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Examining Teacher Reflection in a Multimodal Composition about Identity

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine the reflection and development of a multimodal composition exploring the topic of professional identity formation in a teacher education program of teaching English as a Foreign language (EFL). Using a social design experiment, this study examined the process of a key participant. Three themes were identified: (1) iterations through her composition, (2) critical examination of readings, and (3) giving and receiving feedback. This study contributes to a nuanced conceptualization of reflection through multimodal composition when mediating reflection in identity work in EFL teacher learning.

Introduction

Responding to an increasingly digital landscape in recent decades, shifts in pedagogy have called for more expansive notions of text, giving rise to new forms of literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). These literacies have moved beyond static ideas of text and writing and have been more inclusive of multimodal forms such as visual and audio (Kress, 2010). This view of literacy is characterized by an agentic construction process of text that integrates multiple dimensions, layers, modes, and stages, positioning the writer as “an active designer of meaning” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 175). Research in this area has highlighted the affordances of those expansive notions of text to develop learners’ voice, creativity, and meaning-making. Notably, a significant subfield has been the studies on digital multimodal composition, especially with language learners (e.g., Anderson, Chung, & Macleroy, 2018). However, few studies have been conducted exploring multimodal composition with teachers. Although it is a tool with the potential to enhance teacher reflection processes necessary to prepare pre-service teachers, most of the extant literature is related to conventional forms of text such as narratives and autoethnographies. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the reflection and development of a multimodal composition exploring the topic of professional identity formation in a teacher education program of teaching English as a Foreign language (EFL) in Costa Rica. The present study describes a full semester-long multimodal project in a language teacher education program, focusing on the intricacies of the multimodal composition process and what made it effective for reflection.

Methods

This research is based on a larger study that uses social design-based experimentation (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010) to design a semester-long intervention. Participants created a digital multimodal composition telling stories about their English learning experience, process of becoming teachers, and feelings of tensions related to identity development. The participants were fourteen pre-service teachers enrolled in a culture course in an EFL teacher education program in a university in Costa Rica. For this study, one participant, Kathy (pseudonym), was selected because she illustrated the major findings. She strategically selected and analyzed everyday and academic elements to make sense of her lived experiences in her multimodal composition. Data sources for this study included: (1) participant artifacts from iterations of the multimodal composition, (2) a 60-minute interview with the participant to dig deeper into the process she followed in her project, (3) field notes and memos from class sessions and the revision process of the participant’s drafts. For data analysis, we iteratively examined the data. Through thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015), the researcher determined patterns and common themes across the multimodal composition process to identify key moments and elements of the intervention that promoted the participant’s reflections on her identity.

Findings

Three themes were identified that facilitated the participant's reflection and development of her multimodal composition: (1) iterations through her composition, (2) critical examination of readings, and (3) giving and receiving feedback.

Iteration through the composing process

Kathy found that revisiting her story multiple times and reexamining the modes selected provided opportunities to further elaborate her analyses and gradually build her modes for meaning-making. For example,

by revisiting her experiences and looking for modes, she remembered that she had written the Poem “Mi Lengua No Quiere el Inglés” (my tongue does not want English) in one of her college classes. In this part of her story, she was convinced that she was betraying her culture and language by learning English, so her tongue was rejecting English. This poem's title became a central piece in the mode of this chapter, illustrating her frustration and tension. The iteration process was a scaffolding tool for her to gain deeper meanings of what she was gradually constructing and making effective connections among all the elements and the narration.

Building “aha” moments through critical examinations of course materials

Modifications Kathy made to the modes were connected to specific “aha” moments in the course when students critically examined socialization processes and language beliefs in readings and discussions. An example of this was a reading about a critical autoethnography of a Costa Rican author who had learned English in the same context as Kathy. Because of this critical moment, Kathy included a quote from this reading “My journey started much earlier and can be better understood in the context of sociohistorical local and global dynamics” (Solano-Campos, 2014, p. 422). Kathy decided to tell her story from her perspective. She added audio to explain her feelings and thinking rather than describing the events as they happened. Like the article’s author, Kathy owned her story and used her voice to uncover the social and cultural factors not analyzed before.

Giving and Receiving Feedback

During the course, students provided and received feedback through peer assessments and formative revisions from professors. In terms of the professors’ feedback, Kathy emphasized that the questions received in iterations of her work guided her reflection. For instance, in the second draft, the professors wrote comments about connecting more with cultural aspects. Thus, she described her first contact with English at the age of five through the interest-driven activity of watching cooking shows. She explained how she enjoyed it as she was unconsciously learning words by association. However, she was not making any connections to culture. After adding the videos and the audio to represent what she was thinking when watching the shows, she decided to highlight in the audio the contrast between the “American dream kitchen” with the “cocina de leña” (wood-burning stove) at her grandma’s house. Including this cultural aspect helped her reflect on how she was overgeneralizing that all American homes had that “cooking show” kitchen. The opportunity to receive feedback in key moments of her composition allowed Kathy to construct gradual layers of analysis.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that (1) “aha” moments occurred when unnoticed socialization processes and beliefs about language were critically examined through readings and discussions to provide a tool for interpretation of lived experience, (2) an iterative and recursive approach to multimodal composition to foster deep reflection about the self effectively mediates meaning-making of personal narration, and (3) giving and providing feedback provides distributed and collaborative opportunities for gradual improvement and deeper levels of analysis of lived experience. Altogether, these findings demonstrate that these elements of design assembled to produce a multimodal project mediated nuanced and complex understandings of the self rooted in past lived experience. These results show promise for language teacher education programs aiming to integrate identity work to unravel the mediating power of designing a multimodal composition with the elements of critical reflection, iteration, and collaborative feedback for teacher identity development.

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