



Title of Project:

Social Semiotics and Literacy: How Refugee-Background Adult Second Language Learners with Emerging Literacy Make Meaning in Multimodal Assessment Texts

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated:

Language Assessment

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

This dissertation contributes to the fields of applied linguistics and literacy studies by considering the complex meaning-making processes of adults from refugee backgrounds as they navigate new textual, linguistic, and educational landscapes. Meaning-making as it is understood here involves both perception and production; it is inherently dialogical, and bound in social semiotic systems, which are not only linguistic but multimodal (Kress, 1994). Making meaning from multimodal texts requires understanding headings, directions, images, graphic devices, top/down and left/right organization, and the relationships among such elements. Taking these complications as a starting point, this research focused on refugee-background adult second language (L2) learners, specifically, those with emerging literacy or who (have) experienced interruptions in their formal, school-based education. Such learners are becoming literate while simultaneously learning the language in which their literacy is developing. For these reasons, the texts that are central to their experiences as learners of a new language—particularly language and literacy assessments—are of considerable importance for understanding the intersecting dimensions at play when people learn how to make meaning in a new language.

While there is a growing body of research that has examined the psycholinguistic aspects of adult L2 learners' literacy development (e.g., Huettig, 2015; Kurvers, 2002; Tammelin-Laine, 2015; Tarone & Bigelow, 2007; Tarone et al., 2009; Vainikka et al., 2017; Young-Scholten & Naeb, 2010), many questions remain about the social semiotics of literacy—the interplay of context, culture, history, text, and meaning-making—for adults with emerging literacy or interruptions in their education. Moreover, little research to-date investigates the connections between social semiotics and the visual and multimodal literacies of this population (Altherr Flores, 2017, 2019; Bruski, 2012; Whiteside, 2008), and scarce research (Allemano, 2013; Altherr Flores, 2017) has investigated this population's engagement with multimodal assessment texts. This is problematic because many materials designed for beginning L2 learners rely heavily on visual cues. Without a comprehensive understanding of how such cues are being



interpreted, the field's understanding of how diverse populations make meaning from multimodal texts is compromised. Such knowledge is crucial for designing tests and other materials that aim to support learning.

Building on prior scholarship, including an earlier pilot study by the author (Altherr Flores, 2017), this dissertation focused on the role of visual literacy, language, and lived experience in multimodal assessment texts used with refugee-background adult L2 learners with emerging literacy or interrupted education backgrounds. In particular, the research centered on low-stakes language and literacy assessments, such as those widely used in community and adult education settings.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQs) that guided this research are:

- 1) What ideologies and assumptions are present in the multimodal composition of assessments for refugee-background adult L2 learners with emerging literacy or who (have) experienced interruptions in formal, school-based education?
- 2) How does this population make meaning from the multimodal assessments?
 - a. How do they make meaning locally (of the tests)?
 - b. And what kinds of implications or understandings do they perceive from the wider aspect of these assessments?

Research Methodology

To answer these questions, I studied the in-house English language and literacy assessments used by a local ESL program for refugee-background adults. Two experimental assessments were also created through iterative design as part of the research. Data sources included the three aforementioned assessment texts, textual artifacts, and semi-structured interviews.

In total, there were 54 student participants in the study. Fifty-three students completed the classroom assessments. Additionally, 14 students participated in the semi-structured interviews. Study participants' ages ranged from 18–84, and both men and women participated. Participants originated from different countries, including Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria.

To ensure the focus of the interview was on meaning-making in multimodal texts, and not on English performance, the individual semi-structured interviews occurred in either the participant's L1 or a *lingua franca* with which they were familiar. Interviews were recorded with a video camera to capture deictic gestures.

Data collection and analysis were iterative as each phase of analysis was necessary for the next stage of data collection. There were 11 phases; data were collected and analyzed through document collection, textual analysis, artifact collection, artifact analysis, interview, metafunctional analysis, and thematic analysis. The analyses utilized 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.

Summary of Findings

The dissertation research was composed of three interconnected studies. One study was a critical analysis of the tests currently in use by the program accompanied by a critical analysis and reflection of the experimental tests. The second study examined how the focal population made



meaning in assessment texts through writing. The third study explored participant meaning-making through self-articulated responses in interviews.

The results of the first study illuminated assumptions of multimodal design and visual literacy, assumed content and referential background schemata, and assumptions of test genre knowledge in the design of the original assessment texts. There was an apparent expectation of test literacy such that test-takers already know what to do with this test, how to read it, how to interpret it, and how to respond. This assumption also assumes that test-takers know how assessments of this sort are used, that is, how they are evaluated, and what is done with the data from these assessments. These assumptions are all undergirded by a belief that images, visual cues, and visual design are universal or innate, when in fact they are embedded in socio-cultural contexts.

The second study's results revealed how participants interacted with the three assessment texts, and the kinds of writing they produced. Analysis of writings uncovered tensions between answering a question with the expected content and/or answering a question in the expected manner. This tension highlighted not only knowledge of genre and multimodal design, but also illuminated how participants engaged in the dialogic nature of both assessment and writing. The findings provided insight into both how participants perceived the visual code as utilized in assessment texts, and how they made meaning through writing. In particular, the results demonstrated that students were engaging in dialogue with an absent reader through their writing, whether it was by the act of writing itself, and thereby making a concerted effort to write something (copied or creative), or by engaging in restricted codes (Bernstein, 1971) that they assumed were shared with an expected test reader.

The third study offered another view of the meaning-making processes of this population, providing a richer perspective that expanded on what had been learned from the artifact analysis. The interview data revealed the self-articulated strategies participants used to make meaning in multimodal assessment texts. These data highlighted the importance of gathering the student voice when doing research of this sort, and also demonstrated that sometimes what participants articulated was not always the same as what they did. Results showed that participants made sense of multimodal components through their lived experiences and prior knowledge, and that this meaning-making was often affected by differing interpretations of icons, indices, and symbols. The findings also shed light on participants' multimodal and visual design preferences in assessment texts.

Implications

As the world grows more connected through globalization, forced displacement, and changing patterns of human migration, there is a growing need for knowledge of and reflection on meaning-making and design, particularly in cases in which various interpretations of texts can have serious consequences. It is therefore crucial for text designers and assessment evaluators to understand and be aware of the meaning-making processes of people with vastly different literacy and education backgrounds.

The results of the three studies demonstrate that reading texts involves reading images and layout every bit as much as reading words, and that such a broadened view of *literacy* must be extended to adult second language learners with emerging literacy.

These findings reveal that it is imperative for text designers to be critically aware of their design in regards to visual and multimodal design. The results have implications for assessments of any sort, from classroom assessments with low stakes (in-house, or widely-used standardized



tests like CASAS, TABE, and BEST), to tests with higher stakes such as the U.S. naturalization test, and to even study materials associated with assessments. More broadly, these implications extend to all text types utilized by institutions, for example, signs, brochures, application materials, demographic paperwork, to all types of educational institutions (K–12, adult education, community education, etc.), and to the wide variety of institutions that serve and work with this population (community and non-profit organizations, healthcare organizations, workplaces, refugee resettlement agencies, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and governmental agencies, such as the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, etc.).

This research suggests it would be of benefit to include and/or embed visual and multimodal literacy, text genre knowledge, and information about how to use a text, as well as how texts are used by others, in classroom instruction for adult L2 learners with emerging literacy. A multiliteracies approach (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kern, 2000; New London Group, 1996) could support these learners.

The findings also raise questions for educators concerning both what *writing* is, and how it is evaluated. For adult L2 learners with emerging literacy, writing is more than words and sentences; it is also putting a pen or pencil to paper and making marks of any sort. In the same way that scholars (e.g., Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; New London Group; 1996; Serafini, 2014) called for broader perspectives of what a *text* is, this research calls for a broader perspective of what *writing* is, especially with respect to adults who are learning how to read and write for the first time. Educators need to move from deficit perspectives that focus only on (correct) completion of an assessment task towards more strengths-based approaches to assessment and evaluation that include consideration of the logics and strategies students use to complete a task.

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