Comparing the essays of third-year undergraduate students without and with multimodality: grades & perceived benefits

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Background

In the Covid19 context, the final task of third-year undergraduate students studying ESL was changed twice. The first semester, they were asked to submit a standard essay composed on a word processor using reference materials (Guerda Rodriguez, 2021). The next semester, they were to choose between two multimodal tasks based on Mayer's theory of multimedia learning (2009). Both tasks had comprehension questions : one task consisted of sound + image documents; the other task, consisted of sound + text documents. In addition to their writing task, they were to answer questions based on the multimodal documents (before doing the writing task).

Data analysis procedures

This study is based on the impressions of the students and on the grades obtained at both writing tasks.

Self-report data analysis

Responses to an open-ended question about the advantages and disadvantages they perceived were classified as perceived advantages or disadvantages, whether in terms of preference or of learning benefits (n=63).

A "balance of advantages" was then calculated for the two multimodal tests *vs*. the non-multimodal test as follows:
- equal number of advantages: neutral balance of advantages;
- superior number of advantages: positive balance of advantages;
- inferior number of advantages: negative balance of advantages.

Grades obtained at both tasks

The grades at the writing task for both multimodal tests were compared to the grades at the non-multimodal test.

Research questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

Q1. How are the balance of perceived advantages/disadvantages distributed in each response for each multimodal test?

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Q2. What proportion of the students'essays received higher marks in both multimodal tests (sound +image *vs.*sound + text) writing tasks compared to the non-multimodal writing task?

Results

Q1. For both multimodal tests, the majority, 39/62, had a positive balance of advantages; *vs.* only 15/45 at the non-multimodal writing task.

Q2. Compared to the non-multimodal essay, 19/21 of the writing grades of the students at the multimodal sound + image test were higher *vs.* only half of the sound + text multimodal test.

Discussion

The difference in writing marks could be due to at least the following three variables: 1-the different authors, 2-the different tests or 3- the familiarity of the task when it comes to personal preferences.
Assessing the same students at both tests and comparing their performance at each could help us rule out the hypotheses of individual proficiency as well as that of the differences in each multimodal test.

References

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