A Case Study of How Multiple Semiotic Systems Relate to Non-Traditional College Students' Literacy and Literary Learning

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Abstract. Multiple semiotic systems, which include linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, spatial, and multimodal, are communication systems (The New London Group, 1996). Different semiotic systems offer different potentials for representation, and certain semiotic systems are used to convey particular meaning in ways that other semiotic systems cannot (Berghoff, 2003). This qualitative case study takes place in a college-level children's literature classroom. It seeks to understand how non-traditional college students use multiple semiotic systems to interpret and to respond to a piece of children's literature, and how the multiple semiotic systems relate to the non-traditional college students' literacy and literary learning. The research findings show that when the non-traditional college students are encouraged to use multiple semiotic systems to interpret and to respond to a piece of children's literature, they are positioned as meaning-makers. They choose appropriate semiotic systems to communicate their thoughts, they explore the use of different semiotic systems, and they reread the text to study the literary elements.

Keywords: Multiple Semiotic Systems, Children's Literature, Literacy and Literary Education.

1. Introduction

On the definition of literacy, Gee (2003) indicated that literacy is no longer just the ability to read and write. In this modern world where the text forms are increasing, literacy is now viewed as the ability to construct and understand the different possibilities of meanings made available by various textual forms. On what it means to be literate, Richards and Gipe (2000) pointed out that literate students do not simply read and write. They demonstrate competence in all forms of communication, such as print, technology, and the arts.

Thought is not solely depend upon language, and language alone doesn't make one successful communicator to express thought (Harste & Carey, 2003; Whitin, 2005). Everyone constructs and conveys meaning in a different way. Supporting students to communicate through multiple semiotic systems acknowledges individual's aptitudes (Gardner, 1983) and helps the development of a democratic classroom (Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000). Although educators have suggested that oral or written forms alone may limit students' abilities to construct and share knowledge (Eisner, 1994; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), most schools center literacy education on developing reading and writing abilities and literary education on reading and responding to literary works through the linguistic semiotic system. To challenge the traditional assumption that reading and writing are the ultimate meaning-making modes in schools, this qualitative case study explores the literacy and literary learning process in a college-level children's literature classroom where multiple semiotic systems play an important role in the curriculum. This study seeks to: 1) understand how non-traditional college students use multiple semiotic systems to interpret and to respond to a piece of children's literature, and 2) explore how multiple semiotic systems relate to the non-traditional college students' literacy and literary learning.

2. Literature Review

On classroom language research, Jewitt (2008) pointed out that the linguistic semiotic system has been well researched; however, "considerably less is understood about the semiotic potentials of gesture, sound, image, movement, and other forms of representation" (p. 246). With the expanding view of literacy in mind, several teachers have started to make room for semiotic systems other than language in their curricula.

As a special educator and reading specialist working with first and second graders, Wilson (2003) validated tableau as a way of thinking. After reading aloud a picturebook without showing the illustrations to

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the children, Wilson invited the children to identify scenes in the story they would like to use for a tableau. Wilson analyzed the children's facial expression, gesture, body posture, and body position in a tableau and stated that the gestures reflected the children's cognitive work and represented the children's interpretations of the story. She also argued that tableau helped promote comprehension and develop perspective.

Believing that learners construct meaning and express ideas through multiple semiotic systems, a literacy researcher and a classroom teacher (Berghoff, 1995; Berghoff & Hamilton, 2000) developed curriculum introducing multiple semiotic systems to first graders and explored the children's performance in such an environment. They invited children to explore different semiotic systems and ensured that the children had access to different media and tools while engaging in various activities at different centers in the room. The researcher and the teacher also dedicated two hours every Friday morning for the children to use multiple semiotic systems to present their understandings about the books they had studied together. Berghoff and Hamilton found out that the children were motivated to plan ahead and to invent new ways to use different media and tools to express their thoughts. The children also demonstrated persistence and concentration when they found a semiotic system that they were interested in exploring.

Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) explored how third and sixth graders responded to literature through multiple semiotic systems. In the classroom contexts where teachers provided different semiotic resources and encouraged the children to interpret literature through using multiple semiotic systems, the researchers found out that the children made a wide range of connections to literature and considered stories from different perspectives.

On teachers' use of multiple semiotic systems in classroom instruction, the reviewed studies show that when teachers integrate multiple semiotic systems in the teaching and learning process, they provide resources for students to explore multiple semiotic systems and invite students to examine how semiotic systems work in coordinated ways to convey meanings. Different semiotic systems provide different avenues for students to make connections across texts. They also support students to interpret literature from different perspectives. When using multiple semiotic systems to construct knowledge and to express thoughts, students position themselves as meaning makers. They are able to step back, to consider how to use different semiotic systems available to them, and to mediate or represent meaning across semiotic systems.

3. Methodology

To study how non-traditional college students use multiple semiotic systems to interpret and to respond to a piece of children's literature and how multiple semiotic systems relate to non-traditional college students' literacy and literary learning, I chose to conduct qualitative case study research. Six non-traditional college students who took my children's literature course were chosen as the research participants. The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 45. The children's literature course met every other Saturday morning for three hours. The data sources included the reading response projects from the participants, the videotapes and photographs documenting the participants presenting their reading response projects in the children's literature course, audiotapes documenting interviews with the participants, and the field notes and reflection journal from the researcher. To analyze the research data, I first transcribed the videotapes. I included the verbal and nonverbal communication in the transcription. Based on the multiple semiotic systems and the literary elements, I developed a list of preliminary codes, found patterns and themes, and then conducted "analytic coding" (Glesne, 1999, p. 135). I followed the constant comparative method (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) to analyze the data in order to find emerging themes, patterns, and categories (Patton, 2002). Triangulation (Glense, 1999) and member checking (Stake, 1995) were also used to provide research validity.

4. Findings

To understand how non-traditional college students interpret and respond to a piece of children's literature through multiple semiotic systems, I collected and analyzed the students' final reading response projects on Paul Fleischman's novel, *Seedfolks*. It is a story about how residents in a neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio overcome the barriers of background and language to come together and transform a vacant parking lot into a community garden. To represent different perspectives, 13 people told their stories of

living in the states with distinct voices in this novel. After reading *Seedfolks*, the students were invited to use multiple semiotic systems to respond to this novel. Among the 6 participants' reading response projects, 3 of them use the linguistic semiotic system, 1 of them uses the multimodal semiotic system, 1 of them uses the auditory semiotic system, and 1 of them uses the visual and the linguistic semiotic systems.

4.1. Linguistic Semiotic System

Sarah, a mom in her 30s, made connections with Maricela, a 16-year-old pregnant Mexican who didn't want her baby. In Sarah's letter to Maricela, she shared her experience of raising two boys. From changing the boys' diapers to holding their hands to school, "it is really a painstaking job to be a parent. Sometimes the children make you angry, sometimes they make you cry, and sometimes they make you feel proud and touched." Sarah encouraged Maricela to enjoy this amazing journey of being a parent.

The chapter told from Gonzalo's perspective left a great impression on Sammy. Gonzalo's great uncle, Tio Juan, barely understands English. After immigrating from Guatemala to America, what Tio Juan did all day was wandering in and out of the apartment rooms and talking to himself. Tio Juan reminded Sammy of her 90-year-old grandmother. In Sammy's diary, she wrote, "Knowing only Taiwanese, my grandmother can't read Chinese newspapers and doesn't understand most of the TV programs. Very often she just stares at the images on TV and falls asleep later. She also gets forgetful. Worse, she becomes obstinate. She focuses on trivial things, such as washing and folding clothes, and she insists on having them done perfectly." In the end of the chapter, Gonzalo found out that working in the community garden helped Tio Juan find the passion for living. Sammy also noticed that knitting made her grandmother feel enthusiastic about life. In her diary, Sammy recalled her grandmother, and she considered what she could do to keep her being passionate about life.

Mia wrote her life story as the 14th chapter of *Seedfolks*. Feeling connected with Nora, a British nurse who took care of a stroke patient, Mia recalled her down time of losing her husband who suffered from erect intestines cancer. "The fact of losing my husband made me feel frustrated. The circumstances almost choked me to death. I had been swallowed up in the darkness and grief. I refused to meet anyone. I hid myself all alone for a long time to keep my family and friends from being influenced by my deep sorrow. From time to time, I thought about committing suicide." Mia imagined visiting her best friend, Nora, in Cleveland, Ohio. Nora took her to the community garden, where Mia was welcomed and inspired. Mia decided to grow grapes there. She took clusters of grapes as a symbol of her new life, which would be filled with harvests in the friendly community.

4.2. Linguistic Semiotic System & Visual Semiotic System

Feeling connected with Maricela, a 16-year-old pregnant Mexican who didn't want her baby, Michelle used words and photos to share her feelings of being pregnant for five months. Before getting married, Michelle never thought about being a mom. However, once she got married when she was 35 years old, she decided to have a baby. In her response project, Michelle included photos of cherry blossoms in Japan and the field of cherry blossoms in her husband's family garden. Cherry blossoms represented the childhood memory with her grandparents in Japan and the love from her husband. Observing the growth of cherry blossoms made Michelle realize the amazement of life. Like Maricela who felt hopeful for having a baby while planting in the community garden, Michelle expected the birth of her baby with happiness.

4.3. Auditory Semiotic System

Feeling moved by how the residents in *Seedfolks* changed from being indifferent to caring, Peggy used the auditory semiotic system to create an audio clip to represent the indifferent feeling among people in the society. Peggy wrote a script and cast her friends for different characters. Using sound recording and editing software, Peggy used the auditory semiotic system to convey the emotion, tone, and feeling of different characters.

4.4. Multimodal Semiotic System

Using the multimodal semiotic system, Alice created a short film to tell her life story. The images in this short film were composed with photos from Alice's childhood. From the over 100-year-old house built by

Alice's great-grandfather to the cartoons that enriched her childhood memories, Alice used the images, poetic words, and the Taiwanese folk song "Childhood" as the background music to lead audience into her childhood. Feeling connected with Florence, whose great grandparents were breed slaves, Alice imagined getting together with Florence, talking about their hometowns, and recalling the things they both missed very much. Alice dreamed of founding a museum to collect different stories from the members in the community and inviting all the residents to share their culture and life stories.

5. Discussion

On multimodal pedagogy, Ajayi (2009) stated that it "goes beyond language to promote alternative ways of reading, interpreting, and text composing" (p. 585), and it "emphasizes complex literacy" (p. 585). The above examples show that when the non-traditional college students were encouraged to use multiple semiotic systems to interpret and to respond to a piece of children's literature, they communicated the connections they made with the text in a distinct voice.

5.1. Choose Appropriate Semiotic Systems to Communicate

To tell their life stories, the students considered the features of the stories they planned to tell, and they evaluated what semiotic systems best helped them communicate their stories. For example, to present the nostalgia mood and setting of her childhood, Alice created a short film. She stated that through the play of the images, sounds, and words, a film is a powerful tool to lead audience into her childhood.

5.2. Explore the Use of Different Semiotic Systems

When the students encountered difficulties regarding the use of semiotic systems during the creating process, they actively looked for solutions. For example, Peggy learned how to use computer software from the Internet to record and edit sounds to create an audio clip. To create a short film, Alice learned to arrange the photos, edit the background music, and add captions from the Internet. She studied the features of a short film and considered how to use limited resources to tell her life story.

5.3. Study the Literary Elements in the Novel

The students revealed that during the creating process, they reread the novel several times to study the literary elements. They analyzed the features of different characters, looked for the history of the setting, studied the author's writing style, and pondered the theme of the story. To interpret and to respond to a novel using multiple semiotic systems, the students actively study the literary elements in the novel to help them communicate the connections they made with the story. For example, to create an audio clip, Peggy examined each character's background, studied their conversation with the neighbors, and considered each character's tone of speaking.

6. Conclusion

The content and objectives of English education in Taiwan are geared toward passing exams. The teachers focus on teaching grammar and sentence structures, and the students are asked to recite and memorize textbooks (Ault, 1986; Lin & Shen, 1996). This kind of training encourages students to memorize answers instead of comprehending texts or inventing new ideas. The approach of responding to literature through multiple semiotic systems empowers students to take ownership of their learning experience. The act of translating meanings from one semiotic system to another promotes thinking that goes beyond reiteration of received ideas. Inviting the students to use multiple semiotic systems to respond to pieces of literature motivates the students to reread the text, to examine the literary elements in the text, to make connections with the text, and to invent new meanings of the text. Moreover, it helps personalize the students' learning experience, and it increases their participation and motivation in literacy and literary learning. This study reveals that when the non-traditional college students are encouraged to use multiple semiotic systems to interpret and to respond to a piece of children's literature, they are positioned as meaning makers. They notice the problems they encounter in their literacy and literary learning process, and they actively find ways to solve the problems. They consider the meaning-making potentials and limitations of different semiotic systems, and they learn to adopt different semiotic systems to communicate. The students actively read,

interpret, make connections with, and talk back to the text. In this classroom, everyone grows as a meaning-maker.

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