CHAPTER 10

Multimodality and Social Interaction: English Learners’ Online Writing Practices

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1 Introduction

The research described in this chapter builds on recent calls to examine literacy as a design and meaning making process (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; The New London Group, 2000). It does so by examining the text design process of two adolescent English Learners who are participants in an online writing intervention. The intervention, called STEPS to Literacy, is a multi-year project geared toward developing the academic writing of Latino English Learners in New York City public schools (Kleifgen et al., 2014). This chapter explores the relationship between writing and multimodality—the key themes of this volume—through the mediating lens of social interaction. This lens focuses on how students draw on a variety of modal resources to accomplish an online writing task. The chapter begins with an overview of two conceptual approaches that have greatly influenced literacy research in recent decades, namely multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996, 2000) and multimodality (New London Group, 2000; Kress, 2003, 2010; Jewitt, 2009). These conceptual approaches are discussed within the context of the New London Group’s “pedagogy of multiliteracies,” which proposes a paradigm change in the study and teaching of literacy through the concept of design. The second section of the chapter examines the pedagogical considerations of applying a design perspective to the development of an online writing space for English Learners. The third section of the chapter addresses issues related to research methodology by proposing an analytical approach that traces student online writing and other communicative practices across different modes. Through a detailed examination of multimodal transcripts, the chapter presents a case for placing

individuals and social interaction at the centre of multimodal inquiry. The chapter concludes with implications for applying a multimodal, socially interactive pedagogy and research methodology to writing instruction.

2 A Multiliteracies Approach to Online Reading and Writing

Academic writing—along with reading—forms an important pillar of literacy practices in schools. This is especially true for adolescent learners. By the time students reach secondary school, they have encountered numerous tests of their reading and writing abilities across a variety of subject areas. Increasingly, adolescents’ educational experience and academic instruction become divided into subject-specific courses, such as math, science, history and literature. This division of educational experience by subject area results in an emergence of various literacies and subcultures—each with their own particular way of knowing, doing and representing knowledge in written texts (Moje, 2008). Added to these subject-specific changes in academic literacy are changes that result from social forces and technological development. As new technologies and social practices emerge, new demands and expectations change notions of what counts as literacy. Certainly part of what counts today is deep knowledge of how to navigate online social networks, manipulate videos and images and manage mobile applications. The influence of these Information and Communication Technologies on daily literacy practices has resulted in a new era of research, one that Mills (2010) calls the “digital turn” in literacy studies. In the digital turn, diversity and change play an important role in defining new pedagogical and research foci of writing activities in schools (see Gilje, chapter 7 this volume).

Over the past few decades, scholars of literacy pedagogy have called for a much-needed conceptual shift in how we approach the teaching of reading and writing in the digital age. In 1996, a group of researchers from across the fields of linguistics, literacy and education met to propose a new framework for literacy pedagogy. The group, known collectively as the New London Group, was concerned with addressing the emergence of new technologies and immigration patterns. The authors argued that given the diversity of student populations in classrooms around the world as well as diversity in the ways people communicate, there was a need to develop a pedagogy of “multiliteracies.” This new approach would embrace both the “multiplicity of communications channels and media” and “increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” in contemporary classrooms (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). The result