

Teachers' Perceptions about Teaching Multimodal Composition: The Case Study of Korean English Teachers at Secondary Schools

Jung Ryu¹ & George Boggs²

¹ Bucheon High School, Bucheon, Korea

² School of Education, Florida State University, Tallahassee, USA

Correspondence: Jung Ryu, Bucheon High School, Bucheon, Korea. Tel: 82-10-8910-4150. E-mail: skynism@hanmail.net

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Abstract

Twenty-first-century literacy is not confined to communication based on reading and writing only traditional printed texts. New kinds of literacies extend to multimedia projects and multimodal texts, which include visual, audio, and technological elements to create meanings. The purpose of this study is to explore how Korean secondary English teachers understand the 21st literacies and multimodal composition in this era of new types of communication. Framing the study are questions pertaining to what these teachers think about teaching multimodal composition in their writing classrooms. The schools of South Korea, including those in this study, prioritize high-stakes standardized tests, and teachers as well as students and parents gauge success by these test scores. As a result, teachers primarily rely on direct instruction via lectures to provide skills and knowledge to ensure that students will succeed in the high-stakes tests. So while teaching and assessment practices in the classroom still adhere to traditional approaches, ongoing technology outside school has transformed the ways in which young people – the students – generate, communicate, and negotiate meanings via diverse texts. If the primary goal of education is to teach students lifelong skills needed in society, it is the responsibility of schools and teachers to recognize social changes and promote individual learning needs.

Keywords: multimodal composition, 21st century literacy, multimodal texts, social changes, writing instruction

1. Introduction

Since English became a mandatory school subject in Korea in 1997, the focus has been on teaching grammar (Fouser, 2011). Most class activities have involved translating passages from English into the native language, memorizing vocabulary in isolated contexts, and drilling grammatical rules. Teachers did not need good oral skills in English because explanations were provided in the learners' native language, and the focus was not on facilitating communication in the target language (Brown, 2007). As English has taken hold as an international language, English teachers are encouraged to focus more on teaching communicative abilities (Brown, 2007). Also at this time, the increasing communication among people in different countries via the Internet makes geographic boundaries less significant. As a result of the needs of a fast changing society, changes in the classroom also are needed, including new insights about "texts, new models of learning, and new national needs" (Myers, 1996). However, in spite of the importance of communicative competence in English education, Korean teachers of English are likely to have far less motivation to teach writing compared to other areas such as reading and listening because of the continuing test-driven orientation and a lack of teacher confidence in teaching writing (Yang & Son, 2009).

While the curriculum does not emphasize writing, students now have more opportunities to read and write English outside of school. Online communities such as Facebook, tweets, and blogs enable students to read what others write and to express themselves in writing their own ideas (Vasudenvan et al., 2010). Many students who do not show any interest in writing in class participate actively and competently in these types of activities without realizing that they are practicing writing (Park & Selfe, 2011; Witte, 2007). This illustrates the gap between the school curriculum and networked environments where students use English for interacting with people globally. It also points to the need to support the provision of improved writing instruction to students, and to encourage teachers to expand their definition of literacy and to learn ways in which to combine digital technology with traditional writing instruction (NCTE, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine teachers'

perceptions of such changed environments saturated with various modes and to suggest practical guidelines to support enhanced writing instructions.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Literacy and Multiliteracies

According to the definition of literacy approved by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2008), “literacy is a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared by a group of people”. By such a definition, literacy is unstable, dynamic, and flexible as it reflects ever-changing social values, attitudes, and interests. Individuals today need a wide range of abilities to respond to ever-changing social needs (Myers, 1996), and multiple and multimodal literacies, using the tools of technology, continue to challenge the traditional form of literacy. As a result, the English Language Arts curriculum must change. As the Internet and digital technology require reconsideration of the definitions of text and writing pedagogy (Froehlich, 2013), new media literacies demand that students master three types of skills: (1) functional skills which enhance their understanding about managing technology; (2) critical skills which are to help them regard digital technology as a tool to understand social and political contexts; and (3) rhetorical skills which may help them choose the best way to convey their ideas (DeVoss et al., 2010).

The new literacies are not confined to communication through the reading and writing using only printed texts. Rather, literacy now includes the use of multimedia and multimodal texts – visual, audio, and technological – to produce all types of products (Grabill, 2005). In other words, multimodal aspects of texts challenge the concept of language (Kress, 2000). Kress (2000) used an example of a science classroom where students were asked to write about and to draw what they had done. They did not just simply reproduce what they had learned, but transformed their understanding by using different semiotic system modes such as speech, images, and writing.

The New London Group (1996), a group of ten academic researchers, expanded the definitions of literacy and literacy pedagogy by introducing the notion of multiliteracies to demonstrate that modes of representation are far broader than language. The importance of various communication modes may differ, depending on a given cultural context; for example, some cultures put more emphasis on visual or aural modes over print. Even so, new communication media, with rapidly evolving technologies, have reshaped the ways in which people globally understand and use language today.

The key emphasis of multiliteracies is on encompassing a variety of representational modes as communication channels (Mills, 2009). The verbal or linguistic mode is regarded as one of the integral parts of communication – perhaps even the basic mode, but it is not sufficient to account for multimodal text designs. For example, rather than formal language, computer users generate more spoken-like, informal texts, and even use symbols as new standard terms (Mills, 2009). In response to such a fast-changing textual environment, literacy education supporting multiliteracies attempts to move from a formal, standard, mono-modal mode towards more informal, regional, and multimodal forms of communication (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Texts such as emails, websites, and images cannot be overlooked in relation to print literature (Mills, 2009). The New London Group (1996) points out many forms of communication as types of literacies that should be recognized in the classroom.

2.2 Multimodality and Writing Instruction in Korea

Visual literacy and communication modes have an impact on educational settings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Specifically, the multimodal approach is believed to be beneficial to English language learners with limited English in that it helps them engage in multiple reading and writing activities. In other words, shifting modes from visual to verbal or vice versa helps students better understand, appreciate, and interpret complex concepts written in English (Early & Marshall, 2008). Britsch (2009) addressed the importance of nonlinguistic representations as central to English language development. As several researchers (Coggins et al., 2007; Gerlic & Jausovec, 1999) have indicated, interactions of verbal and nonverbal communication are likely to promote understanding about content because of the positive relation between brain activity and the use of nonlinguistic representations.

Another benefit of multimodality is its emphasis on recognizing marginalized voices. This approach is closely related to critical analysis which allows students to become aware of the political and dominant forms of literacy (Rowse et al., 2008). By understanding the nature of literacies as being conditioned in a situation where they develop (Bomer et al., 2010), students foster an insight that literacy extends beyond learning only standard English and print-based representational modes (Mills, 2009).

Multimodality, however, represents a complex set of challenges for Korean teachers and schools. English teachers rarely integrate multiple modes into their writing instruction because of the emphasis being placed on

form-focused instructions (e.g., error correction) (Vasilopoulos, 2008). They may provide video clips or images to entertain students between lessons, but in many cases, the integration of multimodality may not be relevant to instruction and does not complement traditional literacies (Han & Kinzer, 2008). The mismatch is explained by an imbalance in teaching content. As noted, despite recognition of the benefits of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the main focus of English education in Korea is still on teaching more receptive skills such as reading and listening rather than productive skills such as speaking and writing (Monaghan & Saul, 1987). Teachers continue to spend most of their instructional time teaching reading comprehension to prepare students for tests, with writing instruction being pushed to a low-profile position (Kwon, 2003). Teachers' use of multimodal instruction mostly limits writing activities to one-time rewards before or after reading instruction. In a culture where the results of high-stakes tests are of paramount importance, teaching writing which is not grounded in social, cultural, and political contexts cannot connect students to understanding communities beyond printed texts (Shin & Cimasko, 2008).

2.3 Teacher Perceptions of and Attitudes towards Multiliteracies and Multimodality

Perceptions are shaped by historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Holloway, 2012). This is the case with perceptions of literacy, which, according to Gee (2000), is situated in a social context, a view that differs from traditional approaches that regard language as a closed system. The use of language and meaning are closely related to experiences that people make in the material world (Gee, 2000); and, therefore, literacy practices are complex social acts whereby participants interact and interpret an occasion (Reder & Davila, 2005).

Students live in a complex environment where the mediation of new literacies enables them to generate their identities (Reder & Davila, 2005). Most of them use the new technologies that transform traditional print, form multiple identities, and utilize different forms of expressions (Luke, 1998). Students "read" a variety of textual forms such as video games, films, graphics, and visual images on a daily basis (Ajayi, 2011). In order for teachers to maximize students' learning opportunities, Luke (1998) suggests that they have a critical dialog with students about how culture and new media affect them, and how contexts and knowledge continue to change. For instance, Roswell et al. (2008) emphasize several points that may affect teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding teaching multiliteracies: 1) Students recognize cultural, ethical, and social changes in the classroom; 2) Students bring a range of diverse representational resources into the classroom and integrate them to make intercultural texts; 3) Teachers recognize linguistic and cultural diversity, and use them as teaching resources; 4) Teachers recognize students' different interests, preferences, and dialects, and use them as opportunities to teach and learn; and 5) Literacy practices provide chances for negotiating, contesting, and refiguring attitudes and mindsets. Teachers could ensure that students' personal and cultural resources are rooted locally and socially, and that the school is not isolated from their communities (Holloway, 2012).

Teachers' reported perceptions and attitudes about multimodality have been both positive and negative. Antonietti et al. (2006) analyzed the psychological correlates of multimedia computer-supported instructional tools through a questionnaire. This study, which included 272 teachers working in kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, examined "motivational & emotional aspects (attraction, involvement, boredom, and tiredness), activation states (participation and effort), mental abilities (attention, language, and logical reasoning), cognitive benefits and learning benefits (better understanding, memorization, application, and overall view), and metacognition (planning)" (p. 273). Teachers responded that the use of multimedia was positive since it facilitated comprehension, memorization and learning. They also appreciated multimedia for its association with visual thinking and ability to provide a global view. However, some factors such as confusion, tiredness, and excessive involvement negatively affected teachers' attitudes towards using multimedia. The outcome of this study was consistent with previous studies in that a new tool helped students achieve their desired goals.

3. Methodology

This study presents an exploratory overview of Korean English teachers' understanding about multimodal composition and practices in the digital age. In particular, it examined how teachers implement multimodal composition in a school culture that privileges, above all, standardized test scores. The guiding question is as follows: What attitudes and perceptions do Korean secondary English teachers articulate regarding teaching multimodal composition?

3.1 Research Sites

Research sites located in a metropolitan area in South Korea were purposefully selected, based on several factors such as type of school (e.g., a high school for academic focused learners, and a vocational school) and teachers' use of multimodality. The metropolitan area is home to 48 percent of the national population and has the greatest number of schools in South Korea. However, the characteristics of the schools vary greatly within this large area.

For example, schools in more affluent sections may be well equipped with technology to aid English language classes. In schools with smaller class sizes, student-centered activities are more likely to be implemented, compared to conventional classrooms with larger numbers of students where the average class size is 35 to 40. Also, students in a metropolitan area may have greater exposure to multimodal texts compared to their counterparts in rural areas. Sources of information in the city such as television, text media, and advertisements (even on the street) provide students with more opportunities to access (and produce) multimodal texts. In accordance with increasing interest in multimodal texts, some teachers may have considered the possibility of bringing these literacy activities into the classroom.

3.2 Teacher-Participants

Teacher-participants were selected from a pool of teachers that indicated in a demographic survey that they were using multimodality. Specifically, five teachers currently teaching English writing and using multimodality in middle and high schools but teaching different levels of students and types of curriculum were selected. This is called “purposeful sampling.” Unlike random sampling used in quantitative studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), purposeful sampling strategies are employed to collect information from specific participants or processes where the researcher gains a great deal of information about each case (Patton, 2002). In other words, the aim of purposeful sampling is not to generalize but to better understand the phenomenon that the researcher is interested in.

Table 1. Teacher-participants in this study by gender and school type

ID	Unit	Gender	Type of School	Notes
T1	Teacher 1	Female	Middle school	Coed school
T2	Teacher 2	Female	High school	Coed school
T3	Teacher 3	Male	High school	Boys school
T4	Teacher 4	Male	High school	Girls school, Vocational school
T5	Teacher 5	Female	High school	Coed school, Foreign language school

3.3 Procedure

Before the study began, all participants were given a survey to complete, including open-ended questions about the teachers’ backgrounds. This information helped identify the characteristics of the population and narrowed down interview questions afterwards (Patton, 2002). The questionnaire items comprised: gender, teaching experience, education, and questions about their writing classroom. Most of the data were collected via interviews. An in-depth interview is a useful way to collect rich data because it uses open-ended questions to explore participants’ feelings and perspectives (Patton, 2002). In this way, a deeper understanding can be developed as the interviewer and interviewee co-construct meanings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

3.4 Data Analysis

Pre-interviews with all teacher-participants were used to explore their general attitudes towards and perceptions of multimodal composition. The pre-interviews were more likely to be informal conversations with the subjects, and the interview questions were spontaneously formulated to be specific to the teachers’ individual interests and situations. Most data were collected during the semi-structured and structured interviews. Documents collected and the researcher’s notes were also used to help the researcher to investigate how the teachers used multimodal designs to teach writing effectively, how they perceived multimodal composition, and what multimodal elements they used. An observation checklist was used to collect information during classroom visits and to correlate between the interviews and teachers’ actual behaviors. Their classroom practices were logged using a scale of 1, 2, and 3, with 1 meaning that a given practice was not observed, 2 indicated that it was rarely observed, and 3 denoting that a practice was observed most of time. These data sources along with the interviews were considered together to increase credibility and accuracy (Patton, 1996). In other words, multiple sources of data, or multiple perspectives, were used to check and interpret the same event by means of triangulation.

All data were recorded and immediately transcribed and translated if necessary. The preliminary analysis began with reading the researcher’s notes and verbatim transcripts several times. By using cross-case analysis (teachers working at different types of schools), and constant comparative analysis, the researcher broke down the raw data and synthesized it to find patterns. During this process, conceptual categories or themes were identified. The process of analyzing data was recursive. The researcher compared data against the data corpus, and constantly

returned to research questions and findings. In this way, each question was answered by using the constant comparative analysis technique. (Patton, 1996)

4. Results

4.1 Teaching Multimodal Composition and Affective Engagement

The findings of the current study indicated that the teachers anticipated positive effects of multimodal writing on their students' motivation to write. All the teachers surveyed incorporated multiple modes such as images, video, and music as well as printed texts to engage students on a daily basis. The teachers reported that they were interested in the use of technologies and various texts because traditional methods which depended mainly on linguistic modes had little effect on learners' affective engagement. They all knew that outside the classroom students were exposed to new texts and resources, whereas in the traditional classroom paper and pencil were the primary tools used for the purpose of conveying messages. These findings are consistent with those of a number of researchers (Hughes & Narayan, 2009; Thompson, 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010); Specifically, the teachers' comments revealed their perception that students were more likely to participate actively in collaborative projects and reflective learning practices, demonstrating the essential features of willingness and enthusiasm.

Visual images can be used as a cue to elicit students' responses. Teacher 1 stated that a picture is worth a thousand words. She believed that a picture as a pre-reading or pre-writing activity was more likely than a verbal explanation to stimulate students' curiosity as well as their imagination about the reading content. In order to help her middle school students better understand the content, Teacher 1 showed a cover of the *Time* magazine titled "The Truth about Tiger Moms," where an Asian girl is playing the violin facing her mom. She asked students to guess the content of the cover story with vocabulary they already knew by looking at the cover photo. Groups of four students brainstormed together for about five minutes, and then wrote how they would feel if they were the young girl in the picture. Teacher 2 reported that her students showed a high degree of attention and commitment in a book project. In what she described as a successful lesson, she described how her high school students were engaged in making their own book, using both writing and drawings, based on having first read a book of their own choosing.

Newfield (2011) regarded participation as a necessary process by which learners learn how to think independently and critically articulate their own ideas and feelings. In multimodal composition classrooms, the students take part in the whole process, from prewriting activities to writing to presenting their writing, felt ownership of their final products. Hence, intrinsic motivation is likely to increase in conjunction with ownership and participation. The teacher participants in this study noted that their students seemed to be more engaged in multimodal lessons compared with traditional lessons, as indicated by willingness of the students of Teacher 1 and 2 to complete the target tasks set

All of the teachers in this study used multimodal composition as either prewriting or post-reading activities, rather than as the main method of writing instruction. Also, not all recognized the need to have students communicate across modes in school for a variety of authentic purposes and, therefore, did not provide writing instruction using multimodality. That is, multimodal composition played a secondary role of assisting in traditional writing instruction. Despite this secondary role, however, teachers regarded student engagement as a reason for incorporating multimodality by facilitating connections to students' interests (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

4.2 Helping Students Understand Content

Multimodal composition reinforces formal education by providing various notions of literacies which help students participate in diverse ways of meaning-making (Jewitt, 2008). Teacher 1 gave her students an assignment in which they had to create vocabulary video clips by using a movie-making program. The students made creative video clips to help their classmates memorize vocabulary in more effective ways. Teacher 1 reported that the students seemed to memorize and retain information for a longer period compared with students using conventional methods of studying vocabulary; and the students themselves said they could connect visual modes (e.g., images) with example sentences and remember meanings better.

Multimodal composition also helped Teacher 2's students understand stories when they revisited texts to make an illustrated book. The students were given an assignment in which they were supposed to re-create Aesop's fables. Before doing so, they broke into groups to discuss the stories, characters, themes, plots, and settings. This process helped them clarify related information because they had to reread and/or discuss the stories. According to Teacher 2, it was a challenge for some students to read the stories written in English, but they shaped and

reshaped the content of the stories as they built connections via discussions and representations of knowledge. Based on their understanding of the texts, students also reinterpreted the author's meaning by adding, deleting, and restructuring the stories using English. She considered that multimodal composition provided additional and instructive strategies for some students, allowing low-performing students not to merely copy stories from the text but to interpret them from their own points of view.

For Teacher 3, tables or graphs are ways to facilitate understanding of the reading content. In a writing activity, tables of pros and cons were visually presented to help his high school students determine their position and write supporting ideas. The sample general statement was "GMOs (genetically modified organisms) should be banned." Tables containing the pros and cons helped the students organize their ideas and evaluate the short or long term effects of eating GM food. Teacher 3 said, "When it comes to technology, I rarely use it. Sometimes, I use it when it is necessary. But, you know, I usually teach reading. I only need a textbook and chalk. As you see, tables or graphs can provide effective ways to help students' understanding."

4.3 Facilitating Effective Communication

For English language learners, incorporating multimodal composition can mean involving different learning strategies (Ajayi, 2009). Teacher 4 created lesson plans integrating hands-on activities because his vocational high school students' English proficiency and confidence were both quite low. As he stated, "Some of my students quit studying English since they graduated from middle school. They prefer drawing because they don't have an ability to express in English what they think." He allowed students to respond by using diverse modes other than language, instead of asking them to answer verbally. Many students depended on visual modes, such as drawings and photos, for alternative ways of presenting their understanding of texts. Teacher 4 observed that, "It is important to keep students going forward at the beginning stage. They do not care about their English scores. So making them draw is the only way in which I encourage them, because they like it."

The English proficiency level for Teacher 5's students in a foreign-language-oriented high school was quite high and the students' motivation to study was relatively greater than that of peers in other schools. She said that many of the students had lived in foreign countries, and even those who had never traveled were good in English and were not afraid of English. She said that students today, unlike during her school years, could use messenger smartphone applications for recreation and correspondence. They could communicate by writing (texting) without extra charges if they could access the Internet. She added, "I know, they may not communicate in English when sending messages to peers. At least, they write and respond to their friends." She was clear that by doing these literacy activities on their own, whether in Korean or in English, the students could have a positive experience of writing and develop the conviction that writing was enjoyable, easy, and practical.

Both Teachers 4 and 5 had more positive perceptions towards multimodal composition because they believed that it facilitated effective communication by allowing learners to use all the available resources to convey messages. However, they did not recognize the equal importance of each semiotic mode, but considered the nonlinguistic modes as secondary methods to assist language learning. Also, even though they believed that diverse modes could play an important role in fostering communication, their focus was still on practicing the linguistic mode.

5. Practical Guidelines for Teaching Writing

5.1 Providing Different Modes

In the Korean context, final products including tests, quizzes, and final papers may be more highly valued than the process. However, classroom instruction in writing can involve multimodality, which students may be familiar with or become interested in. Tables, graphs, and pictures can be used in the classroom to explain concepts or central aspects of meanings. In digital environments, teachers may also select digital resources and make different choices so that their students can develop various competencies (Chang & Lehman, 2002). For instance, lessons might include:

- summarizing a text by using tables or graphs
- making a story using pictures or photos
- students bringing belongings and creating a story related to their belongings
- writing a script about one's self before shooting a movie
- writing a summary of a movie or a book

5.2 Overt Instruction Using Multimodality

It is believed that explicit instruction can maximize learners' academic growth in that it provides clear explanations and demonstrations in small incremental steps. By supporting learning during each step, teachers can not only help students understand content but also reduce pressure, an overwhelming feeling that they may experience. Besides, teachers select the teaching content in accordance with students' cognitive capabilities and interests and then deliver the content in an efficient manner. Explicit instructions in developing a multimodal composition can include:

- providing an introduction connecting previous lessons to new ones using visual aids (e.g., PPT)
- presenting instructional goals and explaining them in clear language (e.g., using both verbal and visual modes)
- guided practice, from easier to more difficult tasks (e.g., providing multiple modes in the beginning, but explaining mostly in verbal mode in the later stages)
- independent practice until students can perform tasks without teacher support (e.g., filling the summary table)
- giving feedback which is timely, concrete, and appropriate (e.g., verbal or written feedback).

5.3 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The interview data showed a strong connection between language learning and multimodal composition in that learners of both are required to be sensitive to literate environments and to understand that language learning is dynamic and situated in social trajectories. With this in mind, the Korean government has emphasized that more resources should be directed toward improving students' communicative competence in English in addition to their learning the written language (Kwon, 2003). In a sense, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can provide a useful framework within which to teach multimodal composition since in CLT learners are encouraged to use both linguistic and nonlinguistic resources to negotiate meanings and to complete the communicative task at hand. In order to facilitate communication, teachers in a multimodal composition classroom can

- encouraging students to use nonlinguistic modes to convey meanings
- focusing on content over form
- providing a variety of language inputs represented by multiple modes of forms which enable students to read and use socially and culturally accepted language
- offering opportunities to develop 21st century literacy skills.

6. Discussion

All teachers articulated positive attitudes toward teaching multimodal composition, although acknowledging challenges because of the social and school culture emphasizing end results instead of the process. All teachers answered that multimodal composition allowed students to engage in writing by providing different semiotic resources, which is the basis of effective classroom management contexts. They agreed that, although multimodal composition may not improve students' academic performance directly, it may potentially motivate learners during stages of prewriting and writing and evoke a deeper understanding of the content being taught. In addition, multimodal composition is more effective for students who do not express themselves in traditional ways. For example, some students may understand certain meanings better than others according to their preference for a certain mode.

Therefore, all teachers in the study have used multimodal composition as one of several teaching strategies by allowing students to respond using diverse modes other than language, instead of accepting responses in the linguistic mode only. Many of the students depended on visual modes, such as drawings and photos, for alternative ways of presenting their understanding of texts. That is, the teachers had more positive perceptions toward multimodal composition because they believed that it facilitated effective communication by allowing learners to use all available resources to convey messages.

7. Conclusion

Today, digital technologies and information development have altered the nature of communication from the traditional perspectives of literacy, which were limited to reading and writing, to multiliteracies focusing on local diversity and global connectedness. All the teachers participating in the study agreed that knowledge is constructed not only in printed texts, but also in dynamic texts supported by multiple modes. As Johnson and Smagorinsky (2013) indicated, the nature of multiliteracies is participatory and multimodal; 21st century learners

have more opportunities to read and express ideas more actively online. Students have become more engaged in literacy activities outside the classroom in innovative and significant ways through the use of online tools. Such social, cultural, and literacy practices may have a significant effect on both teachers and students in Korea, where digital technology is evolving rapidly.

There is, therefore, a need for educators in Korea to pay attention to social, cultural, and economic changes so that meaningful learning can occur. Of greatest importance is communication among teachers, students, parents, and administrators in order to understand the relevance, importance, and learning outcomes of multimodal composition. Through ongoing discussions of teaching multimodal composition, for example, teachers may develop a wide range of good options in teaching and learning 21st century skills. In addition, teachers may find ways in which to balance social needs against a test-oriented school culture by considering the practical use of knowledge and learning goals in relation to students' personal interests.

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