Digital multimodal composing and investment change in learners' writing in English as a foreign language

Lianjiang Jiang

School of Foreign Languages, Jimei University, 361021, Xiamen, China

ABSTRACT

Situated in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, this study navigates the processes of investment change in learners' writing when a digital multimodal composing (DMC) program was implemented in a university-based EFL curriculum in China. Using data gathered from observation, interview, and student-authored multimodal texts, this study presents three patterns of change with three focal cases. In the first pattern, the student repositioned himself from a resistant writer to an active composer, while in the second, the student evolved from an exam-oriented writer and textbook-decoder to a multimodal designer during DMC. Yet the third case displayed a pattern of little change in his investment in English writing. These results suggest that while DMC expanded the range of identity positions for EFL learners, students differed in responding to these positions, leading to varied impacts on their investment. The findings also reveal that these individualized responses were directed by students' commitment to various positions in their self-valued identities and mediated by larger ideological structures associated with the high-stakes testing regimes. The paper concludes with implications for second language writing regarding ways to promote and sustain learner investment through DMC in digitalized instructional landscapes.

School has long been about print, words on a page and lectures that sound like print. We give students texts and when they do not understand them we give them more texts. If they do not understand a word we give them more words, such things as definitions, explications, and lectures. The world outside school today is replete with words married to images, sounds, the body and experiences. (Gee, 2014, p. xi).

1. Introduction

The opening quote from Gee (2014) depicts a dissonance between students' language-focused reading and writing in schools and their outside-school experience of words in combination with multimodality, which has "reached a qualitatively new level" with "new technologies" in modern times (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 22). Over the past decade, such dissonance has posed serious challenges for language teachers to get students invested in print-based English writing both inside and outside formal English classes (Gee, 2014; Ushioda, 2013). To tackle this problem, a number of literacy scholars (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Hafner, 2015; Miller & McVee, 2012; Norton, 2015) have advocated the crucial role digital multimodal composing (DMC) could play in creating favorable conditions for students to integrate their out-of-school multimodal experience into schools and to invest in English writing. In language education, DMC is defined as a semiotic process that involves the use of digital tools to produce texts by combining multiple modes, which include but are not limited to word, image, and soundtrack (Jiang, 2017). In recent years, there is an ongoing call for

the pedagogic use of DMC and this call is powered by both an observation that "digital media expand the repertoire of resources for text construction" (Hafner, 2015, p. 486) and a "recognition that when a learner engages in textual practices, both the comprehension and construction of the text is mediated by the learner's investment in the activity and the learner's identity" (Norton, 2010, p. 358).

So far, however, the pedagogic adoption of DMC in classrooms where English is learned as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) remains limited (Early, Kendrick, & Potts, 2015). Little is known about whether and how learners may change their investments in English writing during DMC, even though a better understanding of such change can promote effective use of DMC for L2/EFL learners. While there is no lack of literature (e.g., Hafner, 2014) on how DMC can widen the range of identity positions in traditional writing classrooms, how such positions may be mediated by learner identity and contextual factors and the pertinent impact on investment have been given little attention in L2 multimodal writing contexts. In this study, I attempt to address this gap by examining the ways in which three EFL learners change their investments in English writing when a DMC program is implemented in a university-based EFL curriculum in China. In particular, this study draws on a year-long qualitative inquiry and aims to build a deep understanding of the processes of identity and investment change in writing, and the factors that may shape such change. For this purpose, this study integrates Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment model with Gee's (2001) framing of identity positions. Such an integrated framework allows the present study to investigate not only whether and how investment changes, but also how and why L2 learners may differ in such changes. The study extends previous scholarship on digital multimodal writing, investment and identity by linking DMC and investment. For this investigation, the following research questions were posed:

(1) What kinds of investments did the students enrolled at a university in southeastern China make in English writing before the DMC program?
(2) How did their investments change when the DMC program was implemented in their English curriculum?
(3) What factors may explain such change or lack of change?

2. DMC and investment change in English learners

Various forms of DMC such as video production or audio podcasting are increasingly popular among adolescents, whose reading and writing are found to be dynamic and multimodal (Belcher, 2017; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2003). In recent years, there has been a small but increasing body of literature reporting the benefits of DMC for L2 writing development (Vandommele, Branden, Gorp & Maeyer, 2017) and other aspects of language learning such as vocabulary building (Ajayi, 2008). However, research on how the literacy practice of DMC affects student identity and investment in writing remains limited and inconclusive. On the one hand, existing research (e.g., Hafner, 2014) suggests that using DMC as part of L2 pedagogy can expand the range of identity positions for learners, leading to positive changes in their investments in academic writing. For instance, Lam (2000) documents how a Chinese immigrant teenager who was labeled as a struggling learner in school repositioned himself as a competent English writer during the process of constructing a multimodal webpage, which played to his aspiring identity interests in Japanese pop culture. Another study of relevance is conducted by Wilson, Chavez and Anders (2012), who observed that while "traditional school-based assignments may curtail the expression of students' identities" (p. 376), the inclusion of multimodal podcasts in classrooms enabled secondary L2 learners to "represent aspects of self that were important to them" (p. 383) and to foster an identity as "an invested user of a second language" (p. 384).

On the other hand, there is also research reporting that DMC might have minimal impact on investment. Research by Shin and Cimasko (2008), for example, shows that college students who have been socialized into the language-dominant success model sanctioned by high-stakes testing and print-centric curricula may interpret DMC as "a distraction from the primary goal of developing academic capability through written language" (p. 390). This finding suggests that although DMC affords opportunities for L2 learners to take on a wider range of identity positions (Hafner, 2014; Wilson et al., 2012), such positions may nonetheless be resisted by some students. It is thus important to explore how and why individual learners may vary in responding to these positions and how learners may then differ in their investments in English writing. Nonetheless, this line of inquiry has received little attention in the existing literature, which seems to be mainly celebratory about the role of DMC in pedagogy. Another reason for the commonly reported positive gains in students' investment in the existing literature may be due to, as Zheng and Warschauer (2017) critique, the novelty effect as existing research usually involves one DMC project within a short period of time. For these considerations, the present study situates the examination of investment change within a cohort of university EFL learners' experience of participating in five DMC projects over one complete academic year. This allows for a more complete portrait of the interplay between DMC and investment in EFL learners.

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. Investment

The construct of investment in applied linguistics was first proposed by Norton (1995) to denote "the socially and historically constructed relationship" of learners to the target language (p. 17). This definition suggests that when a learner invests in a target language, he/she is also investing in an identity, which can be conceptualized as "how a person understands his/her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands the possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 4). The concept of investment offers a critical lens for researchers to examine whether and how learners' identity and commitment to using a language are shaped by the relations of power in wider societal contexts.