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With eyes wide open: enhancing ESP learners' multiliteracy skills in workplace communication through multimodal analysis of their oral presentations

This paper proposes to study the intersections between ESP studies and multimodal communication. It focuses on technologically-assisted multimodal oral production of ESP learners in the context of corporate communication, a relatively understudied area of ESP in comparison to written production (Belcher, 2006: 149). In particular, we seek insight into the ways ESP learners use various tools and semiotic resources to construct complex narratives while presenting their projects in groups.

The study adopts a corpus-driven approach for analysing ESP learners' recorded oral presentations (more than 50) produced throughout two academic years (2019-2020 and 2020-2021) struck by subsequent lockdowns and distance learning. Under such circumstances, students were called to reinvent their ways of learning and communicating. Interestingly, students tap into different techniques and resources to construct a unified and coherent marketing discourse to present an innovative concept, while being faced with the impossibility to get together physically to present their projects in group (because of the sanitary restrictions).

After a brief discussion of the different conceptions of modality according to the area of reference (language studies (Prior 2013), semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001), or communication channels), through examples of different oral presentations, we trace the use of different semiotic resources to construct complex multimodal narratives, involving special effects, images, sound, graphs, hyperlinks and videos. Bearing in mind the visual impact of technologically-mediated communication and multimodality, this analysis necessarily extends to the study of the intersemiotic dimension of these communication contexts and such non-technological factors as language, gesture, dress code, proxemics, artefacts, etc.

Indeed, with the advent of new technologies and, more recently, the outbreak of the pandemic, multimodality has been gaining ground in workplace communication. Guo (2004: 215), for instance, suggests that 'teachers and researchers need to take seriously the multimodal nature of meaning-making in academic apprenticeship and professional life and refocus our research and teaching agenda to better prepare our students for their current and future academic and professional life'. In the same stance, the present study aims at coming up with a theoretical framework which focuses on multimodal meaning-making practices rather than artefacts alone, and finally, enhancing learners' awareness of their multimodal and multiliteracy skills.

References

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Keywords

Multimodality; ESP; semiotic resources; multimodal narratives; developing multiliteracy skills