

Plurilingualism and Multimodality: The Metanoia Within Reach

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Drawing on the evolution of our thinking around expedited learning and more egalitarian classroom spaces where learners are afforded greater agency and opportunities to tap into their full linguistic repertoires (Todeva & Morule, 2009; Todeva, 2016) and on insights from complex dynamic systems theory, this paper offers a framework for dynamically aligning research on multimodality and plurilingualism with inquiry-based classroom practice. We argue that despite the existence of important research shedding light on the processes underlying our meaning-making and communicative abilities, languages continue to be taught as bounded entities and many instructional and assessment practices still reflect monolingual ideologies and nativespeakerist mindsets. Adopting a plurilingual, multimodal mindset provides a way for teachers, students, and researchers to bring their practices in line with the increasingly complex manner in which people construct, share, and access knowledge. How to achieve this metanoia—this shift of mind towards linguistic and modal plurality—is the main thrust of this paper. We provide concrete examples of classroom plurilingual explorations and an emic narrative of one teacher’s journey. Finally, we call for transformed research practices grounded in retrodiction (Larsen-Freeman, 2009) and for more nimble multimodal knowledge dissemination to support this realignment.

En s’inspirant de l’évolution de notre réflexion sur l’apprentissage accéléré et des espaces de salle de classe plus égalitaires où on accorde aux apprenants plus d’autonomie et d’occasions de se servir de tout leur répertoire linguistique (Todeva & Morule, 2009; Todeva, 2016) et sur les aperçus de la théorie des systèmes dynamiques complexes, cet article propose un cadre de travail dans le but d’aligner de façon dynamique la recherche sur la multimodalité et le plurilinguisme sur la pratique en salle de classe fondée sur l’enquête. Nous avançons que malgré l’existence de recherche importante mettant en lumière les processus qui sous-tendent nos capacités à faire sens et de communication, on continue à enseigner les langues comme des entités limitées et de nombreuses pratiques d’enseignement et d’évaluation reflètent encore des idéologies monolingues et des mentalités de locuteurs de langue maternelle. L’adoption d’une mentalité plurilingue et multimodale fournit aux enseignants, aux étudiants et aux chercheurs une façon d’aligner leurs pratiques sur la manière de plus en plus complexe dont les gens construisent, partagent et accèdent à la connaissance. Comment réussir cette métanoïa – cette réorientation de l’esprit vers la pluralité linguistique et modale – constitue l’idée directrice de cet article. Nous fournissons des exemples

concrets d'exploration plurilingue dans la salle de classe ainsi qu'un récit émiqve du parcours d'un enseignant. En conclusion, nous appelons à des pratiques de recherche transformées, enracinées dans la rétrodiction (Larsen-Freeman, 2009), à une dissémination multimodale plus souple pour soutenir ce réalignement.

Keywords: plurilingualism, multimodality, plurilingual pedagogy, crosslinguistic explorations, cross-cultural explorations

Meaning-making, gaining insights, and sharing with others are all fundamental human endeavours. Modern technology and mobility have changed how we learn and how and with whom we communicate. Researchers from a number of fields have shed light on the processes underlying our meaning-making and communicative abilities, increasingly through the lens of complex dynamic systems theory (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2018; Lin et al., 2020; Piccardo, 2019). However, the insights gained remain primarily on the inspirational, rather than the implementational level as far as changing pedagogical practices are concerned. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between the highly normative monolingual academic discourses and the increasingly plurilingual and multimodal manner in which people communicate and build their knowledge nowadays, which calls for better accommodation to these new realities for the purposes of maximal growth and learning. In order to move beyond the prevailing monolingual instructional practices and fully tap into learners' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), we need changes on numerous fronts. García et al. (2016) talk about *stance* (a belief that students' diverse linguistic practices are valuable resources to be leveraged in their education), *design* (a strategic plan integrating students' in-school and out-of-school language practices), and *shifts* (an ability to make moment-by-moment changes to an instructional plan based on student feedback). We propose the Greek word *metanoia* as an all-inclusive term: a profound, encompassing shift of mind and a fundamental change of orientation (Senge, 2013).

This metanoia can move us beyond the limiting discourses present in educational spaces today, towards widespread implementation of plurilingual and multimodal pedagogies, by inspiring teachers to reconceptualize the role of languages and modalities in language instruction. We do not view plurilingualism and multimodality as distinct pedagogical strategies; rather we envision all communication as a process of trans-semiotization in which languages interact with other semiotic modalities to form richly embedded expressions of meaning. In doing so, we reframe the learning process around creativity and reflective analysis of possibilities and choices, and we reposition teachers as co-explorers rather than knowledge transmitters. While others have called for the integration of plurilingualism and multimodality into language pedagogy with teachers and students as co-explorers (Canagarajah, 2014; Li, 2018; Magnusson & Godhe, 2019; Piccardo

et al., 2021; Prada, 2021; Tian et al., 2020), we see the process of incorporating a fluid, emergent co-exploration not just as a set of practices to be adopted, but as a metanoia, a personal mindset shift that anyone—teachers, students, researchers—can be part of. This reconceptualization is informed by the work of researchers and practitioners from the vibrant fields of plurilingual and translanguaging studies (e.g., Choi & Ollerhead, 2018; Lau & Van Viegen, 2020; Tian et al., 2020); importantly, it also stems from our own experiences as language teachers and teacher educators with experience from kindergarten to graduate programs on five continents. We theorize our lived experiences (Lin et al., 2004) as plurilingual, multimodal language educators in order to inspire others to understand how these pedagogies can be taken up across a range of proficiency levels and educational contexts.

Plurilingualism and Multimodality as Habits of Mind

As globalization increases cross-border connections, linguistic diversity is becoming ever more prominent and plurilingualism continues to gain ground (Ortega, 2019). So does multimodality, with the wide use of digital information sharing. Plurilingualism, the lived experiences of millions of people around the world, was originally defined by the Council of Europe (2001) as an individual phenomenon, focused on one’s full linguistic repertoire “in which all linguistic abilities have a place” (p. 5). Other terms epistemologically akin to plurilingualism—such as translanguaging, metrolingualism, plurilinguaging, polylingualism, multilinguality, pluriformity and heteroglossia—also reject a monolingual view (see García & Otheguy, 2020; Marshall & Moore, 2018; and Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2021). Multimodality, on the other hand, refers to non-hierarchical meaning-making modes and media (audio, visual, tactile, gestural, spatial, spoken, and written) that can convey ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning (Kalantzis & Cope 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Magnusson & Godhe, 2019).

Despite these growingly documented plurilingual and multimodal communication practices, many educational spaces continue to be dominated by monolingual and monomodal ideologies and policies (Dooly & Vallejo, 2020; Lin, 2020; Piccardo, 2018; Willans, 2013). Languages have typically been taught in isolation as bounded entities, and many instructional and assessment practices still reflect monolingual ideologies and nativespeakerist mindsets (Lin 2020; Manan & Tul-Kubra, 2020; Valdés, 2020). As a result, students are socialized into privileging communication in the dominant language, and schools rarely make space for students to actively engage with the full range of modal and semiotic affordances available to them. Mainstream educational discourse is disconnected from the realities of communication beyond the classroom, where the boundaries between languages are porous and modalities overlap and enhance one another.

A plurilingual standpoint honours all the languages and varieties in a student's repertoire, while a multimodal approach draws on a range of meaning-making modes. In contrast to the prevailing monolingual, logocentric educational discourses, multimodality and plurilingualism are ways of being, doing, and knowing (Lau & Van Viegen, 2020) that reflect the expansive nature of contemporary communication and view human interactions and knowledge construction as inherently trans-semiotizing endeavours (Lin, 2015). When not constrained by society-imposed gatekeeping, our communicative repertoires naturally include a wide range of linguistic and modal resources. Both approaches take us beyond traditional print-oriented, target language-only teaching. When we bring the two together, we open possibilities for students to connect their new language to their prior knowledge in dynamic ways, emphasizing their agency and creativity (Piccardo, 2017).

In the last few years, the field of language education has been offered important publications that reveal the carefully planned work of researchers and educators working together on better plurilingual and multimodal practices that disrupt extant hierarchies and valorize learners' agency and creativity (e.g., Choi & Ollerhead, 2018; the CUNY-NYSIEB Project, 2021; Lau & Van Viegen, 2020; Pandey & Khadka, 2021; Piccardo & North, 2019; Tian et al., 2020). Still, many language educators continue to have a hard time seeing themselves as plurilingual pedagogy practitioners (Çelik, 2013; Iversen, 2019; Lin, 2020; Pauwels, 2014). They feel ill-prepared or they question the idea of having fully fledged curricula with detailed lesson plans before they have even met the students in their increasingly diverse classrooms. When activities and modules for multiple language use are showcased in a more accessible, constrained way, they often feel like an add-on, with insufficient guidance on how to explore things in a deep, focused way. Sustained, guided, and clearly focused deeper explorations not only lead to a better understanding of key target language components and patterns but also reveal the uniqueness and beauty of the learners' languages.

Inquiry-Based Plurilingualism and Multimodality

We believe that tasking teachers with designing elaborate, a priori, plurilingual curricula is discouraging and alienating for many, while isolated, add-on activities inadequately reflect the richness of organic plurilingual communication. Instead, we advocate for grounded explorations—both emergent and strategically planned—that align with inquiry-based pedagogies (Early & Kendrick, 2020; Onyema et al., 2019). With the right mindset, any aspect of language or communication can become the object of a fascinating contrastive exploration. We can guide students towards focused examination of modes and linguistic features and how they vary both across named languages and intralinguistically. These explorations encourage the

development of metalinguistic awareness, as students discover connections and notice differences between languages and modalities. Contrastive explorations also create opportunities for sharing across languages and cultures that stimulate curiosity and intellectual and emotional engagement, and help learners understand the socially situated perceptions of different communicative practices.

For example, Elka, one of the authors, attended a seminar by well-known interculturalists who contended that Eastern Europeans tend to be assertive, aggressive, and intellectually confrontational. This remark prompted her curiosity to explore why these impressions existed. Her research revealed that in academic writing, Bulgarians, such as herself, hedge on average five times less than British or American writers (Todeva, 2000). One can see a similar difference in other domains, and for those from other language and cultural backgrounds (Peacock, 2006; Sepehri et al., 2019). We can help avoid harmful stereotypes by inviting learners to reflect on whether they have been academically socialized to use hedges or boosters. This triggers important awareness-raising that can be initiated early on in their language learning. Many textbooks focus on modal verbs, a particularly challenging element of English, as key hedging devices. If introduced to hedges, such as “I think,” “I believe” and “perhaps,” which are simpler and more frequent than modal verbs (Holmes, 1988), learners will be able to modulate their language even at the beginner level.

We can engage in similar practices of cross-cultural and crosslinguistic multimodal exploration in many other areas, including *linguistic features* (tag questions, devoicing, subject omission, stress and intonation), and *nonverbal features* (haptics, proxemics, or directionality of reading and writing). For both teachers and students to try to write or read in a direction contrary to their usual one can raise awareness that acquiring new habits consumes neural energy and affects speed and fluency, which among other things can cultivate empathy and greater tolerance in people. We can engage in interesting (and often lighthearted) plurilingual examinations of various vocabulary terms. For example, what in English is known as a pie chart is also called a layer cake diagram (Dutch), pizza chart (Portuguese), or Camembert (French). We can merge such metalinguistic probing with porous classroom practices (Breen, 1999) by, for instance, inviting students to share pictures of signs in order to take a closer look at how different languages tend to express prohibitions verbally and visually, noting factors that shape the choices we have, both intra- and crosslinguistically. When we consistently and strategically engage in such comparisons, learners become skilled at creating and testing hypotheses about how languages work. These epiphanies are not only a tacit celebration of learners’ intellectual abilities and identities, but they also expedite growth by helping students move from item- to system-learning (for examples see Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2021; Todeva, 2009, 2016).

Contrastive explorations raise awareness of the communicative affordances present in people's repertoires, as well as of the implications of their choices with regard to the power relations present within their contexts. Through practice, learners cultivate their own plurilingual, multimodal habits of mind.

Plurilingualism, Multimodality and Complexity Theory

The languages within a learner's repertoire are dynamically interconnected. New linguistic knowledge affects the entire system, leading to the emergence of plurilingual multicompetence (Cook, 1999). Gestural, spatial, tactile, audio, and visual modalities are also integral components of one's repertoire which functions as a complex adaptive system with "soft boundaries" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2013) where languages and modalities interact. Complexity theory encourages this ideology of integration, since a system is seen as "a collective whole, made up of heterogeneous constituents, which are interdependent" (Larsen-Freeman & Todeva, 2021, p. 212). By tapping into the communicative potentialities present in the classroom, through a conscious inclusion of multiple languages and modalities, the learning environment becomes increasingly complex. As pointed out by complexity theory proponents (Larsen-Freeman, 2020), complex does not mean complicated; rather, a linguistic and media multidimensionality provides more affordances and interactions which can spur adaptation. These, in turn, lead to increased creativity and innovation (Piccardo, 2017). The inclusion of less-powerful languages and nondominant modalities creates opportunities for students to develop their own socially situated repertoires of plurilingual practices that cross semiotic boundaries. By viewing plurilingualism and multimodality through a complexity theory lens, we bring our teaching in line with the world outside our classrooms.

In contrast to carefully planned plurilingual curricula, a complexity theory-inspired approach to instruction holds that it is impossible for teachers to predict the outcomes of plurilingual, multimodal explorations, and instead calls for a reorientation of the elements of the classroom. The I/thou/it triangle (Hawkins, 1974), provides a model for understanding the type of mindset shift we propose, foregrounding dialogic intersubjectivity where the self is always in relation to others (Fig. 1). Within the field of education, the "I" has been traditionally associated with teachers with their background knowledge and socialization, passions, interests, and sensibilities; "thou" with the students, who bring their lived experiences, prior linguistic and cultural knowledge, and their particular interests, needs and expectations; and "it" refers to the subject matter, the target language in this case, as well as the sources and data that inform the exploration. The three sides of the triangle support each other, reflecting the multidimensional and interdependent

nature of classroom relationships, with teachers, students, and language contributing to the unfolding learning processes in complex and unpredictable ways. Instead of transmitting predetermined knowledge, the teacher seeks opportunities to facilitate focused contrastive explorations of the target language, with learners' insights as a key component of the collaboratively generated knowledge. The deliberate use of pronouns rather than nouns in the I/thou/it model serves as a useful reminder of the fluidity of our subject positions and centres our relationships as co-explorers, in line with a social justice orientation towards education. Approaching plurilingual and multimodal explorations through this framework creates possibilities for more egalitarian spaces that disrupt all sorts of hierarchies entrenched in society and education.



Hawkins, D. (1974). *The informed vision: Essays on learning and human nature*. New York: Agathorn Press.

Drawing on their professional expertise, teachers strategically focus these explorations on linguistic features likely to prove interesting, and in line with their instructional priorities. However, they are not responsible for anticipating the discoveries learners will make or where they will need to allocate most class time. This process allows better negotiated prioritization; it affords the learners agency, content- and process-wise, and harnesses their curiosity, while simultaneously lightening the burden of predictive planning for teachers. Instead of trying to spell out in detail learning outcomes, teachers simply create a space in which “familiar things become strange, curious,

interesting, and full of mystery that had not been visible before” (Rodgers, 2001, p. 475).

Developing a Plurilingual, Multimodal Practitioner Mindset

In this section, I (Riah) reflect on my own development as a plurilingual, multimodal English teacher across three contexts, as an example of this process of reorientation. When I began my career in Tanzania, I was socialized into English-only teaching. Even though I spoke Swahili, I limited its use in my classroom and instead used the arts and other multimodal strategies to engage my students. While I would comfort distressed students in their own language and occasionally translate a single word when other methods of illustrating meaning were not working, my instruction was conducted almost entirely in English.

During my master’s studies at the School for International Training Graduate Institute, Elka (second author) introduced me to plurilingualism. While I appreciated the new way of thinking, at first, I was unsure how to incorporate this mindset into my teaching. I focused on developing my own plurilingual pedagogy during my practicum at a Thai elementary school, which was creating a plurilingual culture by having students share vocabulary words in English, Burmese, and Thai. First, my students drew multilingual self-portraits, writing words in their languages in speech bubbles around their images. Next, I encouraged them to mix languages in their writing. However, they seemed hesitant, likely because they knew that I did not understand these languages. Instead, they made multilingual Valentine’s Day cards for their families which gave their code-mixing a communicative purpose. This led me to think more critically about my reasons for wanting my students to incorporate their multiple languages into their learning of English, particularly in terms of audience. Finally, I had my students choose words they wanted to learn in English, which they drew and wrote in Thai. A Thai colleague helped translate and I incorporated these words into my instruction throughout the week. The students added the English translations to their cards and developed their own personalized word banks. In this way, we moved closer to realizing the relationships of the I/thou/it triangle, with each student assuming more responsibility for their own explorations of the target language, as I reacted to their input.

While these strategies were successful, they were isolated activities, separate from the majority of my day-to-day instruction. In order to more thoroughly integrate a plurilingual perspective into my work, I collaborated on a multilingual, multimodal storytelling club with a colleague at a Tanzanian secondary school (Werner, in press). Students practised oral storytelling, wrote and illustrated picture books and created dramas based on local traditional stories. They first created their stories in Swahili and then

translated them into English, as well as their tribal language, if they chose to use it. Students told the same story in each language, which highlighted similarities and differences and developed their metalinguistic awareness. In addition, through transmediation between oral, written, visual, and dramatic forms, students gained firsthand experience with the affordances and limitations of each medium. The students shared that learning multiple languages side by side through multiple modalities helped them strengthen their skills in all their languages simultaneously; this also led to increased confidence, better public speaking skills, a stronger sense of identity, and more creativity. However, while this club made space for multiple languages to coexist, they were still conceptualized as separate, bounded entities, with distinct times set aside for each.

I continued to work towards an integrated multimodal plurilingual pedagogy when I taught English to seventh graders in Ecuador. I designed a unit that explicitly incorporated song, gesture, movement, drawing, and object manipulation alongside more traditional language skills. I incorporated Spanish, a language I had recently started learning, into my instruction, which normalized the presence of partial competence as a valid component of our classroom practice. My students used Spanish and Quechua to analyze vocabulary and make connections with their day-to-day lives. The broadening of semiotic repertoires opened up dynamic new possibilities, as students who had previously been hesitant were able to engage through the modalities and languages most comfortable for them. By creating scaffolded opportunities for focused linguistic comparisons and consistently welcoming multiple languages into the space, I created a classroom community in line with my plurilingual ideals.

My trajectory shows a progression from a monolingual orientation to language teaching, through the incorporation of plurilingualism in isolated instructional activities, to an attempt at a preplanned plurilingual curriculum that in practice reinforced the boundaries between named languages. It was only when I opened up my classroom to discoveries of the unknown—including my own use of a still-developing language within my repertoire and my students' use of a language I did not speak—that I was able to enact an expansive plurilingual pedagogy. This integration of a plurilingual perspective built on my foundation of multimodal teaching practices, and the two approaches became intertwined and mutually supportive components of a pedagogical approach that honoured learners' full communicative repertoires.

Bridging the Research/Practice Divide through Retrodiction

One reason for the disconnect between plurilingual/multimodal research and classroom practice is the oppositional framing of researchers and

practitioners. Larsen-Freeman (2009) notes that researchers generalize while teachers particularize. She holds that traditional research practices are engaged in processes of prediction, while teachers are grounded in retrodiction, looking back on successful practices after the fact to determine important, interconnected factors. She argues that researchers would benefit from adopting teachers' retrodictive perspective on learning. Retrodiction is grounded in processes of inquiry and an awareness of nuance, since "teachers know that the effect a particular procedure has on their students varies according to the day of the week ..., the week of the year ..., the time of the day ..., let alone with whom it is practiced, how it is practiced, and for what purpose" (Larsen-Freeman, 2009, p. 6). Recognizing this complexity could lay the foundations for new relationships between teachers and researchers, which would lead to richer processes of knowledge generation within our field. We could use the egalitarian I/thou/it triangle to reconceptualize the relationship between researchers, teachers, and pedagogy as a shared enterprise of discovering effective plurilingual and multimodal pedagogical practices, with fluid movement between "I" and "thou" positioning. Instead of framing teachers and researchers in opposition, we could recognize that "at the most fundamental level [research] concerns simply trying to find answers to questions," in which case, "the researcher versus classroom practitioner divide disappears" (Dörnyei, 2018, p. 7).

Another important way of bridging the research/practice divide is through further increasing the positive changes witnessed in knowledge dissemination. Though still in the minority, more and more publishers, academic institutions, and conference organizers embrace and promote plurilingual and multimodal approaches. Offering abstracts in multiple languages, so-called *public abstracts* which present key research findings in jargon-free language geared towards the general public, *video abstracts*, which serve the same function in a different modality, and *three-minute thesis competitions*, which train new scholars to communicate their research concisely and effectively, are just a few examples in this respect.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the complexity of communication and knowledge construction involves recognizing the interconnected nature of our linguistic and modal repertoires and moving away from prediction as a disproportionately dominant structure for language research and education. With this perspectives paper, we are calling for a metanoia that refocuses us on our intersubjectivities as co-explorers, as encompassed by the I/thou/it triangle and embodied in our personal experiences as language educators. Within classroom spaces, this means moving away from hierarchical models of knowledge transmission in which teachers are expected to predict

students' learning outcomes. Instead, strategically and consistently, we need thoughtfully conducted focused reflection and analysis that take full advantage of learners' and teachers' insights, lived experiences, and complete semiotic repertoires. Put differently, we see both the learners' repertoires and the way we choreograph what unfolds in the classroom as dynamic, adaptive systems. Within the field of educational research, the relationship between practitioners and researchers needs further democratization and we also need better multimodal and plurilingual modes of knowledge dissemination. As this metanoia takes root in learners, teachers, and researchers, we can, cumulatively and collectively, create conditions for plurilingual and multimodal pedagogies that align language classrooms with global realities.

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