

# Multimodal Literacy for Improving Presentation Quality

Riesky Riesky

English Education Department, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Jl. Dr. Setiabudhi 229, Bandung, Indonesia

riesky@upi.edu

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**Abstract:** The advance of communication and information technology has significantly changed the way people communicate in many areas of life. Ideas, which used to be shared “mostly by verbal texts”, have been realized in a more “multimodal” form nowadays, further influencing the way knowledge is constructed and meanings are created. This paper addresses the importance of developing multimodal literacy to improve the quality of presentation, particularly in academic settings. Some important principles in how to design multimodal presentation, particularly which composed of texts and visuals are proposed here.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Being able to convey ideas and to share knowledge in an effective and understandable way is something desirable for many academics. Ways of teaching and presenting ideas that once were dominated by the use of spoken and written texts have been slowly and gradually replaced by modern ways of conveying ideas that utilize more audio-visual elements. The rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) has triggered the proliferation of communication channels and social media that provide “multimodal” features that make human interactions more alive. To some extent, it also has influenced how teaching and learning are practiced in the classroom.

However, despite the increasing use of high-tech tools and softwares for information dan communication in the classrooms and seminar venues, such as laptop, LCDs, and presentation softwares like Powerpoint and Keynote, what does not seem to change significantly, particularly in Indonesia, is the way the users communicate their ideas: using texts dominantly while hoping that the audience will understand every single sentence they type in their slides.

To put an emphasis on why multimodal literacy is important and how it can be applied in designing and creating a good quality presentation, this paper discusses four important things, namely (1) Multimodality and meaning-making practices, (2) Why multimodal literacy is important (3) How to develop multimodal literacy for improving academic

presentation quality, and (4) Key principles in designing a multimodal presentation.

## 2 MULTIMODALITY AND MEANING-MAKING PRACTICES

The term “multimodality” can be simply understood as an approach to understand how meaning is created through the use of a variety of semiotic modes in a communication practices (see Van-Leeuwen, 2005; Baldry and Thibault, 2006; Jewitt, 2013). A mode itself in the word “multimodality” refers to “culturally shaped resources for making meaning” (Bourne, et al., 2004). These resources can appear in the forms of verbal, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural shapes. The meanings that are then produced by the combination of these resources need to be understood by considering the culturally specific contexts in which they appear.

In the practice of communication, people utilize a variety of modes, choosing and combining certain modes to create meanings that a single mode alone cannot do. While traditional ways of communication have been for so long dominated by linguistic forms, the rapid development of ICT has made the use of multi-modes in conveying ideas a common practice in people’s daily communication nowadays. That’s why Bezemer and Kress (2008) once stated that in this era multimodal texts have become significantly prominent as the carriers of meaning.

The use of a variety of semiotic modes in communication has made the practices of meaning-making interesting to study. The unstoppable urge to have adequate skills in using various kinds of digital gadgets in nowadays' world has forced people to learn and use these gadgets for survival purposes, one of which is for the purpose of sharing meaning and ideas to others. This becomes obviously true particularly in the fields of education. Teachers, students, and presenters, for instance, utilize a variety of modes with their own personal styles and strategies in interacting and communicating with others for academic purposes. What makes it interesting to observe, regardless the massive use of multimodal texts in informal communication practices, is that the ways people communicate in academic setting do not seem to change significantly. Verbal texts seem to characterize the process of transferring ideas and knowledge in many classes and seminar venues. Even if some have made their sharing of ideas "so-called multimodal", the effectiveness of combining the semiotic modes still needs improvement.

The advance of ICT and the extensive use of audio-visual equipment in many educational institutions have made it easier for many academics to choose and to combine types of modes for conveying ideas and messages. As suggested by Jewitt (2013), "the features of technology ('old' and 'new' technologies) provide different kinds of constraints and possibilities for meaning making (p. 14)." Each of the modes that is chosen in the process of delivering idea basically has what Kress, et.al. (2014) call as "affordance", which relates to the ability of each mode to "get things done". In Jewitt's (2008, p. 247) word, it has to do with what a certain mode can "express and represent easily". What becomes the key here is the ability of people in choosing and making use of the available modes to effectively create and deliver the meaning they want to share.

### 3 WHY MULTIMODAL LITERACY IS IMPORTANT

Multimodal literacy encompasses not only the ability to read and to write multimodal texts but also the ability to operate technological sources to enable someone to make meaning through the available modes. This kind of literacy becomes essential in nowadays' communication due to the fact that there has been a massive shift from a dominant use of

linguistic or verbal texts to a more digital form of communication, which largely uses multimodal texts.

Borrowing Jewitt's (2013) idea, there are at least six important reasons why multimodal approach needs to be taken into account, particularly in the context of meaning making and understanding. **First**, a multimodal approach provides a more holistic understanding of meaning. By having a good degree of multimodal literacy, one can have a framework to describe more systematically how certain modes represent and contribute to meaning. This framework can also be used as a guide to construct meaning as intended by its producers.

**Second**, a multimodal approach provides a new lens to understanding the elements and the process of communication and making meaning. In the context of collecting and analysing data in communication research, for instance, researchers will no longer regard language as the only mode that contributes to the construction of meaning. This is not to say that language is no longer important, but to underline the existence of other modes that also contributes to how meaning is created and interpreted.

**Third**, a multimodal approach can be used to identify power distribution in communication. It can make the uneven distribution of semiotic resources across different groups easier to see, and show how the differences created say something about power and power relation that are built.

**Fourth**, a multimodal approach can be used to investigate how modes are taken up differently in different contexts. It can trace the changes in modal practices across time periods by different actors for different purposes. It can also provide analysis of types of semiotic resources available, how they are used, and what they can and cannot do across different eras. The comparison made by using a multimodal approach like this can strengthen people's understanding on how technologies created by human beings have significantly changed the representation of knowledge and how knowledge is represented.

**Fifth**, a multimodal approach particularly in its application on digital technologies has made it possible in creating new resources. For instance, the innovation in digital synthesizers has been able to reshape human voice into "other new forms of voice" that can be further used for different purposes such as music, announcement, and many others.

**Sixth**, a multimodal approach can contribute to the development of new perspective in conducting research. Through observing and analysing many forms of modes and their application in teaching and learning interactions, Jewitt, Kress and their research

team members, for instance, can further develop an innovative framework to explore issues surrounding multimodal practices in classroom interaction.

Taking these six important reasons into account, the need to develop multimodal literacy particularly among academics becomes undeniable. Academics, such as teachers, lecturers, and scholars who regularly have to present ideas and have a critical contribution to the representation and development of knowledge, have to be aware of this expectation.

#### 4 HOW TO DEVELOP MULTIMODAL LITERACY FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC PRESENTATION QUALITY

Presentation quality, particularly in academic contexts, has a big influence on how knowledge is represented, understood, and made into actions by academic audience. What becomes the main concern to address here is that many presentations conducted in academic institutions, as observed in many occasions, still lack the application of effective multimodality. It is still common to find presenters deliver their ideas or concepts by using Powerpoint slides loaded with dense lines of texts, accompanied by rigid and boring layout, decorated with dreary colour schemes, and delivered with a monotonous voice. What usually happens in this kind of presentation is whether the presenters make their audience easily bored or they make them go to sleep quickly.

The ability to design and deliver a presentation in an effective way is a skill that can be learned by everyone. Multimodal literacy can play a huge role in improving presentation quality for many academics, particularly in the context of representing knowledge to the audience.

To develop multimodal literacy among academics for the purpose of improving their presentation quality, several important steps can be taken into consideration. **First**, an effort to build the awareness of academics on the need to change the way of communicating ideas into a more multimodal style should be systematically and continuously carried out. An emphasis on how technology has changed many aspects of human's life including interaction and communication practices needs to be foregrounded in many occasions, both through offline and online channels.

**Second**, encouragement to utilize and combine a variety of modes in presenting ideas should be given

to all academics. Supports realized in the forms of providing relevant information and communication facilities will be very helpful. Reminding teachers or lecturers of how nowadays' students have been used to multimodal forms of communication and how they can get bored easily with traditional ways of teaching or presenting can psychologically trigger them to improve.

**Third**, a specific training or a workshop on technological literacy, such as how to design an effective Powerpoint presentation, how to edit pictures and videos using a certain software, or how to create interesting teaching media, should be given in a regular basis. This kind of training will be particularly helpful for older generation, which is often considered traditional and outdated in terms of the ability to use recent high-tech facilities. By following this activity, there is a hope that older academics can catch up with younger generations in terms of technological skills and find "similar frequency" to communicate with the young more easily.

**Finally**, an effort to strengthen understanding of essential principles in multimodality that can be effectively applied in the context of academic presentation needs to be carried out. Encouraging academics to apply frameworks proposed by some scholars who have conducted research in multimodality is one of the best ways to do.

These four steps need to be taken seriously if the improvement of academic presentation quality becomes the main concern. An elaboration on important principles to be applied in designing multimodal slide is to be presented in the ensuing section.

#### 5 KEY PRINCIPLES IN DESIGNING A MULTIMODAL PRESENTATION

Every lecture or presentation given in a classroom has been basically multimodal. A lecturer or presenter presenting a topic will almost certainly use their voice, printed text, intonation, gestures, and movements to represent their intended meaning. However, the degree of being multimodal here has not automatically fulfilled the criteria of effective multimodality.

When related to designing an effective multimodal presentation, there are several key principles that need to consider. The key principles presented here are adapted from different scholars

and practitioners particularly in the fields of multimodality and presentation.

**First**, simple is beautiful. Being multimodal does not necessarily mean that we put as many modes as possible as we wish in one slide. In designing a presentation slide, for instance, it is highly recommended that we present only one big idea at a time in every single page. When texts are needed, make sure that only key words or simple sentences appear on the page (see Forsyth, 2009; Reynolds, 2012).

**Second**, building chemistry among modes is important. Whenever, for instance, texts and images are to be combined to create a multimodal presentation slide, make sure that the relationship between the texts and the images creates “chemistry”. To understand about the relationship that texts and images create in a multimodal text, Marsh and White’s (2003) “taxonomy of functions of images to the text” can become a valuable framework to adopt. In their framework, Marsh and White (2003) provide a taxonomy consisting of three main functions, namely (A) functions expressing little relation to the text, (B) functions expressing close relation to the text, and (C) functions that go beyond the text. The main point to underline here is that the combination of texts and images created should be made with dominant functions of (B), with occasional functions of (C), and with minimal use of functions (A).

**Third**, compositions determine information values, coherence and attention. By referring to the framework of composition proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), which is closely related to the idea of Halliday’s (1994) textual meaning, three important related components are underlined, namely (1) information value, which has to do with the positioning of elements in certain areas that convey specific values, (2) salience, which has to do with the degree of importance, or worthiness, or attractiveness and (3) framing, which is related to the sense of connection and separation created by colour composition, shapes, or lines. This composition framework basically includes some important understanding commonly expected from a graphic designer, such as layout, typography, and colour schemes. One important point to consider here is that in composing a multimodal slide, the placement of information or ideas (in the forms of texts or images), the way the key information is emphasized, and the way the texts and images put together should be based on an understanding of how different compositions can result in different interpretations of meaning from the readers’ perspectives.

**Fourth**, orchestrating semiotic modes creates harmony and effectiveness in delivering messages. A study conducted by Bucher dan Niemann (2012)

found that a presenter’s ability in orchestrating various available semiotic modes in his or her presentation will play a determining role in the success of delivering messages to the audience. Regardless the quality of high-tech equipment available, in the end the skills of the presenter in using the equipment and his understanding on the affordances of every single mode he or she uses will determine the success of the presentation. Therefore, training oneself to get used to operating with different semiotic modes in communication becomes crucial here.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Among many things elaborated in the sections above, two important points deserve a special attention. First, developing and strengthening academics’ awareness on the strong impact of technology on human communication is still a big homework to do. Many academics are truly aware of this situation but seem to close their ears and eyes and consider everything is still the same in relation to teaching and presenting ideas in the classroom or academic forums: in other words, “no need to change”. Second, the proliferation of multimodal texts in today’s digital world create challenges for academics to improve the quality of their multiliteracies, including technological and multimodal literacies. By continuously improving their multiliteracy capacity, the role of teachers and lecturers as the main characters in education can remain strong and influential.

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