

ENHANCING STUDENTS' WRITING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH MULTIMODAL LITERACY INTEGRATION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Muhammad Thahir M.¹, Ammang Latifa²
thahir@unismuh.ac.id

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of multimodal literacy practices on students' academic writing development in an EFL higher education context. Drawing on contemporary multimodality frameworks (New London Group, 2021; Serafini, 2022; Jewitt & Kress, 2023), this research explores how students engage with linguistic, visual, spatial, and digital resources when composing texts. A qualitative case study was conducted with undergraduate students at the University of Muhammadiyah Makassar. Data were collected through classroom observations, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, followed by thematic analysis. The findings reveal that multimodal literacy significantly enhances students' idea generation, structural clarity, audience awareness, and overall writing motivation. Students demonstrated an increased ability to integrate visual and textual elements coherently, which contributed to more engaging and conceptually accurate writing. However, the study also identifies challenges, including digital navigation constraints and cognitive overload. This article concludes with theoretical and pedagogical implications for strengthening multimodality-driven writing instruction in EFL settings.

Keywords: Academic Writing Development; Higher Education; Thematic Analysis; Multimodal Literacy; Qualitative Case Study

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication has reshaped the nature of literacy, moving from traditional text-based practices toward multimodal meaning-making. In contemporary learning environments, students interact with texts that combine linguistic, visual, auditory, and spatial elements (Walsh, 2022). Consequently, the ability to compose and interpret multimodal texts has emerged as a key academic and professional competency, particularly in higher education contexts.

Within EFL instruction, writing remains one of the most challenging skills due to its cognitive complexity and linguistic demands. Recent studies (Serafini, 2022; Jiang & Luk, 2023; Bao, 2024) suggest that integrating multimodal resources can scaffold idea development, enhance clarity, and reduce anxiety associated with writing. Despite its potential, multimodal literacy has not been fully implemented in many Indonesian universities, thereby limiting students' opportunities for creative and critical expression.

This study examines how multimodal literacy activities influence students' writing development at the University of Muhammadiyah Makassar. It aims to provide deeper empirical insights and practical implications for enhancing the effectiveness of multimodality-based writing pedagogy in EFL higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodal Literacy in the Digital Era

Multimodal literacy refers to the ability to interpret, design, and communicate meaning through multiple modes—linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and digital (Kress, 2021; Jewitt, 2023). In the digital age, students encounter increasingly complex multimodal environments, including infographics, videos, hypertexts, blogs, and interactive media. Scholars argue that multimodal literacy is not an optional skill but a core requirement for 21st-century learners (New London Group, 2021; Serafini, 2022).

Multimodality and Writing Development

Research indicates that multimodal literacy supports writing development by:

1. scaffolding idea generation (Jiang & Luk, 2023),
2. enabling visual conceptualization of abstract concepts (Walsh, 2022),
3. increasing rhetorical awareness (Bao, 2024), and
4. enhancing engagement and motivation (Hafner, 2023).

To clarify how these modes interact in writing processes, the theoretical framework used in this study is presented in **Figure 1**.

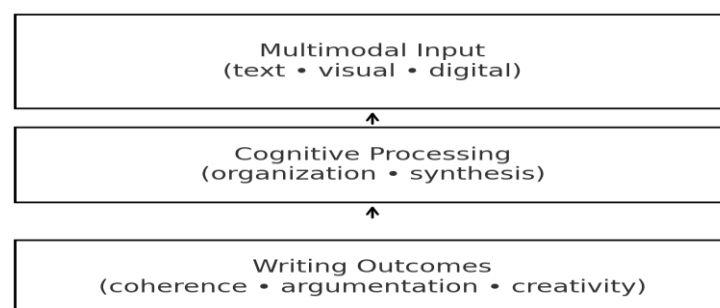


Fig. 1: Theoretical Framework of Multimodal Literacy and Writing Development

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach focusing on students' authentic learning experiences. The overall research flow is illustrated in **Figure 2**.

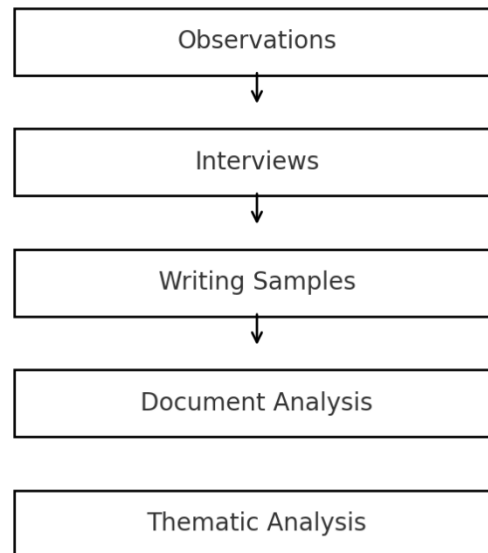


Fig. 2: Research Design Flowchart

Participants

Participants were 18 undergraduate students from an academic writing course. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of learners actively engaged with multimodal tasks.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using observations, student artifacts, and semi-structured interviews. The summary of the data collection process is shown in **Figure 3**.

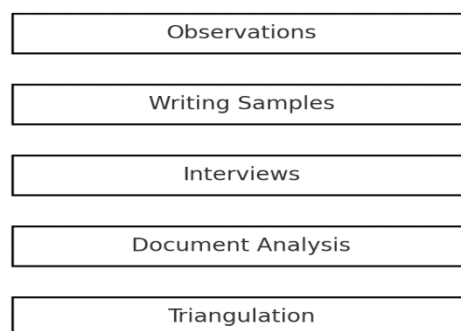


Fig.3: Data Collection Procedure Diagram

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework (2021). The coding-to-theme process is presented in **Figure 4**.

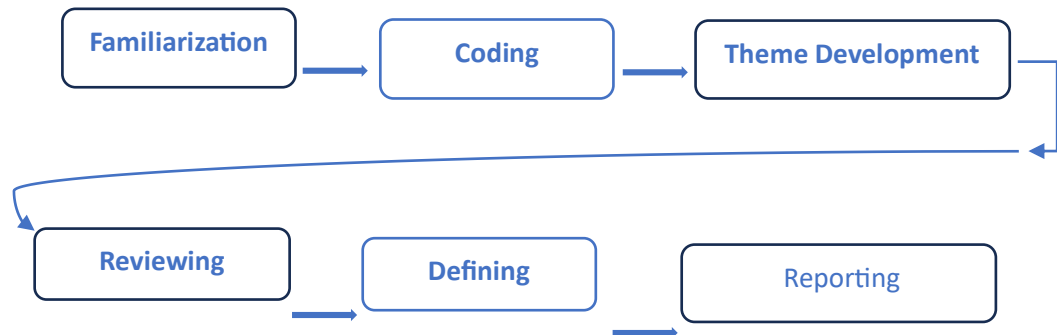


Fig.4: Thematic Analysis Process

FINDINGS

Students' Perceptions of Multimodal Literacy

Students expressed overwhelmingly positive responses toward multimodal learning. One student stated: "It helps me visualize my ideas before writing them in sentences" (Participant R7). Another added: "Using images and diagrams makes writing less stressful" (Participant R12). A distribution of students' perceptions is summarized in **Figure 5**.

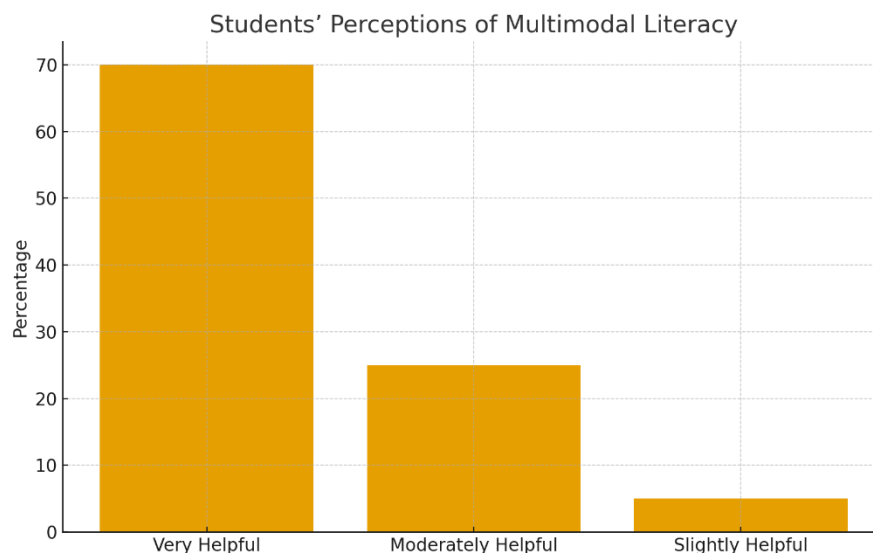


Fig.5: Students' Perceptions of Multimodal Literacy

Improvements in Writing Quality

Multimodal tasks improved students' writing in four key areas: idea organization, clarity, vocabulary use, and conceptual accuracy. This progression is demonstrated in **Figure 6**.

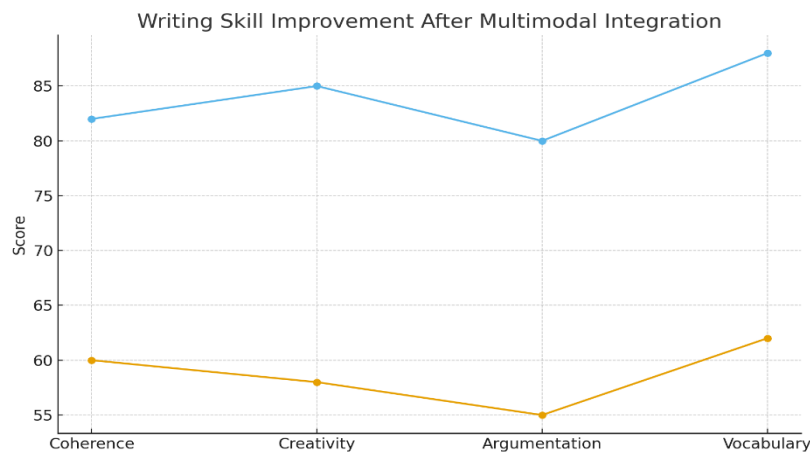


Fig. 6: Writing Skill Improvement After Multimodal Integration

Challenges Encountered

Despite the positive outcomes, students faced challenges, including limited digital literacy, cognitive overload, and inconsistencies in selecting appropriate visual elements. These challenges are summarized in **Figure 7**.

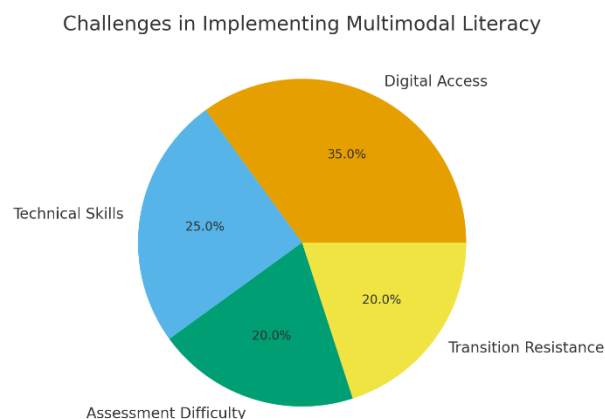


Fig.7: Challenges in Implementing Multimodal Literacy

DISCUSSION

This study confirms and extends previous findings on the positive impact of multimodal literacy on writing development. Consistent with Bao (2024) and Hafner (2023), multimodal tasks enabled students to transform abstract ideas into visual representations, facilitating clearer and more coherent writing.

A critical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how multimodal literacy supports rhetorical decision-making. Students became more aware of audience needs, genre expectations, and message clarity. Additionally, the integration of visual planning tools helped reduce writing anxiety—an area insufficiently addressed in prior multimodal literacy research.

However, unlike earlier studies that emphasized the benefits alone, this research highlights the cognitive challenges learners face. Digital navigation issues and multimodal misalignment sometimes interrupted writing flow, pointing to the necessity of explicit instruction in multimodal design, not merely multimodal exposure. An integrated summary of findings and their pedagogical implications is presented in **Figure 8**.



Fig.8: Integrative Summary Model of Findings

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to multimodal literacy theory by demonstrating that:

1. Multimodal learning enhances not only linguistic development but also *rhetorical consciousness*
2. Visual-textual interplay supports cognitive scaffolding during complex writing tasks
3. The effectiveness of multimodality depends on explicit instruction, not merely the presence of digital tools.
4. Multimodal literacy can serve as an affective regulator, reducing writing anxiety—a dimension underexplored in current literature.

Pedagogical Implications

1. Teachers should guide students in selecting appropriate modes for meaning-making.
2. Multimodal tasks should be sequenced from simple to complex to prevent cognitive overload.
3. Training in digital literacy must accompany multimodal writing tasks.
4. Assessment rubrics should integrate multimodal criteria (visual coherence, mode-text alignment, rhetorical clarity).

CONCLUSION

Multimodal literacy significantly enhances students' writing development by supporting idea generation, organization, and clarity while fostering motivation and engagement. However, its implementation requires structured guidance and digital literacy support. The study offers insights for EFL educators seeking to integrate multimodal strategies into writing curricula, with implications for theory, practice, and future research.

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