Title of Project:
Multimodality, Social Semiotics, and Literacy: How LESLLA Learners
from Refugee Backgrounds Make Meaning in Assessment Texts

Researcher:
Jenna Altherr Flores
University of Arizona
jaltherrflores@email.arizona.edu

Research Supervisor:
Dr. Chantelle Warner
University of Arizona

Jenna Altherr Flores

Project Summary:
This research contributes to understandings of how non-Western refugee-background adults with no or limited literacy make meaning from multimodal texts, specifically those related to low- and high-stakes assessments such as widely-used English language/literacy assessments, and the U.S. naturalization test. Making meaning from multimodal texts requires understanding headings, directions, images, graphic devices, top/down and left/right organization, and the relationships between such elements. Because many refugee-background adults are becoming literate (while simultaneously learning the language their literacy is manifesting in) due to limited/interrupted schooling, their visual literacy is also emergent. Many materials designed for beginning English language learners rely heavily on visual cues, which this population may miss. Knowledge of how diverse populations make meaning from multimodal texts is thus crucial for designing tests and study materials, which claim to support other kinds of learning. This study will provide insight into how these learners engage with learning materials, and how assessment practices may be inadvertently biased against individuals with non-Western backgrounds. The project utilizes two text types: 1) English language/literacy classroom assessments, 2) official USCIS U.S. naturalization test study materials. Data sources include textual artifacts and semistructured interviews. The analyses will utilize a critical multimodal social semiotic approach (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Pennycook, 2001) to examine underlying assumptions presented in the texts' visual and linguistic design, and to investigate how this population understands these multimodal texts. Results will be beneficial for materials development and assessment practices, and will highlight sociopolitical issues in assessment of this population in low- and high-stakes environments.