Monograph

ELAN

More than One Way to Meaning

Using Multimodal Approaches to Support Foundations of Language and Literacy

Curriculum connections

- Multimodal texts
- Transferable skills
- Literacy skills
- Comprehension
- Composition

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What it is

Did you know that the majority of texts that students are accessing outside of school are not just printed words on a page, but instead are multimodal?

To ensure continual literacy growth, students need multiple opportunities to engage with a wide variety of forms of texts for a wide range of purposes. The Ontario Language, Grade 1-8 and English, Grade 9 curriculum define multimodal text as **using "more than one mode to communicate meaning (e.g., children's picture book, graphic novel, film, video, website, speech with visual aids). Most media texts are multimodal,"** and it defines multimodality as the "use of a combination of multiple sensory and communicative modes, such as auditory, visual, audio, gestural, tactile, and spatial" (2023). At the heart of multimodal literacy is the idea that there are multiple ways of knowing, and that learners draw on different sets of skills and resources when making and communicating meaning.

Multimodal texts engage students' multiple senses, expanding their abilities to process and convey ideas. Learning can take on a multidimensional scope when two or more of the following modes are combined in one text and / or utilized through instruction:

⇒ **visual** (representing and viewing),

⇒ **aural** (sounds and music),

⇒ **linguistic** (read, write, speak words),

⇒ **gestural** (facial expressions, gestures, body language),

⇒ and **spatial** (physical layout, scale, proximity) (Oxford, 2023).

Multimodal texts push literacy beyond the traditional borders of print texts, and challenge students to use a broader range of modes and strategies to make meaning and sense of their world. As

contemporary communication becomes more and more multimodal in nature, all educators can empower students to confidently traverse their language landscape by embedding multimodal literacy instruction as an integral part of their practice.

Although multimodal approaches can be used to support all areas of literacy and language development, they can be particularly effective in supporting learners' foundations of language and literacy development.

Remember to consider both the accessibility and alternative formats of each modality. Everyone's needs are different and educators strive to provide alternative formats for students, but we also need to assess if the alternative format provided are accessible for students. For example, are digital formats able to be properly read by screen readers and text to speech software? Are there closed captions and transcripts available for videos?

Why it matters

Multimodal literacy instruction benefits all learners by

⇒ Expanding their communication skills beyond writing and speaking words;

⇒ Providing rich contexts to develop transferable literacy skills (critical thinking and problem solving, creativity, communication) through multiple modes;

⇒ Creating equitable opportunities for students with diverse experiences, abilities, and working at varying English proficiency levels as they can use multiple modes to access and communicate complex ideas and content;

⇒ Making learning more engaging and relevant as students choose the modes to best demonstrate understanding and express themselves;

⇒ Offering options of using a variety of digital tools and applications to work through processes and create products (e.g., visual, auditory) and use a range of elements (e.g., colour, sound, design) to create and communicate meaning.

As Serafini points out, "a multimodal ensemble is a complex, multimodal entity that occurs in both print and digital environments utilizing a variety of cultural and semiotic resources to articulate, render, represent, and communicate an array of concepts and information" (2014). When multimodal literacy is implemented alongside translanguaging, universal design for learning and differentiated instruction, students gain greater access to language, meaning-making and platforms to communicate information and ideas. It opens up possibilities for learners to develop and use language with clarity and precision and as a means for learners to develop a broader range of literacy skills.
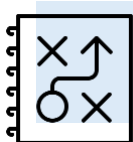
How it works

Beginning to make the shift to a multimodal approach to language teaching may mean adapting one of more of the following principles: (1) widening a view of literacy to a include a range of communication skills that involves combining two or more modes instead of adhering to an approach to literacy that focuses solely on print (and written) texts; (2) adding flexibility to how modes, media and technologies, alone or in combination, are used to optimize opportunities for comprehension and composition; (3) cultivating language-friendly environments where students are encouraged to translanguage in rich literacy learning environments that do not privilege

monolinguistic approaches; and (4) positioning students as agentive readers and writers who have the parameters and resources to make choices when processing thinking and expressing themselves beyond a one-size-fits-all approach.

In addition, here are some examples of how familiar current practices and resources may be adapted with a multimodal literacy approach to support foundations of language and literacy learning.

Teaching letter and sound correspondence

As a way to reinforce letter-sound correspondence, incorporate the use of a variety of modes, including visual, oral, gestural, spatial, linguistic and auditory.

Curriculum connections:

Here is a curriculum expectation that can be supported through multimodality:

Strand B: Foundations of Language, specifically:

B2. Language Foundations for Reading and Writing (e.g., Word-Level Reading and Spelling: Using Phonics Knowledge and Word-Level Reading and Spelling: Using Orthographic Knowledge)

Multimodality:

Here is how a variety of modes can be used to support phonics knowledge and word-level reading and spelling:

⇒ Visual / Oral: using small handheld mirrors, students watch their mouths as they form sounds and letters

⇒ Gestural / Oral: students write letters in the air or in sand as they verbalize the letter name and the sound

⇒ Spatial / Linguistic: using sets of cards with letters / phonemes on them, students organize and categorize similar sounds or match words with sounds

⇒ Auditory / Linguistic: students listen to sets of words that share similar sounds, and they write the phoneme that represents the common sound (e.g., at a listening centre)

Curating multimodal text sets

Fostering a sense of multimodality means helping students to see how information and ideas are presented in a variety of forms and through a range of modes. Curating multimodal text sets around a common topic or theme can be used in a variety of instructional contexts (depending on the instructional purpose), including interactive read-alouds, shared reading, small-group instruction, to support the research stage of inquiry learning, and to use as mentor texts for composition.

Multimodal text sets help to scaffold access to new language, or more challenging texts or ideas, they serve to activate prior knowledge, build background knowledge, and bridge new learning, they support knowledge-building from one text to another, and they offer a lens for exploring a topic through multiple perspectives.

Texts sets that are built around a specific topic provide opportunities for learners to make purposeful connections between the texts and to revisit information related to a topic from different content creators through different modes, each of which may engage students' interests in different ways. The texts sets can also be platforms for students to make connections to their lived experiences, interests, and/or build new knowledge, and allow students of diverse abilities and culturo-linguistic backgrounds to access, engage and interact with the topic. In addition, they support academic vocabulary building that may be transferable across a variety of contexts.

Curriculum connections:

Here are curriculum expectations that can be supported through multimodality:

Multiple, including Strand C: Comprehension: Understanding and Responding to Texts, specifically:

C1. Knowledge about Texts (e.g., Text Forms and Genres, Visual Elements of Texts)

C2. Comprehension Strategies (e.g., Monitoring of Understanding: Making Connections), and

C3. Critical Thinking in Literacy (e.g., Analyzing Texts, Perspectives within Texts)

Multimodality:

Here is how a variety of modes with multimodal text sets can be used to support comprehension of a particular topic:

Sample multimodal text set about the moon

⇒ **Audio (podcast):** [13 minutes to the moon (external resource)](#)

⇒ **Visual (painting):** [The Starry Night painting by Vincent Van Gogh (external resource)](#)

⇒ **Visual / Linguistic (picture book):** *A Full Moon is Rising: Poems.*

⇒ **Linguistic (news story):** [Crew chosen for Artemis II space mission (external resource)](#)

⇒ **Visual / Audio (video):** [Beyond the Moon (external resource)](#).

⇒ **Visual / Audio (video):** [Van Gogh's Starry Night as seen by an astrophysicist (external resource)](#).

Using Picture Word Inductive Model

The Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) is a low floor, high ceiling strategy to launch interactive discussion about an image while activating prior knowledge. This strategy can be particularly effective with diverse learners, and is especially supportive of multilingual language learners at all English proficiency levels, including beginner English speakers.

In this strategy, students (e.g., as a whole class or in guided small group instruction) view and label an image using new, targeted vocabulary. For example, a noun (relevant to the picture) is written beside the picture, and a line drawn between the word and the picture. A verb is then provided for this noun, relative to what is taking place in the picture. Then a sentence is created from the noun and verb. As the parts of the sentence are given, each part (nouns, verbs, phrases) are colour coded (Know that colour may not register the same for all students and alternative ways of coding will need to be considered. Always having at least two ways of expressing meaning is good accessibility practice.) to make explicit to students the parts of the sentence construction. The process is repeated for parts of the picture.

The targeted vocabulary (e.g., nouns) may be provided in English and home languages to support translanguaging. The vocabulary generated is used to construct sentences and/or paragraphs both in oral and in written form, and the approach simultaneously teaches vocabulary, sentence structure at the same time as building meaning. The strategy also supports development of critical thinking literacy skills (e.g., inferring, predicting) that are transferable to reading in other modes.

The rainbow stretches across the sky.

The boat travels along the basin.

The water crashes over the falls.

The tourists stand on the observation deck.

Source: ¡Colorin Colorado!'s ELL Classroom Strategy Library: PWIM (external website).

Curriculum connections:

Here are curriculum expectations that can be supported through multimodality:

Multiple, including Strand B: Foundations of Language, specifically

B2. Language Foundations for Reading and Writing (e.g., Vocabulary), and

B3. Language Conventions for Reading and Writing (e.g., Syntax and Sentence Structure, Grammar).

Multimodality:

Here is how a variety of modes of texts can be used to support vocabulary and language conventions for reading and writing:

⇒ Visual / Linguistic: students select nouns, verbs and phrases (parts of speech), and code or colour code them as part of creating sentences relevant to a topic.

⇒ Visual / Linguistic: students create sentences to label parts of an image.

⇒ Oral / Gestural: students read aloud their coded sentences and use gestures to indicate the different parts of speech.

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Updates

When updates are made to this document, they are tracked below with date and description of update.

- February 2025: initial release