourses and are at a disadvantage.

Multiliteracies have two components. One deals with the ability to navigate within a culturally and linguistically diverse society, and the other deals with the ability to use multiple modalities of discourse to transmit and understand messages. The New London Group (1996) stresses that the “vast disparities in life chances” (p. 61) have been increasing to a certain extent because education does not meet the requirements of contemporary life. It does not seem to provide students with the knowledge to navigate within discourses. The existing pedagogy seems to be static and fixed, still viewing literacy practices as the ability to read and write. The New London Group (1996) argues for the necessity of dynamic pedagogy in which “language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (p. 63).

In order to provide comprehensive ESL education, it is important to incorporate multiliteracies into the ESL curriculum, to develop cultural and social knowledge using multimodal educational materials. At the same time, ability to work with multimodal discourses is not limited to just being able to use e-mail, Blackboard, or conduct basic on-line search. According to Jewitt & Oyama (2001), Kress (2003), Kress & van Leeuwen (2001), van Leeuwen & Jewitt (2001) it means being able to decode multimodal messages delivered through a variety of channels. For example, these can be visual and/or audio messages delivered using print, video, and/or electronic formats. And with a high volume of multimodal discourses entering our lives through the Internet, billboards, mass media, or cinematography, it is important to be able to sort the information, evaluate it, and apply it appropriately within a particular context (Tyner, 1998).

At the same time, literacy is directly connected with questions of identity recognition and opportunities for self-expression. First to understand attitudes towards literacy in ESL, it is important to consider the *great divide hypothesis* (see Reder & Davila, 2005; Wiley, 1996). Wiley (1996) stresses that the assumption of written literacy tradition being superior to the oral literacy tradition is often shared by language teachers. Therefore, teachers often tend to “hierarchically dichotomize” (Wiley, 1996, p. 39) their students, giving more positive acknowledgment to the ones whose literacy tradition is closer to the Western one. Many teachers might also find it important to illustrate to the students with oral literacy traditions that ability to clearly (in the Western sense) write is their ticket to the success in the Western world.

The New London Group (1996) notes, however, that “as there are multiple layers to everyone’s identity, there are multiple discourses of identity and multiple discourses of recognition to be negotiated” (p. 70). The process of identity negotiation takes place all the time during schooling, and it is crucially important for anybody to have a positive image of oneself. Introducing ESL learners to cultural capital in the US, we cannot deny the value of the cultural capital with which they enter the ESL programs.

ESL learners, particularly in higher and adult education, enroll into the ESL programs with a variety of goals. While some of them plan to continue their education in the US after completing the program, some enroll in programs only to learn English and will return to their home countries after graduation. And often there are students who live and work in the United States and are trying to improve their English in order to get a better job or a promotion. ESL learners may also represent very different age groups, and while some of them are recent high school graduates, some may have very few years of school completed, while others may be professionals with established careers in their countries. Thus, ESL learners cannot be viewed as one homogenous group of people with static and linear identities mainly influenced by the fact that they are acquiring English as a Second Language (see Koehne, 2005; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995; and Shi, 2006). Their identities are dynamic and multilayered and are influenced by their sociocultural, personal, situational, historical, and linguistic socialization as well as reasons for coming to the United States.

Therefore, in addition to developing multiliteracies in an ESL classroom, it is crucial to create a critical multicultural environment where ESL learners' identities are interrogated and equally recognized. This environment is crucial for the feeling of self-worth and positive identity construction (Oakes & Turner, 1980; Taylor, 1994; Turner, 1999). It is important to create a new literacy pedagogy which, according to The New London Group (1996), will establish "a teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation" (p. 60).

Research methodology

1. *The study.*

This is a descriptive exploratory qualitative study which aims (1) to explore how the introduction of digital stories to the ESL curriculum creates an opportunity for ESL learners to develop multiliteracies and (2) how the ESL learners negotiate their identities through the multimodal narrative means of digital stories. This study draws upon the results of my two pilot studies which (1) explored identity negotiation by two female ESL students from South Korea and (2) investigated the development of multiliteracy skills during the Seminar in New Media and Culture taught in the summer of 2007. The methods proposed for data collection and analysis in the current study were used in the two pilot studies.

2. *Participants.*

The participants in this study will be ESL students at the advanced level of English proficiency (level five) who are taking the Seminar on New Media and Culture during the summer session of 2008 at the UMBC English Language Center. The students, male and female, are at least 18 years old, and come from a variety of countries. The exact demographics will be determined after the summer session of 2008 begins and the class enrollment is confirmed. All students enrolled in this class will be invited to participate in the study; however, only the ones who sign the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved consent forms will be considered to be the participants.

3. *Methods of data collection.*

The seven main data collection methods will be: initial essays, drafts of verbal narratives for digital stories, weekly journals, story boards (explicit outlines of digital stories which include a combination of verbal and visual narratives), final digital stories, final essays, and recorded semi-structured interviews. Incoming demographic surveys will be used as an additional method to provide demographic information to assist in the analysis of identities negotiated in the students' digital stories. Initial essays, drafts of verbal narratives for digital stories,

story boards, and final digital stories will be used to evaluate the students' progress from alphabetic literacy (initial essays) to multiliteracy (digital stories). These methods aim to illustrate the students' ability to move from expressing themselves alphabetically on paper to expressing themselves by combining verbal, visual, and musical narrative modalities in a digital format via new media. Weekly journals, final essays, and recorded semi-structured interviews will provide information about the students' reactions to the process of digital story viewing and production. They will also explain the reasons for the students' choices of topics, visual images, and musical background.

4. *Data analysis.*

In order to answer the two research questions of the study, I will conduct content analysis of the in-coming demographic surveys, students' journals, final essays, and recorded semi-structured interviews. I will also conduct discourse analysis of initial essays, drafts of verbal narratives for digital stories, story boards, and final digital stories to explore the evolution of multiliteracy skills in the process of digital story production. Further, the content of the students' journals, final essays, and recorded semi-structured interviews will be analyzed to investigate how ESL learners negotiate their identities using the verbal, the visual, and the musical narrative means of digital stories.

Statement of implications of research for theory, policy, and/or practice

The study demonstrates effective ways to use technology and new media and has practical implications for the development of ESL curriculum, literacy policies, and ESL content-based instruction in intercultural communication. It illustrates how multiliteracy skills can be developed using such multimodal new media as Internet materials, digital photography, documentary films, motion pictures, print and video advertisements, and digital stories. It also suggests how intercultural knowledge can be developed with the use of these new media as cultural and identity texts. This study illustrates how digital stories can be used in ESL curriculum as instructional texts and forms for final students' projects to foster an engaging and creative multicultural classroom environment through the students' identity expression and recognition while developing multiliteracy skills.