

## The Rhetorical Value of Multimodal Composition

**Patricia George**

CUNY's Kingsborough Community College,

United States of America

*patricia.george@kbcc.cuny.edu*

### Bio-Profile

**Patricia George** is an assistant professor in the Department of English at CUNY's Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York. She teaches courses in ESL, composition, and literature. She received her EdD from Seton Hall University. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, language-based and non-verbal communication, and curriculum design.

### Abstract

This study employed a qualitative approach to examining the rhetorical value of multimodal composing practices among first-year college students with diverse academic, sociocultural, and linguistic backgrounds. With a shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study sought instructional methods that would support the development of composition and language skills through a variety of modalities. A total of 21 participants took part in the study to address whether the inclusion of visual and technological literacy practices in an online setting enhanced verbal and non-verbal communication, multiparty interaction, writing engagement, and audience awareness. The researcher examined the qualitative data for major themes and summarized findings in categories illustrated by participants' quotes. The results of the study show that teaching multimodal practices aligned well with conventional written instruction. Two important trends were revealed: (1) students at all levels of English development demonstrated advances in conventional composing practices, such as thesis statement, organization, and content; and (2) multimodal practices contributed to higher levels of confidence, competence, and creativity, specifically in the students' ability to communicate coherent arguments, cite sources, and interact effectively during the peer editing process. Implications for curriculum, assessment, and practice with a commitment to equitable instruction are discussed.

**Keywords:** rhetoric; multimodal composition; translanguaging; sociolinguistics; equitable instruction and assessment

### 1. Introduction

Rhetorical analysis is essential for the practice of reading, writing, and critical thinking. In recognizing issues at the intersections of language and literacy learning among diverse student populations, it is important to consider expanding conventional composition to include more than just the printed word. The emergence of multimodal and translingual composing practices among linguistically diverse, contemporary composition students highlights the importance of pushing beyond what Selfe (2009) described as the “single language/single modality perspective” in writing instruction (Gonzales, 2015). The connections between the concepts of multimodality and a translingual approach to literacy reflect a “practice-based, adaptive, emergent, multisensory, multilateral, and therefore multidimensional” process (Canagarajah, 2017). The cognitive process of negotiating and producing meaningful, comprehensible output as part of language learning has been proven to contribute to a means of mediating cognition, problem solving, and make meaning by shaping knowledge and experience through language (Swain, 2009). By addressing the translingual practices of linguistically diverse students, this paper situates possible outcomes for multimodal composing practices of contemporary first-year English composition students.

A translingual or translanguaging approach has proven to be an effective pedagogical practice in a variety of educational contexts where the language-of-instruction is different from the languages of the learners (Wei, 2017). Multimodal composition (e.g., the inclusion of visual and linguistic modes of communication) provides critical opportunities for engaging and supporting the language and literacy development of a multilingual student population in a multicultural context. With a focus on negotiating meaning from content and language integration, ‘translanguaging’ provides the ideological framework through which language use can be viewed that acknowledges all parts of the linguistic repertoire as connected and equally valid” (Plonsky and Kim, 2016). Additionally, these theoretical and pedagogical approaches create an inclusive learning environment to that enhance verbal and non-verbal communication; multiparty interaction, writing engagement, and audience awareness. Doing so supports linguistic multi-competence in the mind of the learner (Thierry, 2016) and offers students greater flexibility and choice in demonstrating discursive learning and ability.

Inspired by visual cues, multimodal literacy provides opportunities for alternate means of communicating knowledge, conveying comparisons and opinions, and the literal expression of an author’s voice through various modes of communicative or informative social signals. “When visual, media, and technological literacy practices are purposefully included in a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) framework and curriculum, it helps to reposition both teachers’ and students’ conceptual understanding of language acquisition” (Thompson, 2018).

Digital projects that make an effective argument include student-generated research and citations that parallel the academic authorship valued in conventional composition. With an accompanying meta cognitive, formal written component that includes a focused argument and reflection, multisensory compositions enhance rather than detract from conventional writing practices. Furthermore, expanding the approach to academic argument provides greater access to the discourses and practices of academia.

Research in higher education shows an emerging interest in engaging students in establishing criteria for assessing multimodal literacies (Tan, et al., 2020). However, studies of multimodal composition have tended to examine separate modes or connections between only a few selected available modes. In addition, most written language studies have focused on academic language, to the exclusion of context and multimodal expression that contribute to utterance and meaning construction (Vigliocco, 2014). To take a more holistic approach and to address the learning styles of diverse student participants, this study integrated multimodal elements which focused on all five modes of communication: written language, spoken language, visual (still and moving images), and audio.

### **1.1. Student-Centered, critical thinking environments**

The most effective student-centered learning environments (SCLEs) provide interactive, complimentary activities that enable individuals to address unique learning interests and needs, study multiple levels of complexity, and deepen understanding (Land and Hannafin, 1996). The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) describes the relevant activities of critical thinking as the ability to (a) clearly state and comprehensively describe the issue or problem, (b) independently interpret and evaluate sources, (c) thoroughly analyze assumptions behind and context of your own or others' ideas, (d) argue a complex position and one that takes counter arguments into account, and (e) arrive at logical and well-informed conclusions. Williams posits that composition's purpose is to help students identify problems, solve them, and communicate with others about them. By bridging conventional composition with multimodality, literacy representations born of critical thinking and linguistic rhetoric demonstrate learner-centered mastery.

Using creative design to communicate meaning, the multimodal approach integrates critical thinking skills and multiple literacies in the context of argument-based, student-centered inquiry. Reder, et al. (2011) argue that basic digital skills are so "central to academic success" for the multilingual population that the definition of second language acquisition must be expanded to include digital literacy. By providing opportunities for students to develop the

four primary areas of aptitude (visual, textual, digital, and technological literacy), students are better prepared to critically evaluate credible digital media sources. Similar to conventional composition, multimodal composition requires that students process and communicate information by identifying an author's point of view, bias, and intent.

### **1.2. Supporting cultural and linguistic diversity**

Multimodal pedagogy emphasizes a broader view of literacy that emphasizes students' prior knowledge, personal experiences, and familiar content. Kara (2013) found that students with undeveloped writing abilities in their first language (L1) were more anxious about organizing and composing in English (L2). Multilingual students are expected to master content objectives that demonstrate understanding of source texts and academic essay structure while continuing to master language skills. Introducing multiliteracies helps to remove affective filters (Krashen) related to motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Incorporating digital literacies in relevant modes supports the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and allows the process of composing and conversing in a second language to develop. Translanguaging, as both a practice and a process of knowledge construction, empowers diverse learners and focuses the process of learning on making meaning, enhancing experience, and developing identity (García, 2009; Creese and Blackledge, 2015). It takes students beyond the linguistics of systems and speakers to a linguistics of participation (Wei, 2017).

Curriculum design that values the contribution of multimodal communication also provides increased opportunities for equity in that students are able to practice all areas of literacy and English language acquisition. This alone is reason enough to rethink a "one-size fits all" practice of teaching first-year composition. Semiotic resources support a growing group of students who are at home in more than one culture and who typically speak multiple languages, often including varieties of English (Hawisher, et al., 2016). Though it is common practice to utilize semiotics in ESL reading instruction, conventional composition has historically relied upon the written word. With increased semiotic resources, creating a balance is possible. By bridging text-based forms of communication with new forms to include linguistic, audio, spatial, gestural, and visual resources used to express meaning (New London Group, 1996), the students' understanding of rhetorical communication is enhanced, not diminished.

### **1.3. Purpose of the study**

This study investigated whether multimodalities allow for more explicit communication of knowledge and expression for diverse student populations, including multilingual students. Further, the culturally responsive practice of multimodal composition was examined to determine whether it positively impacted student learning processes and the development of verbal and non-verbal rhetorical arguments. The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth perspective of how first-year composition students used multimodal composition (e.g., written, verbal, non-verbal, and visual communication) to construct authentic, effective rhetorical arguments. The objective was to determine whether students would become independent and creative producers of media as part of the composition process. Finally, the goal of this empirical study was to provide insight into the benefits of literacy support systems that facilitate multimodal and/or multiparty communication in online learning. With an emphasis on extending the focus of academic literacies beyond the written word, this paper aims to contribute to the body of research that examines a holistic approach to multimodal, thesis-driven content representations.

#### **1.4. Research questions**

Several questions motivated the inquiry of this research study. Primarily, learning how the integration of a multimodal capstone composition would further enhance the literacy skills of students with diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds in a first-year composition course. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does the implementation of a multimodal capstone composition allow for better communication of knowledge and expression through various modes of representation?
2. In what way do multimodal capstone compositions positively impact student learning processes and the development of rhetorical argument?
3. Which of the most salient aspects of rhetorical argument (content, organization, or grammar) do diverse first-year composition students better communicate through a multimodal literacy approach?

#### **1.5. Theoretical framework**

Viewed through the philosophical lens of Ladson-Billings' (1995) CRP, digital literacy is rooted in a culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (Paris) that contributes to academic achievement for diverse learners. When paired with conventional composition practices, CRP involves the active integration of language learning in different content-specific textual contexts. Furthermore, linguistically responsive pedagogy focuses on the development of

academic language in connection with content by drawing on second language acquisition theories (Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1981; Swain, 1995). Hollie (2018) defines culturally and linguistically responsive teaching as “the validation and affirmation of indigenous (home) culture and language for the purpose of building and bridging the students to success in the culture of academia” by providing appropriate scaffolding instruction. This study pairs these frameworks of linguistically responsive teaching with the concept of CRP by centering both language and culture in the teaching and learning processes. In *Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language* (2018), Wei frames translanguaging practice and theory as applicable to “pedagogy, everyday social interaction, cross-modal and multimodal communication, and linguistic discourse” in which students’ linguistic and cultural repertoires and experiences are enhanced.

Further, a generative approach to literacy expands the interpretive potential of literature and rhetoric. Along with organization of knowledge, Generative Learning Strategies (GLS) require recall, integration, and elaboration. These strategies have proven effective for motivating college students to become fully immersed in learning include summarizing, reflecting, explaining, predicting, questioning, and illustrating (Brod, 2020). Each of the four key concepts align with a process approach consistent with the perspective of multiliteracies, which emphasizes writing as a process of multimodal design (New London Group, 1996); they include recall (reviewing and revising ideas), integration (paraphrasing content or creating analogies to explain concepts), organization (effectively connecting prior knowledge to new concepts), and elaboration (expanding upon writing creatively and thoughtfully, whether constructing individual sentences or adding visual representations).

One key aspect of generation and ownership of ideas that students in this study brought to their multimodal capstone was independent, interpretive thinking on the theme of language and identity presented in course literature. In response to readings and Technology, Entertainment & Design (TED) Talks, students were asked to consider the relationship between identity and memory, identity and resilience, identity and personal responsibility, and identity and perseverance. In doing so, students were able to draw upon their own experiences, reflect on how they respond to challenges and obstacles, and recall events that shaped the person they are and aspire to be in the future. Students began by writing conventional narrative and persuasive essays, followed by the capstone that required them to compare and contrast additional source material as the foundation of the multimodal composition. By assigning relatable readings, students were able to master the academic language functions and composition skills to fully participate in lessons and meet course objectives. Further, they integrated newly acquired

visual literacies with what they already knew about digital tools and conventional composition structures. Demonstrating critical thinking, students selected from their linguistic repertoire and rhetorical analysis to focus on cultural literacy and individual perspectives on identity, language socialization, and audience awareness. This study was framed by the understanding that for students to successfully communicate rhetorical knowledge in a multimodal composition, they would benefit from a CRP and GLS approach to direct their thought processes.

This paper shares how the participants in the study implemented visual and auditory modalities to argue a particular subject of their choosing, take a position, and incorporate researched evidence to defend that position and persuade the audience.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employed a reflexive (Luttrell, 2010), qualitative, Straussian (Stern, 1994) grounded-theory research design in which the credibility of the theory comes from the rigor of the methods and tools used to guide the collection and analysis of data. Findings identified emerging themes and generated substantive theory in determining the effectiveness of implementing multimodal literacy practices that align with culturally responsive pedagogy framework (CRP). To obtain the perspectives of first-year composition students with diverse linguistic and literacy backgrounds, the study was conducted at CUNY's Kingsborough Community College, an urban community college in Brooklyn, New York.

A reflexive model provides a deeper exploration about “qualitative research purposes, questions, and decision-making” (Luttrell, 2010). The research questions were designed to understand the perspectives of students and the benefits of qualitative inquiry pertaining to the field of education. Following a Straussian School of thought (Stern, 1994), grounded-theory principles focused on generating theory from data gained from social research. Using rigorous coding to build comparisons, Strauss' grounded-theory let the data drive the process of generating categories and theory. This allowed the participants to share their perspectives in a generative approach to Ladson-Billings' (1995) CRP framework. To establish a baseline of the students' ability to compose conventional arguments prior to crafting the multimodal capstone composition, they began the semester by exploring the theme of language and identity. A variety of visual and audio tools, as well as printed materials (fiction and non-fiction), were used to generate possible thesis statements. The use of the TED, (1984) website provided access to talks on identity and resilience, identity and perseverance, and identity and taking responsibility. Each TED Talk featured subtitles and transcripts for citation. Students were



provided with scaffolded instruction, guided questions, and specific language for the composition of conventional essays and the multimodal project (narrative, opinion, and comparison). Learning objectives were centered on recognizing the value of students' personal experiences related to language and identity and inter-textual connections. Students were encouraged to reflect on their identity and/or deepen their sense of identity in a positive learning environment.

Data analysis throughout the semester included observations of online interactions and discussions, student reflections, student survey responses, student journal responses, conventional compositions, and multimodal compositions. Conceptual descriptions and emerging codes were reviewed and documented. Categories emerged during weekly assessments (formal and informal), surveys (beginning, middle, and end of semester), and written rationales, further developing coding during the retrospective analysis of all collected data, both qualitative and quantitative.

Students were encouraged to share their perspectives on all assignments and envision their drafts not simply as written texts with added layers of audio/visual media, but to consider all design elements to develop an interactive, unified rhetorical argument. They were introduced to a variety of digital literacies to form a new vision of multimodal composition beyond the written word. Lectures were designed to provide clear expectations, show exemplars, and share learning objectives. Additionally, scaffolded assignments were purposely designed to support different learning styles and instill autonomy. By removing the constraints of conventional essay directives, students were emboldened to use authentic language and express themselves creatively. Inclusive of the five modes of communication, projects meshed linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and audio components. Students were required to identify an issue for debate and craft their comparative arguments into fully realized hypermedia documents that went beyond the boundaries of non-digital print.

In addition, students worked with peer editors and gave mid-term presentations to receive feedback on thesis development and multimodal design. Audience reactions and peer discussions reinforced the need for additional research or project revision. Critical reflection included a written rationale for the students' design choices and digital tools utilized in the creation of the multimodal capstone. The same fundamental elements of Toulmin's system for developing, analyzing, and categorizing arguments were implemented. Written arguments were also required in the construction of the capstone. Students were also required to present a claim to be proven in the argument, evidence to support the claim, and an explanation to warrant how the evidence and design elements supported the claim. The multimodal capstone



focused on three essential components: (a) composition of multimodal arguments, (b) digital tools, and (c) a process approach to rhetoric. An intensive look at the data can serve as the impetus to design curriculum that bridges conventional English composition with multiple literacies and to generate additional research in this area.

## **2.1. Participants**

Participants included 21 students (10 male; 11 female) with diverse language and literacy backgrounds, most of whom were multilingual. Only one-third of the student population identified English as their first language (L1). The course was divided into two sub-sections. The researcher facilitated both sections. Section A included eight students comprised of four male and four female students and offered the flexibility of an asynchronous online schedule. Section B included thirteen (13) students comprised of eight male and five female students with equally diverse language and literacy backgrounds. The section was designed to meet synchronously to provide online instruction to students requiring additional academic support, some of whom had recently exited the college's English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

Section B met synchronously for 12 hours (one hour online each week) during the Fall 2021 semester. Students participated in discussions and collaborated on reading and writing assignments during peer workshops and breakout sessions. Prior to writing, students received instruction in close reading strategies, annotative note taking, questioning, and analysis. Scaffolds for conventional composition included a variety of media and literature sources, with accompanying prompts to generate written and spoken responses to build on the theme of language and identity. Students were introduced to the specific language of various genres, organization, mechanics, and grammar. Instruction in thesis development, in text citations, and formatting of sources was ongoing.

Pre-project survey responses revealed that 20% of the students requested pedagogical guidance and modeling of software to record and insert audio/visual files. Therefore, discussions and instruction also focused on digital design tools to provide technological methods of support for students. Students had the freedom to select any free, user-friendly, web-based application of their choice (e.g., iMovie, Animoto, Canva, Google Slides, Google Sites, PowerPoint, and Prezi). The available software facilitated learning in general, addressed differences in students' learning styles, and served to motivate learning. Learning outcomes focused on student-centered, independently constructed text and visual artifacts. Mid-semester, to reinforce the importance of writing for an audience, students presented an abbreviated

presentation of their multimodal capstone. Time management concerns reflected in survey responses were abated with instructor-designed weekly schedules that provided specific timelines and due dates to keep students on track toward completion. Conferences were scheduled to monitor students' progress and provide individual feedback on writing and revision.

### 3. Results

This study focused on how to integrate multimodal arguments successfully and authentically without abandoning conventional approaches to organization and structure. During the first week of the semester, a language survey was introduced to assess the linguistic backgrounds of students in both sections. In addition to asking students to identify their first language (L1), the survey also asked how many years students had been exposed to English as an additional language.

The table below shows that in both sections, two-thirds of the students identified languages other than English as their first language (L1), specifically Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Creole, Italian, Malayalam, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

Section A (Asynchronous): The eight students were evenly divided at four males and four females between the ages of 18 and 41. The average age of students in Section A was 22 years old. Two students in Section A identified English as his or her first language (L1), one of whom emigrated as an adult from Northern Ireland.

Section B (Synchronous): The thirteen (13) freshmen students included six males and seven females between the ages of 18 and 50. The average age of students in Section B was 19 years old. Two students in Section B identified English as his or her first language (L1).

**Table 1:** *Student Participant Demographics*

Student	Gender/Age	Origin	Grade	L1	Years of English	Section
RC	M/19	China	LF	Chinese	10	A
JF	M/19	DR	LF	Spanish	19	A
JL	M/41	N. Ireland	LF	English	41	A
KR	M/20	Mexico	LF	Spanish	15	A
SA	F/18	Bangladesh	LF	Bengali	10	A
AA	F/20	Algeria	LF	Arabic	10	A
MK	F/21	USA	LF	English	21	A
KW	F/20	DR	LF	Spanish	5	A
DC	M/26	USA	UF	English	26	B
LB	M/23	DR	UF	Spanish	4	B
VK	M/34	Russia	UF	Russian	25	B
YL	M/28	China	UF	Chinese	20	B
MA	M/19	Pakistan	UF	Urdu	15	B
LI	M/20	China	LF	Chinese	5	B

Student	Gender/Age	Origin	Grade	L1	Years of English	Section
JW	M/41	Haiti	LF	Creole/French	25	B
ASA	F/19	India	LF	Malayalam	10	B
MV	F/50	Haiti	UF	French	20	B
CAB	F/42	Haiti	LF	Creole	35	B
CB	F/37	USA	LF	English	37	B
PS	F/18	Italy	LF	Italian	10	B
TND	F/23	Vietnam	LF	Vietnamese	15	B

*Note.* DR = Dominican Republic; L1 = First Language; LF = Lower Freshman (1<sup>st</sup> Semester); UF = Upper Freshman (2<sup>nd</sup> Semester).

To learn more about the students' perceived academic language skills, the survey asked students to describe how confident they were at the start of the semester in their ability to compose a thesis and conventional essay in English. At the middle of the semester, and after extensive, scaffolded instruction, students were asked to describe confidence in their ability to compose a thesis and conventional essay after composing narrative and opinion essays in English. As indicated below, the confidence level of all students to craft an effective thesis statement improved by the mid-term after targeted instruction. Table 2 shows that overall, the mid-term survey confirmed that students felt positive about having the opportunity to craft a multimodal capstone composition instead of a conventional capstone essay.

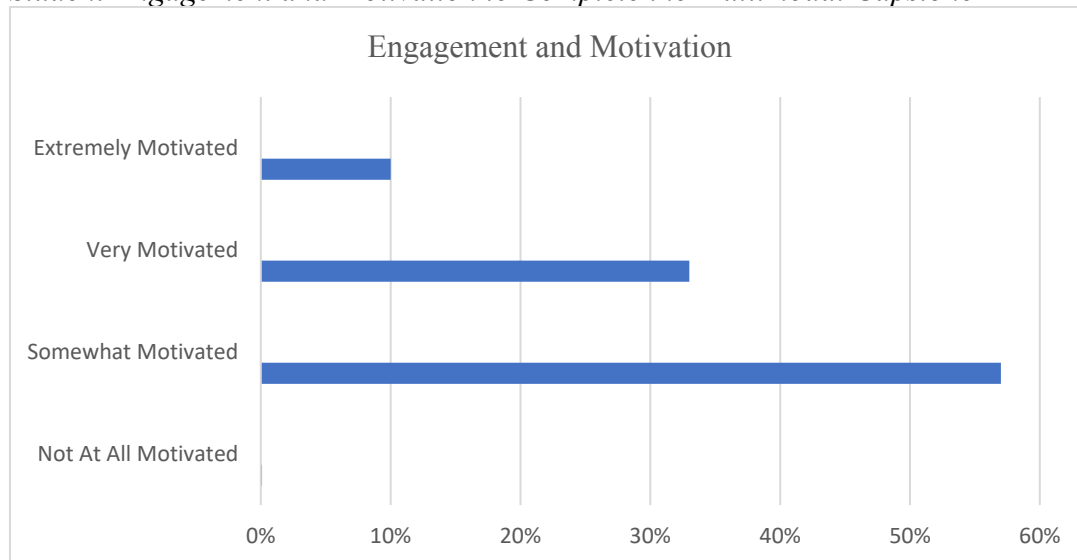
**Table 2:** *Student Confidence in Ability to Compose Conventional Essay and Thesis Statement*

Timeframe	Extremely Confident	Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not So Confident	Not At All Confident
Start of Semester	20%	10%	40%	25%	5%
Mid-Term	26%	50%	24%	0%	0%

A pre-project survey was used at the start of the semester to assess the interest or motivation students had in completing a multimodal capstone instead of a conventional capstone essay. Overall, this survey conveys that most students in both sections of first-year composition were more engaged and motivated to compose a multimodal capstone instead of a conventional capstone composition, even if that modality was new to them. Most students who claimed to be "somewhat motivated" expressed sentiments similar to that of the following student who stated, "I'm happy to do either, but the multimodal capstone is new to me, and I

like challenges.” As can be seen in Figure 1, all students were at least somewhat motivated to create a multimodal capstone, even if they had not done so in the past.

**Figure 1:**  
*Student Engagement and Motivation to Complete the Multimodal Capstone*



In addition to gathering statistical data, three open-ended questions garnered quotes from participants that provided insight into their process and focus.

1. Are you confident that you will have access to and the ability to use the digital tools necessary to complete your multimodal capstone? Why or why not?

All of the students surveyed said they had access to the internet and felt at least fairly confident about obtaining the necessary digital tools because they would either learn about them during the semester or had prior experience. Only three students expressed their comfort level in writing a conventional capstone but shared the belief that “school is all about learning” and “it is always nice to do something different” that will teach them new techniques. The table below shows that students raised concerns about the process and their inexperience using digital tools that are worth noting.

**Table 3:** *Student Concerns: Ability, Competence, Inexperience with Digital Tools*

Student Comments	
Ability	<p>“I need more help to be confident in my ability to use the digital tools to complete my multimodal capstone.”</p> <p>“I am fairly confident, but I have not used these digital tools in a long time and have to brush up on them.”</p> <p>“I am not so good operating visual stuff but will try my best not to give up.”</p>

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 Student Comments
 

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Competence	<p>“I am not so confident to use the digital tools to complete my multimodal capstone because I only did one digital PowerPoint last semester, but I will try to do it.”</p> <p>“Yes, I feel that I will be able to complete the multimodal project after lots of dedication and effort.”</p>
Inexperience	<p>“I can get access to PowerPoint or Googles Slides to create my capstone, but I am not good at those digital tools. I am not familiar with them, but I will do my best. I am a fast learner, and I would love to use one of those.”</p> <p>“I’m not really good with Google Slides yet, but I’m willing to learn.”</p> <p>“I am somewhat confident in my ability to use the digital tools that are necessary to complete my multimodal composition, but I have never done anything like this.”</p>

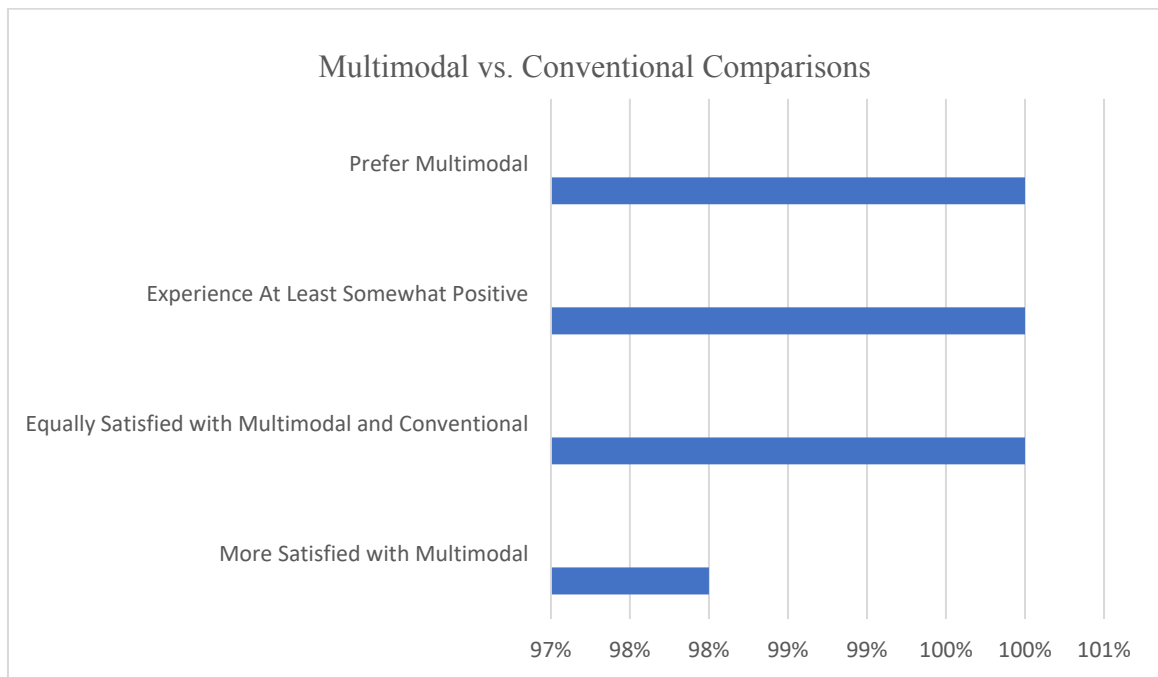
An end-of-term survey was used to determine student challenges in preparing their multimodal capstone. All students responded that they preferred having the opportunity to compose a multimodal capstone rather than write a third conventional essay, with 5% adding that although the multimodal capstone was challenging, they enjoyed the process.

Though many students said they had not encountered any problems with digital resources, 100% of students expressed concern about being able to manage their time. However, students stated that time management was a concern in general due to professional obligations, personal responsibilities, and health issues related to COVID19, clarifying that they would be facing the same time constraints if they were required to compose a conventional capstone essay. Providing extended office hours and responding to student emails in a timely manner helped to clarify assignments and answer questions so that all students could successfully meet deadlines.

In addition to time management issues, students expressed positive unsolicited comments about the course design, the pace of instruction, flexibility with deadlines, and the feedback provided on written responses to readings:

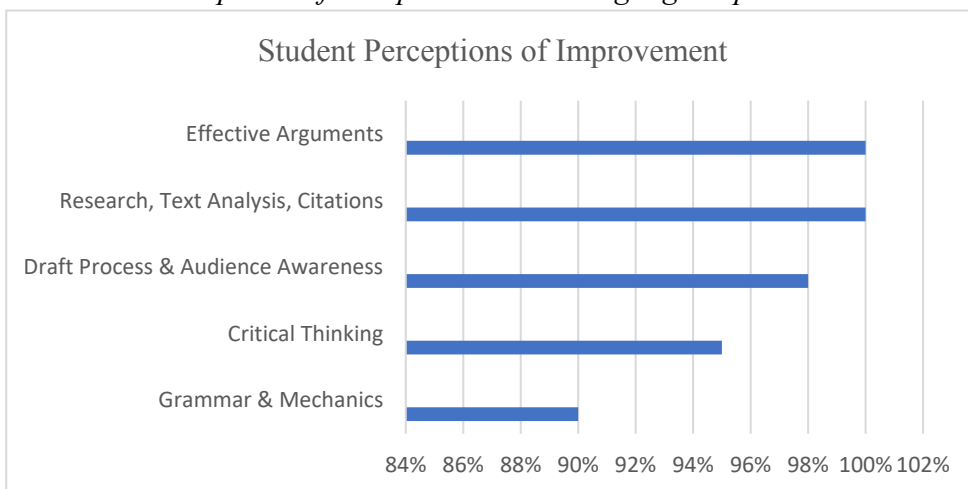
A post-project survey was used to interpret student perspectives upon completion of their multimodal capstone and all writing produced for the course. A priority for the study was determining whether students, especially multilingual English learners, perceived their diverse language backgrounds as having affected their ability to effectively compose conventional essays and/or the multimodal capstone. As can be seen in Figure 2, all students had a favorable experience in crafting both conventional and multimodal compositions, but all would prefer to compose a multimodal capstone if given a choice.

**Figure 2:** *Student Experiences with Multimodal vs. Conventional Compositions*



A self-assessment survey was used to evaluate the students’ opinions on whether they believed the process and focus of creating a multimodal capstone helped them improve as writers. Students were asked to describe their improvement of language skills related to rhetorical argument (content, organization, audience awareness, and/or grammar) and academic skills (time management). In Figure 3, the results demonstrate that students felt prepared to participate in the next English sequence because they learned how to cite quotations, practice critical thinking, research sources using the college library data base, use various materials to enrich content, and successfully analyze and organize text.

**Figure 3:** *Student Perceptions of Composition and Language Improvement*



The language skills that students believed were most improved by the creation of a multimodal capstone included the development of effective arguments using a variety of modes, research proficiency, text analysis, and precise source citations. Most of the students came to appreciate the draft process and were more aware of communicating arguments to an audience with audio and visual representations during the creation of a multimodal capstone. Critical thinking skills, such as questioning, evaluating, and inferring were identified as much improved by the end of the semester. For English learners, a focus on grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary development was highlighted during both conventional and multimodal compositions. None of the students found the multimodal capstone more challenging than a conventional capstone essay. Overall, the final survey confirms that most students had a positive experience while working on their multimodal capstones and would like to compose another one in the future if given the choice between that and composing a conventional essay. Also, students who struggled with language and literacy were more positive and confident about composing multimodal composition than when writing conventional essays. For one multilingual learner, the course “made (her) stop looking at English as a frightening subject.”

Further data analysis revealed that the students used original sources to create multimodal capstones, including interdependent literature, art, media, music, maps, and symbols that expressed a cohesive argument related to the theme of language and identity.

#### **4. Discussion**

English learners are often confronted with many challenges in higher education settings. A shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic added a new level of difficulty for all students. “Coping with the demands of learning new skills and knowledge is compounded by the difficulties of processing a significant quantity of potentially confusing information through the medium of another language” (Williams and Roberts, 2011). With audio visual instructional materials, scaffolded instruction, and student choice, most students in both sections of first-year composition were more engaged and motivated to compose a multimodal capstone instead of a conventional essay, even if that modality was new to them. All of the students surveyed said they had access to the internet, and most were at least fairly confident they would be able to implement the necessary digital tools (some requiring more explicit instruction than others). At the semester's conclusion, students showed improvement in: (1) language skills related to rhetorical argument (content, organization, audience awareness, verbal and non-verbal communication, and grammar); (2) academic skills (time management); and (3) confidence and competence to participate in the next English sequence (having learned



how to cite quotations, practice critical thinking, research sources using the college library data base, use various materials to enrich content, and successfully analyze and organize text). The relatable thematic cornerstone of language and identity presented in a multimodal format (e.g., TEDTalk videos, fiction, non-fiction, film, audio files, and music lyrics) positively impacted student learning processes and the development of solid rhetorical argument. Students successfully crafted an organized composition, researched, and developed audio/visual resources, and mastered the application of software and technology skills. Positive outcomes were dependent upon student attendance, engagement, and participation in online discussions and peer editing sessions, all of which fostered linguistic processing and offered guidance on how students could best develop ideas. Successful students set small, weekly goals for themselves to complete each stage of the project and subsequently mastered each step in the process.

**Section A Findings:** Ultimately, what separated students in Section A from students in Section B appears to be an ability on the part of Section A students to work independently throughout every stage of the composition process for both conventional and multimodal assignments. All students received detailed feedback from the instructor and peers during an exchange of drafts via email and mentioned the benefits of office hour discussions.

**Section B Findings:** Many Section B students made connections between activities, assignments, and the multimodal capstone. Many Section B students reported negative affect when working on the essay portion of the assignment. However, most of the Section B students required additional feedback and mentioned the benefits of peer review, office hour discussions, and online conversations with peers. While Section B students expressed a general lack of confidence in conventional writing skills at the start of the semester, they also expressed their interest in brainstorming their thesis and discussing design ideas with their audience in mind. This feedback helped them narrow the scope of their argument and research connections to their multimodal composition in the initial stages of the assignment.

In both sections, the findings were meaningful. A critically responsive pedagogical approach offered students greater flexibility and choice in demonstrating discursive learning and ability. Students produced a variety of multimodal capstone compositions to effectively compare, and contrast themes of language and identity introduced in each piece of literature and media. Content and organization were the most salient aspects of rhetorical argument that students were better able to communicate through a multimodal literacy approach. In addition to demonstrating knowledge and experience implementing technology, students articulated how visual and linguistic modes were used to reach multiple audiences and demonstrate a

rhetorical position. Furthermore, students composed conventional text-based arguments to explain design choices and their comparison of various texts. In doing so, they engaged in critical thinking and successfully bridged conventional and multimodal approaches. Results demonstrated the potential for expanding students' linguistic and semiotic communication in contemporary composition among diverse populations. The findings contributed valuable insight into student engagement and purpose when in the process of multimodal composing. At the semester's conclusion, students showed improvement of language skills related to rhetorical argument (content, organization, audience awareness, verbal and non-verbal communication, and grammar); academic skills (time management) and demonstrated preparedness to participate in the next English sequence (having learned how to cite quotations, practice critical thinking, research sources using the college library data base, use various materials to enrich content, and successfully analyze and organize text).

#### **4.1. Implications**

The results highlight how overall student success might be increased when each aspect of the course is seen as directly related to the multimodal capstone: coursework, participation in discussions, homework assignments, survey reflections, annotated readings, and conventional composition drafts. Only two students mentioned needing additional time: both to compose essays and to work on the multimodal capstone. One of the most widely cited reasons were personal demands on time (work/life balance). Having been referred to the campus writing center, students worked closely with tutors to develop confidence with writing and with generating ideas/topics for both the essay and the multimodal capstone. All students mentioned perceiving the two conventional essays and the multimodal capstone composition as connected projects. Most viewed them as interconnected and understood that drafts written for the two conventional essays transferred to the multimodal capstone. Overall, the study reveals that students in both sections began at roughly the same starting point: students in both sections mentioned they view themselves as average writers; expressed anxiety about the essay assignment; mentioned feelings of concern about whether their writing skills would be equal to the task of composing a college level composition; and were enthusiastic about having the opportunity to compose a multimodal capstone.

##### *4.1.1. Benefits of integrating Multimodal composition*

Students were highly interested and invested in composing multimodal projects that began after students were taught how to compose thesis statements for two conventional essays. This

sequence allowed for better communication of knowledge and expression through various modes of representation. Students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to compose a multimodal capstone in an English composition course and approached the subject in a creative manner while learning new multiple literacies skills. Students started preparation for the multimodal capstone by composing a thesis that compared and contrasted themes of language and identity within social roles, cultures, and existential statements. Previously, students had composed a narrative essay on language, identity, and self-defining personality traits (resilience, perseverance, responsibility), followed by an opinion essay on how their most vivid, integrative memories have shaped their language and identity. In both sections, students incorporated critical thinking and extensive research in the development of their multimodal capstone. Multilingual students supplemented their linguistic skills using captions, audio/visual interviews, recorded voiceovers, L1/L2 transcription, and literature they connected with to compare/contrast sources. Visual literacy enhanced the students' ability to communicate information accurately and effectively through digital media. Overall, students were motivated and engaged in composing a multimodal capstone and expressed greater confidence in presenting an argument in this modality.

#### *4.1.2. Challenges of integrating Multimodal composition*

Many of the multilingual students, new to academia in the United States, disclosed they had no prior experience with digital technology and presentation software. Even some of those students who have been widely exposed to multimedia applications required assistance. Therefore, multimodal literacy skills must be explicitly taught. An instructor's technology proficiency or willingness to utilize outside sources are key elements to success. Pedagogical beliefs about writing instruction and the role of technology in communication also contribute to the successful implementation of technology innovation in first-year composition. Those who support multiple literacies in academia recognize that there are many ways to communicate knowledge. For academic and career success, students need to master visual, textual, digital, and technological literacies. For those who challenge the merit of integrating multimodal composition in a first-year composition course, it is worth mentioning that developing strong visual literacy involves observation, analysis, and the ability to think critically about the purpose and significance of the image.

#### *4.1.3. Final recommendations*

Asking students to set small, personal goals for each stage of the draft process for conventional compositions and the multimodal capstone incorporated time management

strategies into coursework. Early in the semester, identifying students who required help with conventional composition placed emphasis on connecting them with tutors in the writing center. Instructor-created weekly schedules with clear learning objectives, deadlines, and course competencies provided a rationale for every assignment and kept students on track. Reminding students that coursework and homework were directly related to the skills needed for the multimodal capstone brought relevance and meaning to student submissions. Introducing segments of the multimodal capstone assignment prior to the mid-term prevented students from waiting until the final weeks of the semester. Having students meet with a peer editor during the draft stages of conventional compositions and the multimodal capstone, helped students focus on organization and audience awareness. Campus libraries recognize multiple literacies and offer resources to students. Inviting library staff to visit and present digital media workshops on available computer loan programs, internet access, and databases encourages students to explore multiple literacies.

## **5. Conclusions**

While academic writing skills and multimodal design proficiency varied among students, bridging the requirements of conventional compositions with a multiliteracies framework in an online academic setting resulted in positive outcomes and engagement in the process. Multimodal interfaces for human-to-human communication motivated students to contribute their individual efforts authentically and creatively. In addition, observable social interactions in the virtual setting contributed to increased dialogue about student compositions, course content, and multimodal tools and platforms. The combined mastery of skill sets provided a beneficial learning environment for all first-year composition students. Ultimately, the results of this study are intended to contribute insight into the impact of culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) educational practices to support students with diverse language and literacy backgrounds. Finally, the instructional benefit of multimodal interfaces for human-human communication and the practical application of translanguaging theory encouraged all students to think critically, competently, and creatively about the compositions they constructed.

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## Appendix 1

### Survey 1

#### *Language Survey*

1. Which language did you first speak, read, and write?  
Arabic  
Chinese  
English  
French  
German  
Russian  
Spanish  
Other (please specify)
2. Is English your second language?  
Yes  
No
3. How many years have you spent learning English?  
0 - 1  
1 - 3  
3 - 5  
6 - 10
4. Have you written a thesis statement in English for any previous writing classes?  
Yes  
No
5. Have you already written a 2000-word essay in English for any previous writing classes?  
Yes  
No
6. How confident are you in your ability to write a thesis and 2000-word essay in English without using Google translate or any other translation tool?  
Extremely confident  
Very confident  
Somewhat confident  
Not so confident  
Not at all confident

## Survey 2

### *Pre-Project Survey*

1. Is this your first time being enrolled in a first-year composition course at this college? If no, please explain when you first took Composition I and why you are taking it again?
2. Think about the discussions we have had in class and describe what the term thesis means to you. If you don't remember the meaning of this term, explain what you do know about what the term means and how you have heard it before.
3. Is English your first language? If not, please specify which language you consider your first language) and how long you have either been exposed to or practiced listening, speaking, reading, and writing English? Also, list all the languages that you can either speak, read, or write.
4. What is your age group?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 25-35
  - c. 35-45
  - d. 45-55
  - e. 55-60
  - f. 60+
5. Please choose the answer that best describes your experience with computers:
  - I have always had a computer in my home.
  - I started using computers regularly in high school.
  - I started using computers regularly in college.
  - I do not use computers regularly.
6. What is your level of computer and technology skills? (Sending email attachments, uploading documents, navigating web pages, finding information, using word processing software, figuring out how to do things on the computer etc.)
  - I am not very skilled with computers
  - I know the basics
  - I am average
  - I have good computer skills
  - I am an expert with computers
7. Do you have access to digital video cameras that can capture still photos and videos? Please explain.
8. Do you have any concerns about making a video or recording an audio file? Please explain.
9. On a scale of 1-5, five (5) being extremely interested, one (1) being not at all interested, how would you rank your interest in using multimedia software to produce a multimodal capstone using audio/visual files for this course?
  - I have no interest
  - I am slightly interested
  - I am interested
  - I am very interested
  - This is great! I'm really excited!
10. On a scale of 1-5, five (5) being very skilled, one (1) being totally unfamiliar, how would you rank your familiarity with using multimedia software?
  - I have no experience
  - I have very little experience

- I have some experience
  - I have made several presentations
  - I am an expert!
11. Previous to this class, have you ever used multimedia software before (Animoto, YouTube, Windows Movie Maker, iMovie, Photo Story, Audacity or similar programs)? If yes, please explain what kinds of software you used and how it was used.

### **Survey 3**

#### *Mid-Term Survey*

1. When this course started, how confident were you in your ability to write a thesis statement and compose a conventional essay in English without using translation software:
- \_\_\_ extremely confident
  - \_\_\_ very confident
  - \_\_\_ somewhat confident
  - \_\_\_ not so confident
  - \_\_\_ not at all confident
2. How confident are you now, at the mid-term of this course, in your ability to write a thesis statement and compose a conventional essay in English without using translation software?
- \_\_\_ extremely confident
  - \_\_\_ very confident
  - \_\_\_ somewhat confident
  - \_\_\_ not so confident
  - \_\_\_ not at all confident
3. How motivated are you to compose a multimodal capstone composition instead of a conventional compare/contrast capstone essay?
- \_\_\_ extremely motivated
  - \_\_\_ very motivated
  - \_\_\_ somewhat motivated
  - \_\_\_ not so motivated
  - \_\_\_ not at all motivated
4. Are you confident that you will have access to and the ability to use the digital tools necessary to complete your multimodal composition capstone project? Why or why not?

5. Are you concerned that time management will be a challenge in your ability to compose the multimodal capstone, or is time management an issue in general and/or a challenge in your ability to compose a conventional composition?