# Unveiling the Power of Multi-modality in Literacy Learning: Navigating Literacy Education in Chinese Cultural Contexts

Wenqian Huang[1], [*]

[1]School of education and normal, Hunan Urban Professional College, Changsha, Hunan,410013, China

[*]Corresponding author Email: huangwenqiangood26@163.com

## Abstract

This reflective article integrates the personal experiences of Chinese English learners with the academic framework of social semiotics, following the analysis of the multimodal text utilised in literacy instruction by Jeff Bezemer and Kate Cowan in "Reading Exploration in Social Semiotics: Theory and Methodology" (2021). It highlights the efficacy of multimodal resources, such as animations and games, in enhancing second language acquisition, while contrasting traditional text-based Chinese teaching methods with modern digital ones. This analysis underscores the pedagogical importance of multimodality in fostering engagement, inclusivity, and critical literacy abilities, while also addressing challenges such as the digital divide. Conclusion: It is recommended that the course include various methodologies to provide learners with contemporary communication abilities.

**Key Words:** Multi-modal literacy;Social semiotics;Digital divide;Second language learning

## 1.Introduction

As a bilingual individual in the 21st century, I acquired a second language alongside my own tongue. Due to my absence from an international family or community, I lacked an adequate linguistic environment for acquiring my second language. Simultaneously, a significant disparity exists between English and my mother language, Chinese, due to the markedly different structures of clauses compared to the fundamental characters and strokes. It is exceedingly challenging for a student to attain proficiency in a second language solely through conventional textual materials. Since childhood, I have utilised multi-modal books in my second language acquisition, significantly influencing my subsequent reading proficiency.

Reading the paper "Exploring Reading in Social Semiotics: Theory and Methods" by Jeff Bezemer and Kate Cowan (2021) has markedly intensified my interest and curiosity. My primary interest lies in the integration of various modalities and media within literacy education. This topic

has piqued my interest, particularly given my past experience as an overseas student from China, where traditional literacy techniques have been dominating and conventional textbooks were introduced in English education just in the previous century. I will contemplate this concentration through a literature-driven perspective, enabling me to reevaluate my personal experiences with reading and writing, as well as to analyse what may be perceived as 'perfect' for learning. This reflective work seeks to critically analyse the incorporation of many modes and media in second language instruction based on my personal experiences, key readings, and pertinent literature in the area.

### 2.Critical Reflection on the key reading from the module of "Perspectives on multi-modality"

The article "Exploring Reading in Social Semiotics: Theory and Methods" by Jeff Bezemer and Kate Cowan (2021) examined the role of social semiotics in reading research and suggests a research agenda that includes multi-modal texts, aiming to enhance our comprehension of reading and text creation in contemporary literacy. Bezemer and Kate Cowan (2021) contended that comprehension of literacy should extend beyond conventional text to encompass the interaction of images, sounds, and other semiotic resources. Consequently, their investigation of multi-modal texts, sign-making, and the constraints and opportunities of diverse analytical frameworks provides significant new insights on integrating numerous media and modes into literacy education. This article explored diverse analytical frameworks and approaches to enhance critical reading skills, taking into account the influence of technological advancements on text creation and reading habits. This critical study will examine the correlation between their perspectives and my experiences, as well as broader educational practices.

### 2.1 Multi-modality in Literacy and Social Semiotics

Literacy education must use multi-modal texts that integrate textual, visual, and aural components to mirror modern communication methods (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021). Bezemer and Cowan (2021) underscored the need of acknowledging and integrating multi-modal texts in literacy education, contending that reading encompasses more than merely deciphering written language. It encompasses the comprehension and interpretation of pictures, sounds, and other semiotic elements (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021). This method aligns with the evolving nature of communication, as digital media and multimedia texts become increasingly prevalent. Recognising the importance of multi-modal texts in literacy education helps foster a more inclusive and successful learning environment that accommodates varied learning styles.

### 2.2 Sign Making and Meaning-Making

The writers emphasised the notion of sign making, using Saussure and Kress, to elucidate how

meaning is constructed through the interplay of various semiotic resources (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021). The process of meaning-making entails diverse semiotic resources, including images, sounds, and gestures. This idea can profoundly influence literacy education by prompting educators to instruct students in navigating and interpreting the various levels of meaning in multi-modal texts. Recognising the diverse ways in which individuals construct meaning might assist people in comprehending these resources, hence enhancing literacy education (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021). Upon reflection, I discovered that utilising multimedia instructional tools facilitated my understanding of intricate topics in second language acquisition by delivering information across diverse modalities, hence augmenting my critical thinking and comprehension abilities.

## 2.3 Analytical Frameworks

Bezemer and Cowan (2021) reviewed several frameworks for analyzing multi-modal texts, including Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and Burn's framework for moving images. These frameworks are essential for educators to teach students how different semiotic elements combine to create meaning. By using these frameworks in my academic endeavours, I have allowed myself to analyse and comprehend the complex connections between text, images, and sound in digital information. Mastery of this analytical skill is crucial for successfully navigating the complexities of contemporary communication.

## 2.4 Educational Implications

The study advocates for the incorporation of multi-modal literacy into school curricula, recognising the growing importance of diverse communication formats in the digital age (Bezemer & Cowan, 2021). This viewpoint is particularly relevant for EAL (English as an Additional Language) learners, as they benefit from multimodal tactics that provide varied pathways for understanding and expression. As a former international student, I have firsthand experienced the challenges and benefits associated with multimodal texts. Integrating these strategies into the curriculum can surmount linguistic and cultural obstacles, hence improving accessibility and involvement in education for all students.

Bezemer and Cowan's research highlighted the substantial influence of integrating many modes and media in literacy education, capable of effecting transformation. Their understanding of multi-modality and social semiotics provides a strong foundation for teaching and understanding reading and writing in contemporary contexts. By implementing these strategies, educators can create more dynamic and inclusive learning environments that adequately prepare students for the complexities of modern communication.

### 3.My Personal Experience and Context in Multi-modal Literacy Learning

Upon reflecting on my literacy path, I acquired knowledge of the 26 letters at the age of four. The shape of each letter is somewhat abstract for a foreign child, making it difficult for me to recognise the 26 letters. My teacher presented animations and images to assist me in distinguishing and memorising the 26 letters. Furthermore, the teacher offered us to access the computer on the podium to engage in various activities focused on letters to reinforce our literacy abilities. My experiences with digital media, which integrate text, visuals, and audio, have markedly improved my understanding and engagement, aligning with the authors' assertion that multi-modal texts offer richer contexts for meaning-making and ought to be essential components of literacy curricula.

In China over the past century, children's early education predominantly focused on textual resources, emphasising traditional literacy techniques. The curriculum prioritises the memorisation and recitation of ancient texts, seldom integrating varied elements. Fortunately, youngsters consistently have access to picture books and illustrated narratives. These preliminary interactions with visual texts cultivate an appreciation for the intricate link between images and language in infants. Having been born in the 21st century, I am presently undergoing a phase of swift progress in science and technology. Since childhood, I have encountered a diverse array of educational resources, including illustrations, animations, and interactive games. These experiences have underscored the need of diversity in the acquisition of reading skills, especially in the context of learning other languages.

The emergence of digital media acquainted me with a novel realm of multi-modal writings. Digital articles, interactive e-books, and educational films amalgamate text, graphics, and audio, offering a more enriched and captivating learning experience. These resources enabled me to comprehend intricate concepts more intuitively, particularly in areas such as second language acquisition, where visual and aural components elucidate abstract ideas and distinct sentence structures. This personal engagement with multi-modal texts underscored their capacity to enhance understanding and cultivate critical thinking skills.

As a former international student in the UK, I have observed various approaches to literacy teaching. The UK National Curriculum emphasised the importance of developing reading abilities through many text formats, including digital media (Department for Education, 2013). The expansive notion of literacy, encompassing hearing, speaking, reading, writing, visual perception, and text creation, bears resemblance to my initial school experiences, yet also presents several distinctions. Fortunately, I had the privilege of encountering exceptional educators who employed several textual modalities to enhance our comprehension of content. Nevertheless, some unfortunate youngsters may find educators who continue to utilise traditional pedagogical methods that primarily focus on rote memorisation and text-centric literacy from the preceding century in China. The monotonous tone of certain classes hinders comprehension of complex concepts and may even

cultivate a hatred for the subject matter. The UK's use of this inclusive strategy corresponds with Bezemer and Cowan's (2021) viewpoint on including multi-modal texts into literacy education to reflect contemporary communication standards. Recent trends in China indicate a movement towards the integration of digital and multimedia materials in classrooms to align with evolving communication patterns and global educational developments. Nonetheless, the issues of formalism and the insufficient literacy of educators result in subpar performance of multi-mode in practice. Nonetheless, the challenges of formalism and the insufficient literacy of educators hinder the effective application of multi-modality in literacy instruction.

In higher education, there is an increasing emphasis on multi-modal literacy. Courses frequently necessitated the analysis of intricate multimedia texts, and assignments encompassed the creation of presentations and projects that incorporated diverse semiotic resources. Utilising frameworks such as Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2005) and Burn's framework for moving pictures (2013), I acquired the ability to dissect and analyse the intricate links among text, imagery, and sound. This analytical ability was essential in managing the intricacies of modern communication, both in academic settings and everyday situations.

Bezemer and Cowan's perspectives offer a significant framework in my reflective discourse on multi-modality in literacy education. Their focus on multi-modality corresponds with my experiences interacting with digital media and interactive texts, which greatly enhanced my literacy abilities. Understanding sign-making as a multifaceted process that employs numerous semiotic resources illustrates my experience in understanding and generating meaning through diverse modalities. Through the integration of analytical frameworks and an acknowledgement of the educational significance of multi-modality, I recognise the necessity of promoting curricula that encompass several forms of communication. This methodology can improve literacy education, rendering it more accessible and attuned to modern communication requirements.

## 4.Critical Analysis of Personal Experience in Multi-modality Literacy Learning
### 4.1 Early Literacy Experiences

Upon reminiscing on my early reading journey, I distinctly remember learning the 26 letters of the English alphabet at the age of four. The abstract shapes of the letters first presented a challenge; nevertheless, my instructor utilised animations and pictures to assist us in distinguishing and memorising them. Moreover, our literacy skills were improved through the use of interactive computer games. My comprehension and involvement with the subject significantly enhanced upon my early exposure to multimodal literature. This literary genre includes several media formats, including written text, visuals, and audio. The findings corroborate Bezemer and Cowan's (2021) assertion that multi-modal texts provide larger contexts for meaning-making and therefore be integral to literacy instruction.

Nevertheless, in China, many students persist in facing challenges related to learning. The different cultural backgrounds and differing logical structures present difficulties for certain students in memorising English terminology and sentence constructions. For youngsters living in China's remote and destitute areas, their instructional resources, which adults find tiresome, resemble dictionaries. These instructional resources will not only impair their passion for gaining reading abilities but may also lead to illiteracy.

### 4.2 Traditional vs. Modern Literacy Practices in China

Conventional literacy instruction, especially in Chinese and Western societies, has historically prioritised the memorisation and recitation of classical literature (Yu, 2011). This method has been common in religious education, exemplified by the memorisation of the Torah in Jewish instruction (Cannon, 2013). In China, conventional literacy education has historically prioritised memorisation and recitation of classical literature, with minimal integration of varied resources. Traditional Chinese education has always emphasised the memorisation and recital of classical texts, including Confucian classics, poetry, and ancient literature. This approach has been essential in influencing Chinese educational methodologies, prioritising rote memorisation and the assimilation of culturally important literature (Yang & Dan, 2011). The "Three Character Classic", a Confucian classic employed to impart fundamental literacy and ethical values, is frequently memorised by students. In their childhood, my parents focused on memorising the "Three Character Classic." According to a renowned Chinese saying, "If you recite 300 Tang Poems, even if you cannot compose a poem, you will be able to recite some." Historically, Chinese education prioritised memorisation considerably.

During my upbringing in the 21st century, I witnessed a phase of swift technical progress. Children frequently engage with picture books and illustrated narratives, cultivating an understanding for the interplay between imagery and text. From a young age, I encountered a diverse array of educational resources, including images, animations, and interactive games. These experiences highlighted the importance of diversity in developing reading abilities, especially for learning additional languages. In recent years, China has significantly advanced its literacy instruction by incorporating digital literacy. The government's emphasis on incorporating technology into education is demonstrated by initiatives such as the "Education Informatisation 2.0 Action Plan," which seeks to guarantee extensive access to digital resources and enhance digital competencies among students (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). This approach underscores the significance of digital literacy as a fundamental competency for the 21st century. An exemplary instance of contemporary literacy practices is the implementation of "Smart Classrooms" throughout several locations. The classrooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards, tablets, and high-speed internet, promoting an engaging and stimulating learning environment. Educators utilise multimedia resources, like educational videos and interactive

e-books, to enhance traditional instruction. This multi-modal approach efficiently caters to many learning styles and sustains students' active engagement.

Currently, China's initiatives to enhance global connectivity have led to an increased focus on bilingual and multilingual education. Educational institutions are encouraged to integrate English and more foreign languages into their daily curriculum, alongside Mandarin. This technique is bolstered by employing digital resources, like language learning programs and online platforms that offer interactive and immersive experiences. Research indicates that kids receiving bilingual education exhibit improved cognitive flexibility and attain superior academic performance (Christoffels et al., 2015). Significant efforts are being made in teacher education and professional development to advance these modern literacy practices. Programs are consistently conducted that emphasise the enhancement of digital literacy skills, the effective use of multimedia resources, and the adoption of novel pedagogical approaches. By ensuring that educators are sufficiently equipped to fulfil the demands of a modern classroom, they can effectively integrate new technologies into their teaching methodologies (Zhao, 2019).

Nonetheless, barriers remain that must be surmounted despite these advancements. The digital divide, denoting the disparity in technological access between students in rural and urban locales, necessitates intervention and resolution. Moreover, the continuous professional development of educators is crucial to remain informed about rapidly advancing technologies. China intends to enhance its literacy instruction by investing in innovative technology, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality. These technologies has the capacity to deliver more immersive and tailored educational experiences. The aforementioned issues are the most apparent ones I perceive when contemplating my quest to acquire literacy. Notwithstanding the endeavours of governments and leaders to address these issues, it may necessitate multiple generations to accumulate and dedicate substantial effort towards their resolution.

## 4.3 Incorporation of Diverse Materials

Children's education in China has undergone a notable transformation, emphasising the incorporation of many teaching resources, including picture books and illustrated narratives. This technique enhances early reading by stimulating children's imaginations through a blend of visual and textual elements. Contemporary children in China possess access to an array of instructional resources, including picture books and illustrated narratives. These resources are crucial for fostering early literacy by engaging children through visual and textual methods. For example, the renowned children's book "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" by Eric Carle has been translated into Chinese and is extensively utilised to impart language and cognitive abilities through engaging visual narratives. The translated works not only familiarise youngsters with new vocabulary but also instruct them on sentence structure and linguistic patterns in an interesting manner. Bilingual books

facilitate the simultaneous acquisition of two languages, promoting bilingual literacy from an early age. Research indicates that bilingual books facilitate language development by offering meaningful situations and pictures that enhance comprehension (Chen, 2019). Furthermore, illustrated narratives frequently introduce challenges and scenarios that stimulate children's analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. They facilitate the development of cognitive functions, including event sequencing understanding, pattern recognition, and memory retention. Research indicates that picture books can improve children's cognitive abilities by fostering active interaction with the text and illustrations (Liu, 2020).

The influence of different media types on children's storytelling abilities is a topic of intrigue (Crawshaw, 2020). The integration of several genres of picture books, alongside traditional textbooks, enriches the curriculum and caters to different learning styles. Some youngsters may respond more well to visual storylines, while others may prefer written content. Li (2017) asserts that employing diverse instructional resources can address the needs of many learners and enhance an inclusive education system, hence promoting educational diversity.

## 4.4 Significance of Multi-modal Literacy for Learning Additional Languages

Exposure to multi-modal educational resources has significantly enhanced reading skills in additional languages. Visual aids, auditory stimulation, and interactive elements improve the clarity and perceptibility of abstract ideas. Language learning programs like Duolingo employ several multimodal elements, including visuals, auditory prompts, and interactive tasks, to facilitate the acquisition of a new language. This approach enhances language acquisition, especially in young children, by engaging many senses (Godwin-Jones, 2015).

These diverse experiences underscore the importance of incorporating many approaches and materials in literacy instruction. They demonstrate how multi-modal techniques can bridge the gap between traditional and modern teaching methods, enhancing engagement and comprehension. Studies have shown that multi-modal learning environments significantly improve reading skills by providing many approaches for comprehension and memory retention (Jewitt, 2008). A study by the National Literacy Trust indicated that children who engaged with digital reading platforms exhibited improved reading abilities and increased motivation (Picton, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

Upon contemplation of my experience in literacy instruction, encompassing both conventional and contemporary settings, I have come to recognise the profound influence of multi-modal resources on the acquisition of language and development of literacy abilities. The incorporation of several modes and media into literacy education, from childhood exposure to animations and interactive games to the wide array of educational resources accessible today, clearly enhances the

learning experience by creating a more immersive and captivating environment. The transition from conventional text-based literacy techniques to integrating multi-modal texts is in accordance with the evolving nature of communication in the digital era. According to Bezemer and Cowan (2021), a comprehensive view of literacy involves acknowledging the interaction between written text, images, sounds, and other semiotic resources. This complete strategy not only aligns with current communication methods but also accommodates various learning styles, hence improving inclusion and effectiveness in education.

My direct experiences with multi-modal literacy underscore the importance of these methodologies. The use of multimedia tools in my early education significantly improved my comprehension and engagement, particularly in learning English as a second language. This aligns with broader educational practices and research indicating that employing many communication modalities enhances learning and retention of new languages (Godwin-Jones, 2015; Jewitt, 2008). China's endeavours to enhance its literacy instruction are manifested through programs like the "Education Informatisation 2.0 Action Plan" and the establishment of "Smart Classrooms." These measures demonstrate a commitment to integrating technology and multi-modal resources into the curriculum. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including the digital divide and the necessity for continuous professional development for educators (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018; Zhao, 2019).

As a former international student, I have witnessed the benefits of multimodal literacy and recognise the capacity of these technologies to address deficiencies in conventional educational institutions. In the future, I acknowledge the need of advocating for curricula that include diverse communication modalities, as this can enhance literacy education and provide students with essential skills for navigating the complexities of contemporary communication. As an aspiring educator or lifelong learner, I am committed to integrating multimodal resources into my instructional techniques. This strategy will foster a more thorough and dynamic learning environment while equipping students with the necessary skills needed to navigate and understand the complexities of current literature. My aim is to improve the dynamic and effective landscape of literacy instruction by continuous reflection and adaptation to new educational technologies and methodologies.

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