

## **A platform for developing student competence: a look at the online Korean classroom**

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*This paper looks at the online undergraduate classroom in a South Korean context. Due to the prolonged COVID 19 pandemic, educational institutions around the world have adapted to online learning for course delivery. In addition, recent years have seen an increase in attention to multimodality, and according to Stein (2000), an array of resources including language and other modes, such as gesture, sound, images, textures, and silences should be used when making meaning. Multimodality can play an important part in developing L2 learners' awareness and sensitivity to language and meaning, for increased effective communication. The current study looks at the undergraduate learner in an online, multimodal classroom context. Students met online through Zoom weekly for their classes and participated in online discussions with the lecturer and their fellow peers. Results indicate L2 learners' heightened awareness to both linguistic and multimodal aspects developed through the online learning platform. The details of the class and overall design will be outlined in the paper, as will examples and data excerpts. While the current study was based in a South Korean undergraduate classroom, the pedagogical method can be easily applied across different contexts and adapted to suit various classrooms and needs.*

Key-words: *Covid 19 pandemic, online learning, multimodality, South Korean context*

### **1. Introduction**

Due to the prolonged COVID 19 pandemic, educational institutions around the world have adapted to online learning for course delivery. In addition, recent years have seen an increase in attention to multimodality, and according to Stein (2000), an array of resources including language and other modes such as gesture, sound, images, textures, and silences should be used when making meaning. Multimodality can play an important part in developing L2 learners' awareness and sensitivity to language and meaning, for increased effective communication. In light

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of such changes, the current study looks at the undergraduate learner in an online, multimodal classroom context. It reports on classes for which students met online (through Zoom) weekly for their classes and participated in online discussions with the lecturer and their fellow peers and looks into multimodality and its use in the undergraduate classroom.

## 2. Background

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the role that non-verbal semiotics play in written and spoken texts. An increased number of studies in the field of language pedagogy (Archer 2010, Royce 2002, The New London Group 1996) emphasize the importance of taking into account different non-verbal signs that contribute to the construction of the meanings of the text. Kress (2000, 337) argues that it is no longer possible to “understand language and its uses without understanding the effect of all modes of communication that are co-present in any text”. Meaning is communicated in various forms other than languages, such as pictorial images, gesture, posture, gaze, and colour (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

All communication is multimodal, and any communication necessitates the mobilisation of multiple modes. A multimodal approach means “looking at language as it is nestled and embedded within a wider social semiotic rather than a decision to ‘side-line’ language” (Jewitt 2008, 357). Although there are different disciplines and fields for approaching multimodality (see Jewitt *et al.* 2016, for details), the social semiotics approach (Kress 2009) emphasizes three important principles of sign-making. First, signs are motivated conjunctions of form and meaning. Signs are never arbitrary, and there is a motivation on the part of the sign maker and the context in which the sign is produced. Secondly, there is always agency of the sign maker. The sign maker refers not only to the producer, but also the interpreter of a sign who is viewed as engaging in a remaking of a sign. Thirdly, these sign makers use culturally available semiotic resources in a given situation. Each resource offers different potentials for meaning making, and when making signs, a person brings together and connects available resources that are most appropriate to express meanings they wish to create.

As meaning can be conveyed by various modes, Jewitt *et al.* (2016, 3) give three key premises for multimodality:

- Meaning is made with different semiotic resources, each offering distinct potentialities and limitations.

- Meaning making involves the production of multimodal wholes.
- If we want to study meaning, we need to attend to all semiotic resources being used to make a complete whole.

Royce (2002) highlights the importance of developing pedagogical resources that enable students to understand non-verbal modes, for example what visuals are trying to say and how they interrelate with linguistic aspects of meaning.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Research questions

In light of the discussion above, the research questions proposed for the current study are the following:

- 1) In what ways can an online, multimodal classroom context develop student competences?
- 2) What pedagogical implications can occur from an online, multimodal classroom?

#### 3.2. Methodology

The classroom examined in this study is an undergraduate Public Speaking class at Undergraduates at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea. The class is offered by the Department of EICC (English for International Conferences and Communication) and was a regular 16-week long class. As for the students' background, they were all L1 users of Korean and L2 users of English. Their proficiency in English was intermediate level and above, as the Public Speaking class is intended for intermediate-level English presentations. An overview of the setting can be seen in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Participants and setting

Setting	Undergraduates at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea
Class	Department of EICC class Regular 16-week long Public Speaking Class
Students' background	Korean students L2 users of English (L1)
Level of students' English	Intermediate and above

For the Public Speaking class, students worked together online to prepare, practice and deliver Informative and Persuasive speeches. After practice, preparation, and discussion, students recorded their own presentation as a video and uploaded this to the school system for peers to view. An actual example of instructions from the classroom is shown in the following section.

#### **4. Actual example instructions from the classroom**

This section will show examples of instructions given in the classroom. The instructions are for the Informative Speech, as an example. The data are from both the Informative and Persuasive Speeches.

##### **❖ Presentation Project**

*Explain It:* 3-4 mins

This is from the slide, which gave an overview of the presentation project.

##### *Group Activity*

- Watch the video presentations of your group members
- Fill in one feedback sheet per person

This is from the slide that gave students instructions for the group activity.

Students worked in small groups in breakout sessions and watched group members' videos together. After they had finished viewing the videos and filling in the feedback forms, they then held a feedback session, for which the following prompts were given:

- *Peer Feedback* – Give and receive detailed feedback
- *Self-reflection* – How do you feel about your presentation?
  - What feedback did you receive?

Students then held their feedback sessions and took turns to give and receive feedback. They collected their received feedback and used this to reflect on their presentations and make improvements.

##### **❖ The Portfolio**

Students were given a portfolio assignment, and this was submitted three times during the semester for the class. Students were to add images/scans of notes or work and to reflect and comment on their own work for the portfolio. The instructions students received for the portfolio assignment were the following:

### *PS Portfolio Instructions*

You will keep a portfolio for this class. This is one single file that will contain your notes, scripts and any visual aids for some of the presentations given over the semester.

You can either scan or take photos of the parts that are in handwritten form and insert these into the portfolio document. Add any reflections or comments about your work or performance.

You will be given specific instructions each time a submission is due. Please add to the same file each time and update the file name.

Data excerpts are taken from the portfolio assignment for examination and discussion. The Discussion section follows below.

## **5. Discussion**

This section will look at two anonymous students' data excerpts. For ethical reasons, students will be referred to as Student 1 and 2.

### **Student 1**

An overview of Student 1 can be seen in Table 2 below:

**Table 2.** Overview of Student 1

Year of Study	4
Major(s)	English Literature and Culture
L1	Korean
L2	English

The following are excerpts from Student 1 for the Informative Speech task:

### **A. Informative Speech**

#### *Preparation and brainstorming*

- (1) This week, I prepared for an informative speech. Below is part of the brainstorming I did with my groupmates about the topic, "depression during the pandemic." I chose to talk about this topic because I thought it could be a symptom that many of my classmates could relate to during this time of the pandemic. Even though the sloppy notes I took below are some abstract ideas of the problems and solutions, I chose three from each of the

categories and also used better vocabulary when writing the script of my speech. (S1)

In the excerpt above, we can see the student explicitly mentions their work with other peers. This excerpt shows how the online platform for the classroom enabled students to work in groups with their peers and choose a topic based on brainstorming.

The next excerpt also shows some interesting observations:

#### *Reflection after feedback*

- (2) This time, it was good that I reduced my fillers and my classmates really liked my choice of topic and attention getter hook with three questions. However, I made a big mistake!! I should have used visual or audio aids to support my speech. I also think I got too nervous and started speaking a little fast again. Next time I prepare for my speech, I'll work on my supporting aids and focus on controlling my pace. Better luck for next time! (S1)

The student mentions how he/she reflects on how they should have used visual or audio aids to support their speech content and also that they would like to work on their visual and audio aids as well as focus on controlling pace of speech for future improvement. Such considerations show how the student is thinking about multimodal aspects and how to use audio and/or visual aids to enable more efficient communication to peers during the presentation.

The following excerpts are from Student 1's reflections of the Persuasive Speech task.

#### **B. Persuasive Speech**

- (3) Like last time, I made cue cards, but decided to keep them next to the camera when presenting. I found that holding them would be a distraction when having to use visual aids. (S1)

This excerpt shows how the student is aware of how they would look in front of the computer, on the Zoom screen. The student is considering how to organize the space on the screen during the presentation and decided not to hold cue cards in visibility of the audience to prevent distraction.

The following is a capture of the student's data. This excerpt was captured as it shows an image:

The highlighted parts are the keywords, and the underlined parts are for signaling gestures or showing visual aids. Unlike last time, when I made a huge mistake of forgetting my visual aids, I prepared a printed picture one of my favorite oatmeal recipies. On the right is the picture I printed out. I made sure it was nice and big so everyone could see it clearly. I also tried to practice speaking slowly, since I have had multiple feedbacks about my fast pace.



The capture shows how the student considered visual aspects and reasons for preparing a picture to show the audience. The student explicitly mentions how he/she made sure it was big enough for all audience members to see on his/her screen, which again shows multimodal considerations in the online classroom context.

The excerpt below also shows some further interesting observations:

*Changes I would make if I were to do my speech again.*

- (4) If I could have done my speech again, I would have adjusted the sound quality by placing my iPad apart from my computer. I think my computer background noise blocked my voice.  
Or I could have just spoken louder. Also, to self-criticize, I think it could have been better if I adjusted my camera angle, because I sort of looked like if I was looking down at the audience. (S1)

In the excerpt above, the student mentions “I would have adjusted the sound quality by placing my iPad apart from my computer. I think my computer background noise blocked my voice” which indicates further multimodal considerations. Likewise, the student also says, “I think it could have been better if I adjusted my camera angle, because I sort of looked like if I was looking down at the audience”. This also shows that the student is thinking about how he/she looks to the audience on the screen.

The excerpts from Student 1’s data show how the online classroom enabled him/her to make considerations relating to multimodal factors. As the class was conducted online on Zoom, the student considered how he/she looked and sounded on the screen during presentations.

The next section will look at excerpts from **Student 2**. Table 3 gives an overview of Student 2.

**Table 3.** Overview of Student 2

Year	3
Major(s)	German
L1	Korean
L2	English

The following excerpt is from Student 2's portfolio for the Informative Speech entry:

#### **A. Informative Speech**

- (5) I didn't use any visual aids for the practice, so for the next time [presentation] I prepared a statistic related to this topic, in order to get the audience more interested. (S2)

This excerpt shows how the student decided to use statistics as visual aids to enable the audience to be more interested in his/her speech. The student mentions how he/she did not use any visual aids for the practice beforehand, and, thus, made sure to incorporate visual aids for this presentation. Further, the student mentions areas he/she could improve on for the following/future presentations:

- (6) Things that I could improve: speech aids, work more on time limits. Couldn't see the gestures because I set the camera too high. (S2)

The excerpt shows how the student thought about improving speech aids further and also about the placement of the camera – as the camera was placed too high, the audience could not see the student's gestures. This indicates considerations and awareness of multimodal aspects. The student is aware of how his/her presentation delivery looks on the screen to the audience.

The following is an excerpt from Student 2's portfolio data for the Persuasive Speech entry:

#### **B. Persuasive Speech**

- (7) While preparing for the final version, I tried to work more on the content and the clear message of the speech. I deleted all the unnecessary information and tried using clear numbers or facts from statistics and graphs. Also, I tried to sound as natural as possible and at the same time very enthusiastic, so that I could deliver my message clearly. Since it was a persuasive speech, my goal was to make the audience realize how serious the environmental problem is, and to encourage them to reduce plastic cups in our daily lives. For this, I tried to sound strong and powerful, and made a lot of gestures throughout my speech. Also, I used pictures of



endangered animals and marine plant life to visualize the problem and the solutions. When I showed the pictures and statistics, I tried to explained it in details and give strong accents to each point, so that the audience could follow and concentrate better on the speech. (S2)

Student 2 mentions how he/she tried to aim for clearer message delivery and improved content. The student attempted to do this by deleting unnecessary information and aimed to use numbers or facts from statistics and graphs. The student also mentions how he/she aimed for natural-sounding, yet enthusiastic delivery because they wanted to deliver their message to the target audience in a clear, effective manner.

We can observe the fact that the student is aware of the visual aspects of his/her communication and took care to enhance the visual aids so that the information could be clearly presented to the audience. Student 2 also thinks about how he/she sounds and mentions how effort was made to sound natural and enthusiastic.

In addition, Student 2 also mentions further considerations of the visual and audio message. The student says “I tried to sound strong and powerful, and made a lot of gestures throughout my speech”, which indicates awareness of multimodal factors for effective message communication.

Further, Student 2 also says “I used pictures of endangered animals and marine plant life to visualize the problem and the solutions. When I showed the pictures and statistics, I tried to explained it in details and give strong accents to each point, so that the audience could follow and concentrate better on the speech”. This also shows how the student is consciously making an effort to enhance their visual and audio message for the audience.

Excerpts from the data show how the online classroom utilizing Zoom for both the main class sessions for the whole class and group activities carried out in smaller groups in breakout room sessions enables students to consider multimodal aspects. As discussed in the background section, studies in multimodality highlight the fact that all communication is multimodal, and any communication necessitates the mobilisation of multiple modes. Data excerpts show how students considered multimodal aspects for their communication, including audio and visual aspects. Students’ data show how meaning was conveyed, or attempted to be conveyed, through the communication of messages by means of pictorial images, gestures, posture, and gaze. Students explicitly mentioned the use of images for the communication of meaning, and also aimed for more effective message delivery – mentions were made of the camera angle, camera positioning and considerations were made as to how the students looked in terms of visibility of gestures, and how they appeared to the audience in terms of screen spacing and eye contact level.

## 6. Conclusion

Findings show how the online platform can serve to increase students' perceptions and awareness of multimodal aspects. This in turn develops their competences as students in being able to read and interpret non-verbal signs that contribute to the construction of the meanings of the text and make sense of meaning. Due to the prolonged COVID 19 pandemic, educational institutions around the world have adapted to online learning for course delivery. In line with this and the increased attention to multimodality in recent years, it seems to be timely and apt to use the online classroom platform to explore multimodality and enable it to play an important role in developing L2 learners' awareness and sensitivity to language and meaning, for increased effective communication.

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