

Exploring Multiliteracies and Multimodal Pedagogies in Chinese Language Teaching: A Teacher's One-Year Action Learning Circle

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ABSTRACT

This study explores one teacher's forays into multiliteracy practices and multimodal pedagogies in teaching a language other than English in an international school in Hong Kong. Using the action learning circle as a guiding framework, this study analysed a Chinese language teacher's one-year self-initiated exploration of multiliteracies and multimodality with students of different proficiency levels. Data analysis is unpacked through interview reflections and three digital multimodal composition (DMC) projects that the teacher designed to explore the unique processes of incorporating multiliteracies and multimodality into Chinese language teaching. This study has filled in multiple research gaps by being one of the first to look at DMC in Chinese language teaching through a teacher-focused investigation. It has also included a more balanced focus on both visual and video projects to respond to the linguistic features of the Chinese language. Continuous professional learning and strong institutional support are required to fully embed multiliteracies into language education.

KEYWORDS

Action Learning Circle, Digital Multimodal Composition, Multiliteracies, Multimodality, Professional Learning

INTRODUCTION

The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO, 2020a) recently introduced the concept of "multimodality" in the *Language Acquisition Guide* put into use from September 2020 to January 2021 for the Middle Years Programme (MYP) designed for students aged between 11 and 16. In IB education, Language Acquisition, previously known as Second Language, includes nearly 80 additional languages for students to learn from ab initio level up to a high level. According to the new Guide (IBO, 2020a), "multimodality implies that a message or composition consists of multiple modes. Navigating multimodal texts requires students to attend to the grammars of visual design, in addition to the structures, typography, and graphic elements associated with written language." (p. 12). It has interpreted what "multimodal texts" contain and how multimodal texts should be used in achieving the learning objectives in listening, speaking, reading and writing respectively. As can be seen, this document has explicitly signalled a "multimodal turn" (Goodling, 2014; Tan, Zammit, D'Warte, & Gearside, 2020) in language teaching and learning in the IB curriculum, calling teachers in every language discipline to reconceptualise not only how to teach languages but also what to teach students.

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Following the publication of the new language Guide, a *Language Acquisition Teacher Support Material* (IBO, 2020b) was made available to give practical help to support teachers' understanding of multimodal texts and new assessment criteria to be used from May 2022 onwards. At this point, understanding how language teachers perceive multimodality and how they implement multimodality into their everyday pedagogy is essential to the success of language teaching in the international education context. This study can be of immediate relevance to other educational systems in which multimodal learning and testing are becoming the trend of the future.

However, based on the findings of two recent review studies on digital multimodal composition research (Smith, Pacheco & Khorosheva; 2021; Zhang, Akoto & Li, 2021), there has been a dearth of research on how teachers explore the concepts of multiliteracies and multimodality while developing pedagogies to transform their teaching practices to establish a more long-term and sustainable practice rather than through a one-off experiment. Equally scarce in existing research is multimodal teaching in languages other than English, which limits the scope of our knowledge and multimodal project designs to alphabetical languages based on the Latin script. Languages such as Chinese with unique writing systems and different input systems on electronic devices have not received adequate attention in digital multimodal writing research (Li, 2020; Xu, Jin, Deifell & Angus, 2021). Against the backdrop of an ongoing major curriculum transformation in IB education with a particular focus on Chinese language teaching, this study aims to explore how a lead teacher of Chinese forayed into multiliteracies practices and multimodal pedagogies through a full circle of lived experience on a volunteer basis over one year of teaching and professional learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodality in Language Teaching: Combating Print Bias

Multimodality entered the realm of language acquisition as a neologism through the Multiliteracy Movement in the mid-1990s (The New London School, 1996). The Multiliteracy Movement has, for the first time, challenged people's understanding of literacy as a single and pure mode of written text. Kress (2001) defined mode as "a range of meaning-making systems" (p.11), articulating the meanings demanded by the practical, social requirements of different communities. The New London Group (1996) asserted that there are five types of modes, including linguistic modes (e.g., vocabulary, metaphors); visual modes (e.g., images, colours); audio modes (e.g., music, sound effects); gestural modes (e.g., body language); and spatial modes (e.g., environmental spaces). The basic assumption of multimodality is that meaning is made and interpreted through many representational resources and that linguistic text is just one of the modes of the meaning-making process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). As Mills and Unsworth (2017) asserted, language and literacy practices have always been multimodal because communication usually requires attention to diverse meaning, whether it be spoken or written language, visual images, gestures, posture, movement, sound, or silence, rather than one sensory at a time.

Multimodal pedagogies focus on working across multiple semiotic repertoires to ensure that students develop a full set of literacy skills (Kress, 2001). Literacy pedagogy has traditionally been defined as teaching and learning to read and write on paper-based and page-bound texts and has been limited to monolingual, monomodal, and rule-governed forms of the language. However, in our modern social lives, which are powered by networked technologies and dominated by social media, students must understand multimodal relations between different meaning-making processes to absorb new information and remain socially engaged. In second language education, an increasing body of work has shown that the monomodal print-based pedagogies are no longer relevant to today's device-based literacy landscape, largely falling behind with how young students engage in languaging and knowledging with their full semiotic repertoires to make sense of their lives (Canagarajah, 2021; Li, 2011). With multimodal pedagogies, the goal of language education has become broader and more

socially and critically engaged instead of serving the interests of a small group of students who learn exceptionally well through the print-based method, which is no longer the sole source of knowledge in the 21st century. As Li (2011) pointed out, multimodal pedagogy has the potential to lead to “a major shift of interest in literacy pedagogy from conventional written or printed text to multimodal signs that are often mediated through new technologies” (p. 381).

It is inevitable that teachers will have to break away from the print bias (Jiang, Yu & Zhao, 2021) that holds that learning on devices is “less academic or rigorous” (Yi & Choi, 2015, p. 844) than learning through print. Teachers are expected to view multimodal texts as the embodied reality of human communication and knowledge production rather than an invented reality that only exists after school. Scholars such as Kress (2003), and Bull and Anstey (2019) have argued that it is no longer possible to reduce knowledge to a finite number of facts that can be memorised to produce a generation of young citizens who can effectively function in contemporary society. In their recent work, Bull and Anstey (2019) highlighted that literacies are continuously changing, and the process has been accelerated by globalisation and eased by the aggressive adoption of digital technologies that have already significantly transformed many aspects of our lives within the past decade. What remains unchanged is our educational goals, how language teachers are trained (Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016), and how their professional identities are formed (Jiang, Yu, & Zhao, 2020).

Digital Multimodal Composition: A Few Gaps to Fill

Digital Multimodal Composition (DMC) refers to modern learning tasks that engage students in using digital technologies to construct texts in multiple semiotic modes, including linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial modes (Kress, 2010). DMC has emerged as a popular multimodal pedagogy in second language education (Hafner, 2014). As evident in its rich theoretical and social backgrounds (Jewitt, 2008), DMC is a scholarly call for incorporating concepts of multiliteracy and multimodality in L2 pedagogy through various digital modes of learning. DMC requires teachers to develop activities “engage learners in the use of digital tools to construct texts in multiple semiotic modes” (Hafner, 2015, p.487). The overall findings of this body of research show that using DMC in second language classrooms can engage students with positive literacy learning experiences and results (Smith, Pacheco & Khorosheva, 2021). Using new digital technologies and interactive platforms, DMC projects such as video-making have become increasingly popular in contemporary adolescents’ everyday literacy practice (Smythe, Toohey & Dagenais, 2016). By integrating DMC initiatives, students can develop stronger ownership in the process of language learning, and a competent identity in language use and a long-term investment in L2 learning and use (Wilson, Chaves & Anders, 2012). As can be seen, recent studies have exemplified how integrating DMC into language acquisition can greatly improve the relevance of literacy practices to students’ real lives.

There are a few remaining gaps in the existing scholarship in DMC. Based on the findings of an analysis of 70 recent studies with 94.2% between 2009 and 2018 on DMC in secondary classrooms, Smith, Pacheco, and Khorosheva (2021) found that the existing literature is extensive in investigating students’ identity expression and reshaping classroom power relations, but it lacks insights on teacher change and how they engage in inquiry-based learning alongside their students. When DMC research comes to teachers, it is usually related to the challenges teachers have regarding designing, implementing, and assessing DMC projects (e.g., Smythe & Neufeld, 2010; Dagenais, Toohey, Fox & Singh, 2017). Similar cases are noted in EFL teaching in China (Jiang, Yu & Zhao, 2021; Jiang & Ren, 2020). As more teachers explore multimodal teaching in the new learning environment after the pandemic, there is a need for research on teachers’ forays into DMC. Such research is relevant not only for preservice teachers (Ajayi, 2010) to envision their future teaching practices but also for in-service teachers who are transitioning from print-based teaching to multimodal teaching (Tan & Guo, 2009).

More scarce in the scholarship are stories and cases of multimodal pedagogies explored and developed by teachers of languages other than English. Zhang, Akoto, and Li (2021) in their recent review study with 60 empirical studies on DMC in post-secondary education explicitly showed

that current expertise is almost exclusively English-centric. 56 out of 60 studies were on English as second or foreign language education. Also shown by Smith, Pacheco & Khorosheva (2021), DMC studies have almost all focused on English language programmes for emergent bilinguals or newly arrived migrants in English-speaking countries (e.g., García & Leiva, 2014), and students in EMI programmes outside the English-speaking world desiring a Western way of academic literacy practices (e.g., Wei, Feng & Ma, 2017). So far, in the rapidly emerging field of DMC research, little has been found related to Chinese literacy teaching.

Moreover, existing DMC research showed a strong preference for video projects over visual projects. According to Zhang, Akoto, and Li (2021), over 40% of the studies they included in the review article have focused on students' video projects. Similarly, Smith, Pacheco, and Khorosheva (2021) also found that 42.9% of all the included DMC projects were about video making. More research is needed to extend the scholarship of DMC beyond video making. The use of visual projects may be more suitable for teaching Chinese as a second or additional language as they can help students, especially beginners, develop long-term visual knowledge of the Chinese script (Zimmer & Fischer, 2020). It is anticipated that with the participation of Chinese language teachers, the overall modes of DMC research may be further diversified.

Teachers' Action Learning Circle

Teachers are central to achieving pedagogy change to integrate multimodality into teaching (Bull & Anstey, 2019). Since multimodality was introduced to English as a second or foreign language teaching, an increasing number of studies have been done to document how individual teachers incorporated multiliteracy and multimodal pedagogies to support students in meaningful tasks. For example, Tan and Guo (2009) investigated how Alicia, an English language teacher, designed activities to support teaching multimodal texts in a top-ranking school in Singapore through collaboration with researchers. They (Tan & Guo, 2009) suggested that more research is needed to "understand the challenges and complexities faced by teachers as they attempt to forge ahead into new literacies practices in their classrooms" (p. 316). In China, Jiang, Yu and Zhao (2020) have explored how Jan, a university EFL teacher, developed a sustained interest in DMC even after her collaboration with a research team. These single case studies provided an in-depth and longitudinal account of a teacher's experience integrating DMC into their teaching, which served as an example for many more teachers to emulate and reflect upon.

More research is needed to better support teachers in developing multimodal pedagogies through professional learning (Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016) and understand teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences while engaging in multimodal teaching and DMC projects (Tan, Zammit, D'Warte, & Gearside, 2020). However, according to Bull and Anstey (2019), previous research did not actively investigate the change in teachers' professional knowledge of multiliteracies and multimodality over time through voluntary action research. Most studies have involved multimodal pedagogies as a one-shot approach, a teaser or a quick fix to attract students' attention to the single-mode text teaching with no follow-up or critical and reflective examination to further develop the approach through professional development. As Bull and Anstey (2019) argued, "such professional learning development rarely resulted in teacher change" (p. 42).

The notion of Action Learning Circle (ALC) was developed by Bull and Anstey (2019) to provide a reflection tool and action learning tasks that enable teachers to construct their own multimodal pedagogies. The ALC model is based on action research with a specific goal to address key matters arising through the process of integrating multiliteracies into teaching. It is different from action research in that action learning requires teachers to engage in the process on a voluntary basis over a relatively long project duration, usually one to three years, to complete a meaningful and continuous learning circle. Essentially, ALC is inquiry-based learning for teachers and is often practised and embodied in the form of co-inquiry with students in designing and implementing a multimodal

project. DMC pedagogy facilitates and aligns with inquiry-based learning, which is a core principle in IB education.

A Multiliteracies Matrix was specifically designed and provided in their latest book to provide a reflection tool to teachers participating in the ALC (Bull & Anstey, 2019, p. 24-30). It can be used as a guide for data analysis to understand how teachers' perceptions change when engaging in multimodal teaching. The Matrix includes a number of guiding questions for teachers to consider when designing their DMC project and reflect on their multimodal pedagogies across three domains: **text** (what type of text is used, how and why it is used), **context** (under what context and for whom the text is produced), and **pedagogy** (what kind of teaching methods and strategies are used to support students' multiliteracies capacity). In total, the Matrix consists of 26 items of questions, including 8 for text, 4 for context, and 14 for pedagogy. Teachers will engage in a succession of investigations using questions from the Matrix, each building on the previous one to form a cycle of inquiry that results in a deep level of involvement in multiliteracies and multimodality.

Multimodality in Chinese Language Teaching

Not every language experiences the multimodal turn in the same way in curriculum and assessment design. Integrating DMC into Chinese language teaching will inevitably encounter a range of challenges that cannot be found with English and other alphabetical languages. First, Chinese language teaching has a long tradition of orthography training due to the unique writing system that requires strong orthographical awareness to differentiate meanings (Zhang & Min, 2019). Second, the printed text has been regarded as the canon of Chinese literacy for millennia. For a considerable amount of time in China's history, the ability to write in Chinese characters elegantly by hand with a brush pen used to be reserved for the social elites and the ruling class (Elman, 1991). The cultural reservations surrounding Chinese language education, especially in writing practices, carry significant weight as they are linked to one's intellectual level and social status. Also, for this reason, text annotations are central to Chinese language teaching because of the importance of classical readings in Chinese literacy. Third, the passion for maintaining a monolingual, purist learning environment has long dominated Chinese language teaching. Wang (2015) argued that linguistic purism permeated Chinese as a second and additional language teaching, just as in EMI teaching in China (Zhang & Wei, 2021). For many teachers, semiotic resources other than Chinese characters are regarded as a disturbance to learning with a serious attitude (Wang, 2020), similar to what Li (2011) found on Chinese language teaching in the UK.

In the past decade, Chinese as a second and additional language teaching has been enthusiastically embracing new technology-enhanced language teaching and learning trends. Based on a special issue edited by two leading scholars in the field (White & Zheng, 2018), it is clear that technology-enhanced approaches in Chinese language education tend to centre more on new technologies such as integrating Virtual Reality into immersion experiences (Lan & Liao, 2018) or application-based mobile learning (Jin, 2018; Kan, Owen & Bax, 2018). Existing research interests seem to be restricted to utilising technology as a new platform to deliver conventional written-text-based learning content. To some extent, technology has been mistakenly regarded as an innovation itself. In particular, Kubler (2018) noted that current digital learning innovation has been primarily technology-driven instead of pedagogy- or theory-driven. He suggested that future Chinese teaching in the digital age should be governed by what technology can do for us, but "not the other way around" (p. 54). At present, multimodality in Chinese language teaching remains a novelty and is largely unknown as a recognised strategy by in-service Chinese language teachers.

The global pandemic has profoundly challenged print-based Chinese language teaching and learning in recent years. Online teaching has become the new normal for Chinese language teachers in many educational institutions and is predicted to continue its integral role even after the pandemic is fully contained. The public health crisis has become a catalyst for many Chinese language teachers to explore sustainable digital solutions rather than a remedial coping strategy when their handwriting-

focused literacy practices are disrupted by campus closure. For instance, Zhang's (2021) new research has challenged the handwriting-centric teaching approach. Her research found that learners using keyboard typing were able to perform significantly better in writing assessment of Chinese. They not only produced longer and more accurate sentences but also had better Chinese character retention rate. Zhang and Min (2019) have also suggested that the handwriting-primary teaching is no longer suitable for young students' real-life literacies practices. Wang and East (2020) argued that the research on digital pedagogies in Chinese teaching should embrace a new learning design rather than seek to duplicate what students do in the classroom and continue to essentialise monomodal teaching.

The study intends to provide insights into the following research questions: How does a Chinese language teacher perceive multimodality in school? How does the teacher develop DMC projects for students at different Chinese proficiency levels?

METHODOLOGY

The study draws on a single case study of one Chinese language teacher in an international school in Hong Kong. Case study research is an investigation of a single or collective case, intending to capture the complexity of the object of study (Stake, 1995). Case study methodology maintains deep connections to core values and intentions and is "particularistic, descriptive and heuristic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). A case study involves careful and in-depth consideration of the nature of the case, educational background, physical setting, and other relevant contextual factors. It is also the most frequently used methodology in existing research on DMC in secondary education context (Smith, Pacheco & Khorosheva, 2021).

Research Context and Teacher Participant

The school on which this study is based is a member of the English Schools Foundation and operates on the IB Curriculum in Hong Kong. According to the *MYP Language Acquisition Guide* (IBO, 2020a), "language acquisition subject group is organised into three levels of proficiency: Emergent, Capable and Proficient" (p. 14). The Emergent level is designed for students with no or little prior knowledge of the language, whereas the Capable and the Proficient levels are intended for people learning Chinese as a second language. MYP Language and Literature course target students who study Chinese as a first language or who are native or near native Chinese learners.

This case study was organised based on a collaborative research design (Christianakis, 2010). Collaborative research repositions teachers to be lesson designers and powerful stakeholders, rather than skilled implementers. The researcher-teacher collaboration bridges epistemic divides between academics and practitioners. In this paper, the two authors engaged in the ALC project out of their common interests in multimodality in Chinese language teaching innovation. The first author is a lecturer of Chinese in a university who is interested in pedagogy innovation and Chinese teacher education. The second author is currently a lead teacher of Chinese interested in developing teaching excellence through integrating multimodality into her teaching. Their collaboration on an ALC project began in 2020, shortly after the *Language Acquisition Guide* was published.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The first author has critically interwoven the theoretical concepts for this study and provided the methodological design for the second author to engage in data collection. Rather than asking the second author to fill in the Multiliteracies Matrix while reflecting on her understanding and practice of multiliteracies and multimodal pedagogies, the first author became the interviewer, regularly checking the second author's understanding and practices of multiliteracies. Based on the "Multiliteracies Matrix and Reflection Tool" (p.24-30) proposed by Bull and Anstey (2019), this study has developed a "Multiliteracies Matrix: Interview and Reflection Questions for Teachers (MM:IRQT)" (see Appendix 1) to guide our regular meetings and interviews. The second author shared her teaching

beliefs and used her DMC projects as examples to showcase her nuanced and concrete analysis of her DMC design through real-time video interviews and informal conversations with the first author. The interviews were open-ended and varied in length. Interviews were scheduled online on Zoom, where both authors had opportunities to share screens, transfer documents via cloud storage, and discuss and reflect on the DMC task design interactively. The multimodal interviews were automatically recorded and downloaded for data analysis. In total, six rounds of interviews were carried out over the one-year period between 2020 and 2021.

Interviews and informal conversations were carried out in Mandarin Chinese, transcribed, and translated into English by the first author for data analysis, and checked by the second author for accuracy. Following the analysis of the second author's perceptions towards DMC, the study has provided a detailed analysis of three DMC projects that the second author implemented with the students at her school. First, open coding was used to categorise the second author's interview and informal conversation transcripts relating to her perceptions of multimodal texts and pedagogies. Second, the initial coding categories were situated within the Zoom meeting recordings. Screenshots were then made from Zoom recordings to capture and illustrate the DMC project that the second author's beliefs and reflections were based upon for cross-analysis and are provided in this article as Figures. Third, guided by the Bull and Anstey's (2019) Multiliteracies Matrix and relevant literature, this study has developed an interview and reflection question

three projects emerged as a complete DMC design that connected the teacher's perceptions and practices in all three domains (text, context, and pedagogy). It is vital for this study to present both the teacher's verbal reflections of her ALC engagement and the DMC designs as visual evidence supporting her multimodal pedagogies. However, due to the limited space in this article, the teacher's one-year professional learning and practices were only briefly discussed.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Multimodality

The first important finding is related to the teacher's changing perceptions of text, literacy, and mode. Over the one-year self-directed study of multiliteracies and multimodality, the teacher found her understanding of these concepts had changed drastically (Ajayi, 2010). She found that integrating multimodality is a continuous process of inquiry-based learning that requires her to take on a reflective learning circle as a lead teacher. She believed that to systematically embed and consistently implement into Chinese language teaching, classroom teachers are expected to carefully study the new concepts and critically examine their own teaching beliefs. It corresponds to what Yi and Angay-Crowder (2016) suggested for teachers to first re-examine their "own perceptions of what multimodal practices are" (p. 994) before incorporating multimodal pedagogies. During the one-year ALC, she had also been actively experimenting with new digital tools, attending seminars, and reading books and articles on the best ways to integrate DMC into her Chinese teaching practices. In the last interview, she summarised her one-year ALC and said,

I have spent a lot of time reading and studying multimodal teaching and learning. I put what I learned into the classroom immediately, and I feel I have gone through a major professional transformation that has fundamentally changed how I see text and language. My one-year engagement in the DMC project has greatly benefited my students and won recognition from my peers.

The participant had not only studied alone but also proactively shared her DMC project designs with the wider Chinese teaching community over the one-year ALC project while she was still learning these concepts herself. Her understanding of texts was further improved through engaging in her DMC project design and sharing with her peers, and her experience demonstrates that it is vital to invite teachers who have successful experiences of DMC to share them with those who find it challenging to grasp the concepts.

The second finding is about the teacher's perceptions of her immediate work environment and the wider professional community. The teacher believed that the introduction of "multimodality" in the new Guide has marked not only a new chapter of literacy practices in IB language education history but also a new level of professional learning for everyone including herself. However, despite the publication of the teacher support material (IBO, 2020b), she found that concepts around multimodality remain unknown to many Chinese teachers and even curriculum developers. It reflects what Jiang, Yu, and Zhao (2020) described in their single case study that teachers who invested in DMC demonstrated strong teacher agency, remarkable resilience, and positive emotions to overcome difficulties and find solutions alone.

I am excited to see multimodality being officially included in the new *Language Acquisition Guide*. However, I must acknowledge that teaching multimodally in a systematic way and purposefully is new.... Text annotation remains the core legacy of Chinese literacy for many of us. It is not surprising to see many Chinese teachers regard the multimodal text as a side dish, not the main course.

Based on the teacher's observation, there was a small group of teachers that took the initiative to explore the multimodal turn in IB language teaching immediately after the new Guide was published. However, she became aware that not every teacher would embrace multimodality with ease. Her sharing is in line with what the research found: print-centric pedagogy and linguistic purism (Wang, 2015) remain the biggest challenges to multimodal pedagogies.

The third finding is related to her perceptions of her investment in multimodal pedagogies. She said that the goal of language teaching was to help students build a connection between what they learn in school and what they do in their real lives. She firmly believed that all teachers should learn to combat print bias because nowadays students make sense of their lives more through social media than through a print material. The teacher participant explained that her teaching philosophy had led her to invest in multimodal pedagogies in the first place, but her deep care of her students' learning had motivated her to continue her pursuit of multimodal pedagogies to this day. She shared that,

DMC is not only a passion for me to make sense of my own teaching. It is a much-needed support for students to make sense of their Chinese learning in the digital age. It is also an artful teaching approach that makes Chinese learning fun and exciting for young students. I want my students to see the connections of what they learn in the classroom and what they do outside school.

As can be seen, the teacher is fully aware of the need to build connections between classroom learning and authentic social life inundated in social media and digital technologies. She uses DMC as affordance and engagement strategies for meaning-making in her own teaching, which has rewarded her with a sense of achievement as a teacher. She reports that her engagement with DMC was through trial and error, without much organised training or professional development by the IB curriculum providers. She acknowledges that effective DMC projects take many rounds of adaptations, and careful designs and redesigns.

The teacher's accomplishments in the ALC project for integrating DMC into Chinese language teaching were well-recognised by her students and peers, resulting in a rewarding professional experience.

The following parts provide a detailed analysis of the teacher's DMC designs to attend to the characteristics of the Chinese language, in particular, its non-alphabetical script. The study focuses on three projects to exemplify how the teacher collaged a wide range of new concepts related to text, context, and pedagogy into holistic DMC designs, and also how she facilitated students to draw on real-life multimodal resources to compose Chinese in a wide range of genres.

DMC Project 1: Emoji Retelling (The Emergent Level)

The first DMC project that the teacher designed and implemented was Emoji Retelling. Originated in Japan, Emoji is a combined word with "e" representing "picture" and "moji" for "character" (Danesi, 2016). It is a set of digital symbols often used in messages on mobile phones or computers to convey meanings and emotions missing from the texted conversation. Emoji is a pictogram, logogram, or

ideogram, meaning-based and presented in the same size and shape, which bears a high level of similarity to the Chinese script.

The teacher used Emoji as a digital affordance strategy to show students that the Chinese writing system can be “as cool and easy as Emoji”, as the teacher explained in the interview justifying her DMC design for beginners of Chinese. She noted that “Emoji is nothing new to the students. It is the language they communicate with each other on a daily basis.” The present DMC project is designed with a purpose to connect students’ first-time Chinese literacy experience with their existing and familiar literacies practices and create a combined semiotic system for meaning making.

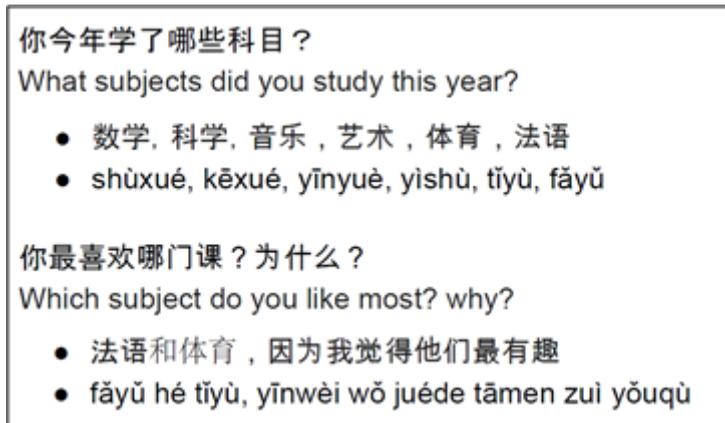
The students who participated in the Emoji Retelling project were Year 7 students who took Chinese as a foreign language at an emergent level course. After studying the topic of *My Family and Me*, students worked in groups to design interview questions for getting to know their peers. The pedagogical decision was made based on her observation of emergent bilingual students’ deep anxiety about speaking and writing in Chinese. The Emoji Retelling project was implemented in three steps. First, students were asked to create an Emoji Essay about themselves by using Emojis as an encoding process (see Figure 1). They then worked in pairs to decode each other’s Emoji stories in spoken Chinese. Finally, after students were familiar with the meaning of the content and the pronunciations of the words, they worked on decoding their partner’s Emoji story into written Chinese by typing the Pinyin on the keyboard (see Figure 2). Students were allowed to keep Emojis for words and expressions they did not know at this proficiency level. This ensured that their personal stories remained consistent.

Figure 1. Emoji encoding process



The majority of students in this DMC project found the activity engaging and inspiring. They also found that they gained a better understanding of both Emoji as a semiotic communication system and the Chinese text as a multimodal writing system after sharing their learning experiences with their teacher after class. Their comprehension was also enhanced after listening to their classmates’ stories. Through this DMC project, the teacher successfully integrated the concept of multiliteracies into her teaching and guided her students through a comfortable transition from paper-based learning to screen-based multimodal learning at the early stage of Chinese learning.

Figure 2. Decoding emoji-encoded story



DMC Project 2: Artful Multimodal Poetry (The Capable Level)

The second DMC project draws on the concept of Artful Teaching (Donahue & Stuart, 2010). Marshall (2014) believed that “art[s] integration ... brings to teaching and learning the benefits of artistic thinking, process, and creativity” and suggested that arts integration could “be a compelling alternative to other pedagogies and/or ... play a pivotal role in shaping a new education model” in the near future (p. 105). In second language teaching, Wu (2019) argued that the use of arts could enhance learners’ motivation and engagement by focusing on their subjectivity, lower cognitive overload for reasoning, allow free play between imagination and understanding with their full semiotic repertoires. In the digital world, arts can be highly diverse and often multimodal.

This artful design employed the concept of concrete poetry, also referred to as visual poetry, which has a long history in Western civilisation. It is an artful arrangement of text elements supporting typographical effects. Visual poetry emphasises the visual modes of literacy and the verbal significance. This DMC project is designed to encourage students to visualise Chinese literacy creatively. The rationale for this DMC is based on the belief that Chinese is a visual language that can be better learned, played, and experienced as people desired through an artful visual mode. It is also due to the fact that, similar to Emoji, Chinese characters are in the same size and shape, which can be used as building blocks to construct more sophisticated shape and meaning. In this regard, students can use Chinese characters like basic Lego bricks to represent their personal meanings in the artful multimodal product.

The students participating in the Artful Multimodal Poetry project were collaborated by students in different courses through vertical teaching that the teacher organised. The Visual Poetry was written by MYP Language and Literature Year3 level students, the final product (reading aloud, music etc.) was made by Y8 MYP Language Acquisition - Capable level students. After learning a poetry mini-unit, students were asked to create a piece of visual poetry by using literary devices to show their artistic skills. In this task, students were expected to demonstrate a deep understanding of the interplay among word choice, outlay, shape, and colour and then apply it in creating their own visual shape poetry (see Figure 3). After creating their visual poetry, students practised reading their poetry aloud with the teacher’s support for pronunciation enhancement, and then selected the background music, and recorded their Artful Multimodal Poetry to combine the visual and aural modes through an artful representation. Finally, a reflection regarding how students applied different semiotic resources to communicate their ideas was assigned. In Figure 3, the student produced her visual poetry design based on a memorable real-life experience. The teacher said, “the student wrote in her reflection report that she realised life is not about winning trophies (represented by the shape of the visual

poetry) but about the experience towards a higher goal and a better self.” The student’s poetry has also reminded the teacher that “the multiliteracies projects are not all about the final product. The experience of designing and redesigning is the core construct”. Through integrating the DMC project, the teacher experienced a co-inquiry of art-based learning through exploring different modes, such as linguistics, visual and aural, and integrated them to create a more holistic and impactful product.

Figure 3. Visual shape poetry application



DMC Project 3: Collaborative Video Essay (Native or Near Native Level)

The third DMC project that the teacher implemented was a Collaborative Video Essay for students to work in groups and deliver their arguments and ideas in the form of a video product containing visual and aural information concurrently. Based on a DMC project with a group of year 12 students (17-18 years old) in a secondary school, Smith (2019) emphasised the collaborative nature of DMC and described how students worked out their roles in the project based on their technical and multimodal composing expertise, content knowledge, and personal interests. Moreover, Hafner (2015) found that video making enabled participants to tell their own stories and express their identities. The video products have the potential to reach a wide authentic audience on the Internet. In another study with Grade 4 children, Smythe, Toohey and Dagenais (2016) highlighted the role of teachers in initiating the idea of video making and giving clear instruction, design consultation, and technical support to students. According to Jiang and Luke (2016), video-making is one of the most popular DMC activities in English language learning. However, few such DMC designs have been heard or investigated in Chinese language teaching.

This project was carried out in an MYP Language and Literature Course with Year 9 students whose Chinese was at the native or near native level. Students were first asked to explore local news about cultural heritage preservation that they found engaging and feasible to explore as a group. Students shared their ideas, discussed with peers, and decided on a topic they all agreed to make a video essay. They then decided on labour division to make the group work more efficiently based on their strengths. Students were asked to reflect on their own multimodal work during the assessment by discussing the rationale and analysing how they deployed various semiotic resources to achieve

their communicative purpose. Students were highly motivated in this task and demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance of cultural heritage as a group of young middle school students.

Figure 4 shows one collaborative video essay called “Hong Kong’s Iconic Neon Sign” (see Figure 4). The video product showed students’ awareness of their audience, using upbeat background music, multiple shooting angles, and popular culture elements such as movie clips about Hong Kong’s neon lights in Japanese anime. In this DMC project, the teacher had facilitated the transformation of students’ identities from students to directors, producers, screenwriters, and photographers, and her own identity has shifted from a sole authority in the classroom to a project consultant. Both the students and the teacher had fulfilled a full circle of active and inquiry-based learning.

Figure 4. Collaborative video essay example – “Hong Kong’s Iconic Neon Sign



This DMC project shows that multimodal texts convey meaning through a combination of meaning-making elements that draw upon several semiotic systems. Language is not always the dominant element, and each has a unique role in contributing to the overall meaning of texts (Anstey & Bull, 2019). Hence, as producers of the multimodal texts, both teachers and students need to understand the codes and conventions of different semiotic systems and how they interact with each other. More importantly, both teachers and students need to deploy such knowledge creatively and critically to achieve the communicative purpose. By systematically introducing multimodal texts as legitimate learning resources into language teaching, teachers can delve into the social consciousness of the larger society and global culture, informing students and lighting a fire under them to push them to enact positive change in the world.

DISCUSSION

First and foremost, through analysing one teacher’s exploration of multiliteracies and multimodal approaches, this study has shown that teachers’ perceptions and explorations of multimodal texts are essential for a successful implementation of DMC projects. The above three projects have shown that a successful DMC project requires more than multimodal texts and digital tools. These projects have integrated theories and pedagogies in other areas of research such as Emoji as a social semiotic theory and artful teaching. It is therefore crucial for language teachers and teacher educators to engage in

professional learning to explore more new educational concepts to broaden their views of text and literacy (Ajayi, 2010). Equally important is that professionals will adopt a trans-semiotising approach (Lin, 2019), breaking the boundaries between different types of text (such as Chinese characters and Emojis) and start to see text more entangled with other semiotics in meaning-making. If a student's first language or existing repertoire is rejected in the process of learning, there will be no opportunity for multimodality to take effect. By making text an open and possibly messy system, learners can apply their own imaginations and creativity to this ancient but vibrant language (Rodney, 2020). If teachers refused to share the ownership of the language and texts they teach with learners and users from other cultures and linguistic backgrounds, Chinese would be confined to being a mysterious and incomprehensible code.

Secondly, the teacher's DMC designs revealed contextual factors are key to task design for students at different proficiency levels. Through designing and implementing these projects, the participant explored how to create a more equitable and just learning environment to better engage and support students with diverse learning styles (Wang & Diao, 2021). Schools are now witnessing a highly diverse student body, consisting of individual students with different learning styles, and teachers should develop more affordance strategies to respond to students' individual differences. Learners can experience learning in various modes to best match their strongest learning styles to fully develop their learning potential. When many senses are being engaged during learning, students can understand and remember more effectively. In this aspect, the teacher holds a belief that multimodal pedagogies are highly effective form of affordance and engagement strategies in language classrooms.

In view of pedagogy, this study has provided a valuable case study for language teaching professionals who wish to explore the digital multimodal teaching approach. First, it is time to nurture an open-minded attitude towards a more radical change in additional language teaching and learning in the post-pandemic world (Wang & Zhao, 2020). The shift of course delivery and technology integration have pushed many teachers to step outside their comfort zones and explore effective multimodal teaching approaches. In Chinese language education, for example, translanguaging practices and multimodal literacy practices require teachers to be game changers to explore more creative to text composition with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Wang, 2020). As the teacher's one-year ALC shows, introducing and practising multimodality in Chinese teaching requires teachers to update their pedagogical skills and professional identities to respond to the complex digital transformation. Teachers are advised to audit "their planning and practice in terms of balance among the semiotic systems, technology, grammar of all five semiotic systems and developing salience and coherence within, and among, the semiotic systems and meaning-making elements of text" (Bull & Anstey, 2019, p. 297).

Finally, we recognise the potential tensions and resistance that may arise when promoting the use of DMC among language teachers. Given the linguistic form-focused evaluative standards and assessment-driven learning in most educational settings, implementing a multimodal pedagogy requires a full consultation with students to better align their learning interests while high-stake assessment remains single mode and paper-based. Tan and McWilliam (2009) pointed out that there have been tensions between being "digital kids" and "diligent students". Without a favourable educational policy and institutional support, teachers and students will have to make a choice between engaging in the digital reality and adhering to the value, legitimacy and priority given to traditional modes of learning and literacy practices, goal orientations and school achievement (p. 218). The participating teacher for this study has acknowledged that despite her innovative DMC activities, student learning is still evaluated in terms of summative assessment. This study echoes what Schissel, Leung, and Chalhoub-Deville (2019) argued, that it is critical for additional language teaching scholarship to "keep pace with changes in society and to align with the knowledge base in Applied Linguistics." (p. 377). We call for adequate institutional support, including infrastructure, technology, teacher training, assessment standards review, etc., for genuinely integrating multimodality into our educational policies and practices.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a Chinese language teacher's one-year Active Learning Circle experience of integrating multimodality into classroom-based teaching practices in an international school in Hong Kong. This study has also provided a nuanced analysis of how an IB Chinese teacher designed and implemented multimodality into her classroom teaching and how she supported her students in harnessing the multimodal semiotic resources in creating meaningful DMC products. The teacher used multimodal pedagogies to flip the classroom into a place where students consult teachers' opinions on their project designs and receive feedback on their language use.

Overall, this study has filled in multiple research gaps by being one of the first to look at DMC in Chinese language teaching through a one-year teacher-focused investigation. The paper has also included a more balanced focus on both visual and video projects in order to respond to the linguistic features of the Chinese language. It is anticipated that, following the introduction of multimodality in the IB curriculum, many other curriculum and countries will soon recognise and integrate multimodality into language acquisition and other subjects. It is hoped that this study can contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the promises and problems of digital multimodal pedagogy in 21st century education. In particular, this study will have significant implications for teacher education, teacher professional development, and many teachers, researchers, course developers who are exploring multiliteracies and multimodality in their professional work. MM:IRQT (see Appendix 1), which we developed for our teacher-researcher collaboration, can be used for future projects similar to ours and for many more innovative ones.

However, the study's implications are restricted by its own limitations. A full implementation of multiliteracies/multimodality requires a well-resourced technology-mediated environment (Cooper, Lockyer & Brown, 2013) that guarantees all students equal access to learning resources. Learning environments in international schools are generally well-equipped, and students come from families that can afford advanced technologies and extra devices such as touch screen tablets and stylus pens, which are essential for practising Chinese handwriting on screens. As Wang and East (2020) noted, teaching and writing Chinese online requires extra technologies and tools that are not required in teaching English. Teachers should adopt an equity-minded teaching while they explore multimodal pedagogies.

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APPENDIX A - MULTILITERACIES MATRIX: INTERVIEW AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS (MM:IRQT)*

Table 1. Multiliteracies matrix

Domain	Item	Questions - Based on your observation, investigation, and interaction with students
Text (8 items)	1	How do your students use, interpret, and produce text?
	2	Do they use single or combined semiotic systems?
	3	How and why do students actively construct meaning?
	4	How and why a text may have several possible meanings?
	5	How and why texts are multimodal, interactive, intertextual, linear and non-linear?
	6	How and why texts are produced and distributed?
	7	How and why text will continue to change?
	8	How social practices shape texts and behaviours with texts?
Context (4 items)	9	How literacies are cultural, economic, ideological, political, psychological, and social?
	10	How students explore their unique literacy identity?
	11	How students explore literacies in all key learning areas?
	12	How context and audience influence text production?
Pedagogy (14 items)	13	Have you kept keep a balance of literacies practices in different disciplines?
	14	Have you used the desired learning outcome to inform the selection of teaching strategies?
	15	Have you involved students in strategy development rather than just activities?
	16	Have you used metalanguage for talking about texts?
	17	Have you used explicit pedagogy that focused on what, how, and why of literacy learning?
	18	Have you used explicit teacher talk?
	19	Is classroom talk dialogic?
	20	Is classroom talk dominated by IREs?
	21	Have you involved students in text consumption as much as in text production and transformation?
	22	Is literacy teaching and literacy learning balanced in your classroom?
	23	How does your project design encourage metacognitive skills?
	24	How does your project design improve students’ understanding of literacy and power?
	25	How does your project design improve students’ understanding of the connectedness between home, school, and community?
	26	Is your project design part of a shared vision about literacy to the whole school?

*Adapted based on the Multiliteracies Matrix developed by Bull and Anstey (2019, p. 24-30).

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