

## Multimodal Pedagogies in Teaching English for Specific Purposes in Higher Education: Perceptions, Challenges and Strategies

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**Abstract:** The rapid growth and renovation from print-based to multimodal information has still not received sufficient attention from the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In fact, a multimodal pedagogy is a new evolving educational concept and practice. It is regarded as a source of creativity and modernity for both teachers and students. It actually refers to the paradigm revolutions in teaching based on what could be useful, effective and relevant to students' needs and interests and its development will ground the principles of student-centered approach. In essence, multimodal pedagogies work across the linguistic and visual modes to fulfill the purposes of the text and the context in order to appropriately organize, develop information and ideas, and convey meaning. The present paper advocates the need to reconsider ESP through multimodal practice to ensure new opportunities of interactive learner engagement. This means that language learners should learn how to exploit semiotic modes beyond the verbal message in order to effectively enhance their awareness and facilitate comprehension. In short, this paper will briefly define modes, the issues of how multimodal environments can affect ESP and how multimodal modes can have an impact on students' motivation and teacher-student interaction.

**Keywords:** Multimodal Pedagogies, Mode, ESP, Student centered approach

### Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has come a long way. It moves from the grammatical or linguistic approach to the communicative approach (which ESP is all about). Importantly, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs are designed for students who want to improve their English in a certain professional field of study. For instance, a student who would like to study Economics in the future would take an ESP class entitled 'English for Economics'; the same thing for a future Psychology student would choose 'English for Psychology'. What is remarkable is that the most prevalent ESP program in graduate studies is 'Business English' due to its significant benefits in the job market. What is important is how to ensure effectiveness in teaching and learning process as well as how to adopt new practices and new opportunities for an active learner engagement.

Significantly, in the case of ESP learning in university context, a multimodal approach is regarded as a source of modernity and creativity for both teachers and students; it actually draws upon available visual, audio, and kinesthetic modes, which could engage students favorably in the course content. In other words, the combination of visual and text stimuli could first enhance students' oral production; second, they improve interaction between teachers and learners, learners and input materials, and classroom communication. The main purpose is to move away from the traditional practices of teaching with one modality (typically linguistic) for all students in a lesson. By adopting multimodalities, they could finally satisfy students' various learning styles, needs and individual differences in education, in general and in ESP class, in particular.

### Towards a Definition of English for Specific Purposes

Importantly stated, the term ESP refers to 'English for Specific Purposes'. It is a major discipline activity chosen around the world today. "It is an enterprise involving education, training and practice, and drawing upon three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy, and the students' participants' specialist areas of interest" (Robinson, 1991, p.1). In other words, ESP is a sphere of teaching English, which enhances the ability and the application of what students are learning in order to use it confidently in their interested field.

Sometimes students are unable to apply the appropriate words in their work place; thus, this is the aim of ESP to help those students use the right terms depending on their field of interest. In this regard, ESP is defined to meet and satisfy learners' needs and make use of the suitable and the appropriate methodology and activities that will efficiently serve their future professional work.

Over the past years, ESP has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching today. Its development is reflected and noticeable in the increasing number of universities offering various master programs in ESP (MA in Business, in communication, in computer science, in tourism, etc.). ESP classes is actually different from English for General Purposes (EGP) in that the former is more directed towards satisfying the professional demands (Laborda & Litzler, 2015). As defined by Richards and Schmidt (2010), ESP is "used for particular and restricted types of communication (e.g. for medical reports, scientific writing) and which contain lexical, grammatical, and other linguistic features which are different from ordinary language" (p.295). They also add, "The content and aims of the [ESP] course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners" (p.181). Therefore, ESP is "a learner-centered approach to teaching English as an additional language, which focuses on developing communicative competence in a specific discipline, such as accounting, business, IT, and teaching" (University of Winnipeg, 2019).

Overall, all the aforementioned definitions agree on the same point that in ESP class learners can achieve a competence in a specific domain of English. To put it differently, ESP aims to prepare students "for chosen communicative environments" (Basturkmen & Elder, 2004, p.672). For instance, Learning English for Business context involve learning tasks that encompass practical situations such as professional presentations, meetings, customer / client relations and so on (Evans, 2012; Greer, 2012). In short, ESP education is a learner-centered approach in which needs, interests, subject matter and content are significant to learners. In this regard, ESP teaching should look for more relevant and appropriate ways and approaches that could foster learner language skills in order to actively process and effectively construct content-specific language (Plastina, 2013).

### **Multimodal Pedagogy as a New Pedagogy for ESP**

Multimodal ESP practice is a relatively new pedagogical issue and is, therefore, still under-researched. Traditionally speaking, ESP education makes use of specialized texts to deliver language information (Plastina, 2013). This actually text-centered approach has been concerned with the development of learners' language needs, in general. Practically speaking, the selected materials and activities took generally the form of vocabulary and grammar exercises. In this way, ESP learners are regarded as passive recipients of the purpose-specific language (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1985). This means that the learning process does not help learners deal with the confronted difficulties related to their cognitive/critical thinking skills, topic content, real-life situations, etc.

Essentially, in this increasingly digitalized world, the traditional way of getting learners to read textbooks on specialized topics has given way to the multimodal approach, where video clips and other resources are freely and easily available on the Internet and prove to modernize the learning process (Plastina, 2013). Interestingly, multimodality was established in a seminal article by the New London Group (1996), who discussed the extent to which changes in communication generated by new technologies. This noteworthy impact called for an urgent need to renovate the conventional text-based teaching and learning into print-based media.

What is important is that the New London Group believe that multimodality can bring benefit to teaching and learning process. This new pedagogy emphasizes on "modes of representation much broader than language alone" (The New London Group, 1996, p.64). The idea is that classroom setting can be a good place "to develop communication and awareness of discourse practices that provides real opportunities for students to express their individual cultural experiences built on their linguistic resources" (ibid, p.69). This communication, shaped through text, image or a combination of resources could engage learners actively, help them to effectively understand and produce texts in the target language, enhance their awareness, facilitate comprehension, and more importantly motivate them.

Interestingly speaking, a multimodal approach combines various modes, which could be visual, audio, text or speech used in a particular classroom situation to construct meaning. In this regard, many scholars today assert that classes need to be multimodal to teach students the skills required in the 21st-century work environment (Vaish & Towndrow, 2010). This rapidly changing situation represents a challenge for ESP scholars in the sense that new methodologies, terminologies and approaches are required in order to deal constructively with

the features of an ESP text in today's world of multimodal communication (Williams, 2014). In short, multimodality has still not sufficiently attracted the attention of teachers and researchers in the fields of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This leads us to stress that ESP teachers and researchers "need to take seriously the multimodal nature of making meaning in academic training and refocus our research and teaching agenda to better prepare our students for their current and future academic and professional life" (Guo, 2004, p.215).

## **Multimodality Pedagogy and Teaching Vocabulary**

As explained hitherto, multimodality has specified how several modes of communication (language, images, graphs, sounds, music, gestures, etc.) could generate meaning. Multimodality is characterized therefore by the presence and use of a multiplicity of modes. So usually, in any lesson, several modes are 'in use' at the same time. Images, for instance, could play a crucial role in multimodal communication in motivating, capturing learners' attention, and improving the linguistic competences (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010).

On a more serious note, one of the foremost challenges in EFL setting is the issue of vocabulary retention in which vocabulary items are mostly and quickly forgotten. Actually, many studies offer the impact of different modes of making meaning such as print mode or visual mode on vocabulary retention. Recently, vocabulary learning has received a great attention from researchers, teachers, and curriculum designers (Zarei & Keysan, 2015). All these educational actors see vocabulary as a cornerstone aspect in the teaching and learning process, which constitutes the basis of how well learners speak, listen, read, write and, in general (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Vocabulary is highly important to any language; its appropriate use in context would help people to better understand each other and to better convey ideas especially for ESP context.

In this regard, learning vocabulary requires much attention, effort and practice. The idea is that language teachers believe that it is time to get rid of rote-learning vocabulary lists, a conventional pedagogy that language teachers still use to teach new vocabulary items (Richards, 2001). In response to such failure, there was a call to redefine and renovate traditional pedagogies and take into consideration the crucial role of multiple modes (images and visual in combination with other modes like gestural and linguistics in teaching vocabulary (New London Group, 1996; 2000).

Significantly, various studies support the fact that multimodal lessons could be a vital element in the learning process and could have a positive impact on learning vocabulary. Bisson, Van Heuven, Conklin and Tunney (2014) found out that students effectively acquired vocabulary through the expose of visual, reading, written and aural modes. The results demonstrated that there is a positive impact on the acquisition of foreign language vocabulary. Zarei and Khazaie (2011) published another study where they tried to discover the relationship between learning vocabulary and laptop based delivery of multimodal items. The results indicated that the groups performed significantly better on the tests. With this in mind, teachers should be able to develop different multimodal ways and strategies to engage students in vocabulary learning, such as learn from visual displays of word relationships within text, connect fun and learning with online vocabulary games, have students use media to express vocabulary knowledge, identify students' needs and interests, etc. (Dalton & Grisham, 2011).

## **Multimodality Perceptions and Strategies**

A *multimodal* approach as stated by Marchetti and Cullen "focuses on the combination of text, audio and image as individual modes and how these can be creatively combined to produce meaning, encourage interaction and learning in the classroom" p.39. The perceptions about multimodality are based on the framework where it has been used in. It is based on the assumption that meaning is made through the many means (we call these modes) (Kress et.al, 2000). It ensures teacher-student interaction, it allows for creativity, it enhances the learning environment, and it optimizes the communication in university contexts for specific and for general purposes.

Making meaning can be achieved through different modes for instance image, gesture, video, or layout. They tend to make a specific form of communication through various perspectives. There are three analytical perspectives that include the perceptions, the structures, and the ideologies. Therefore, each perspective calls for different interpretation for any multimodal aids. If we take a multimodal text, as an example, it needs an expansion of perspectives to be interpreted focusing on visual, textual, and design elements that readers will

combine. The same combination can be applied for a multimodal lesson using video. For this reason, multimodal technologies can open up new landscapes of ESP practice besides to traditional multimodalities. Specifically, Teachers can use any combination of learning modalities; however, in a multimodal lesson, a teacher must use more than one.

The multimodal pedagogy implements many strategies to ensure purposeful teaching, the first strategy is to avoid overload too many inputs or modalities at one lesson, and to change modalities from one lesson to another. In addition, teaching modalities need to be organized, focused and non-repetitive. Otherwise, the lesson objectives will be missed. In fact, each modality must complete the other to create a purposeful meaning at a logical time within the lesson. Another multimodal teaching strategy that teachers will implement is to lead students to the use of mental processes through comparing, analyzing, synthesizing new information, using reflective and critical thinking, In addition to engaging students in different ways.

## **Advantages of Multimodal Learning Environments**

At this stage of the on-going research on multimodal ESP pedagogy, it is still too early to draw any definite conclusions. However, multimodality provides resources that challenge traditional forms of communication and multimodal environments can positively support ESP processes of meaning making. The first advantage is to achieve learner-centeredness. This key aspect of ESP is strongly promoted in higher education. The multimodal pedagogy can help language students learn to exploit semiotic modes beyond the verbal message (e.g., visual, gestural, spatial). And to both understand and produce texts in the target language more effectively, while also enhancing their awareness of the target culture, particularly in relation to differences in non-verbal communication styles. Multimodal pedagogy implies a change of paradigm regarding how meanings are represented, as well as which forms may be used to represent and make meanings. Making students aware of how modes may express meanings and how they interact is of paramount importance.

Given the rapid and ongoing evolution in technologies, it is important to broaden our knowledge of the multimodal dimension of classroom resources, also on the benefits of learners' engagement in creating artifacts with content-specific language, as well as developing awareness of their meaning-making processes (Plastina, 2013). Furthermore, multimodality can stimulate the students' motivation in learning and foster their critical thinking and their decision-making skills. Lorena Marchetti and Peter Cullen claim that "Multi-media and multi-modal tools are approaches to help students' brains function better in relation to the information upon which they are required to work." P.47. Multimodality enhances their natural and flexible language learning, as well as it requires specialized knowledge in switching between linguistic and other semiotic modes. Also multimodality raises their awareness to the different modes used and to their varied meanings.

## **Challenges of Integrating Multimodal Pedagogy in an EFL Class**

Using multimodal pedagogy in EFL classes might face a number of challenges, which have to be addressed if we want successful operations in the teaching environments. First and foremost, teachers must be aware of the changes in communication modes, which lead to changes in language, and then it requires deep understanding of the implications of this pedagogy. Hampel & Hauck state that "It is not sufficient to equip learners with creative and democratic representational resources and expect that as a result student control over the learning process increases" p.15. Therefore, new demands on tutors and learners are emerging to the surface. Another striking issue is the lack of basics for the relationships between modalities, the critical use of modes, the affective demands, and the awareness of intercultural differences.

While the interplay of multimodalities has mainly been treated as an approach to teach English for specific purposes, the varying degrees of embeddedness of modes in the new media and the resulting modal complexity turn language acquisition in virtual environments into a new challenge. In this perspective, ESP learners encounter various difficulties in the English learning because of their cognitive skills, or the complex topic content or even because the verbal modality of content delivery. Multimodality, however, needs to seek more appropriate modes to process the language, and to foster specific skills and competences, which are relevant for the higher education learners. Moreover, the assessment of multimodality with its different modes is still in its beginnings, since it needs to reposition the language among other modes and to consider the involvement of multi factors including language, gesture, gaze, facial expressions, texts, postures, videos and so on.

## **Conclusion**

This article states the belief that the integration of multimodal pedagogy is very important in the teaching design of ESP. Taking an ESP lesson; the educator takes into consideration the different teaching modes. The effect of multimodal pedagogy is better than traditional teaching method, which can be proved by the statistical analysis that is going to be proved in the following article. Furthermore, the article provides a new angle on viewing multimodality pedagogy in correlation with the ESP field of teaching.

Multimodality pedagogy is integrating diverse modes of representation such as texts, images, audios etc. They call for different interpretations from English language learners, and they require multimodal thinking and cognitive flexibility that are crucial for language learning in ESP. Most of multimodal studies focus more on theoretical discussion; however, empirical studies need to be strengthened. This paper tries to make up a clear set of concepts of the multimodal pedagogy. For future studies, multimodality is going to be verified to test the feasibility and effectiveness of multimodal discourse analysis on pedagogies in the ESP Class.

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