FROM TEXT TO MULTIMEDIA:
A STUDY OF MULTIMEDIA EFL WRITING

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyze the transforming process of EFL writers' writing from plain texts to multimedia presentation. Writing has been dominated in the form of plain texts. Even in an era of internet, the writing class concerns mainly the production of text. However, the real world writing is constantly accompanied by multimedia such as pictures, music, or video. The study would like to explore the following research questions: (1) What multimedia elements do students choose to incorporate in multimedia writing? (2) What are students' perceptions of the transformation from text to multimedia writing? The participants were 20 English majors in the second year writing course. They were instructed to essay writing in the first half of the course and transformed text to multimedia presentation in the second half of the course. The participants' pieces of multimedia writing were collected for analysis and a survey was used to elicit the participants' perceptions of multimedia writing. The findings indicated a preferred choice of picture integration with text.

1 Introduction

Conventional writing in college writing classes is linear and the dominant medium of writing production is textual. However, the domain of conventional college writing is limited and far from the variety of writing in the real world. Computer technology has advanced the textual form of writing to link between texts, or hypertext (Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, & Selfe, 1996). Internet further gives an easy access to multiple types of media (e.g. audio files, images, or videos) and provides resources to users. Hofstettler (2000) defined multimedia as "the use of a computer to present and combine text, graphics, audio, and video with links and tools that let the user navigate, interact, create, and communicate" (p. 2). Combining multimedia with text is a trend in information presentation (e.g. TED forum) and knowledge delivery (e.g. eBooks) in writing classrooms (Edwards-Groves, 2011; Oakley 2008).

A similar term, multimodality, emerged in research in the past decades and has been often used interchangeably. Lauer (2009) presented a detailed discussion and distinction of multimedia and multimodality. Nonetheless, the term "multimedia" was adopted in the paper in line with Lauer's (2009) suggestion of term distinction.

> "If instructors want to make sure they are able to communicate the importance of this work to their students, to others in their departments, to university administrators, to journalists, to grant-finding agencies, and to business and government leaders, they would do well to keep the term multimedia in play as a gateway term because that is the term members of those communities are already familiar with and that describe the kinds of texts they value (p. 238)."

The purpose of the study is to investigate how students would respond to the transformation from textual writing to multimedia writing and perceive the practice of multimedia writing in a writing class. As a result, the research questions were (1) What multimedia elements do students choose to incorporate in multimedia writing? (2) What are students' perceptions of the transformation from text to multimedia writing?

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants were twenty English majors taking their second year English writing course in a public university in Taiwan. They learned paragraph writing in the first year English writing course.

2.2 Instruments

The instrument included a survey that was composed of five parts (see Appendix). Part A was to know the participants' computer and technological skills before the multimedia writing project and new technological skills they learned in order to complete the project. Part B and C were to learn the multimedia elements and the digital tools used in the project. Part D was about the participants' perception and attitude toward the project. The ten items were found to be internally consistent, with Cronbach's alpha reaching .844. In Part E, four self-report questions followed to ask the participants about the strength and the weakness of their projects and the difficulties they encountered.

2.3 Procedure

The multimedia writing project consisted of three phrases. In the first phase, the class prepared the participants with the conventional instruction of essay writing. The instruction included, but was not limited to, organizing a typical five-paragraph essay, writing an effective thesis statement, and using quotations and citations to support arguments. In the second phase, after the participants demonstrated the basic proficiency of essay writing, the participants were required an essay as the textual basis of multimedia writing. The topic was "professors and the students who grade them", selected from the section of "Room for Debate" on the Opinion Page (http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/09/17/professors-and-the-students-who-grade-them). The participants were asked to express their views regarding students' evaluation of professors. In the third phase, the participants started to arrange and insert multimedia elements to convert the text essay to a multimedia piece. In the final week of the semester, a survey was administered.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Quantitative results

Before the participants started to work on the multimedia writing project, their computer and technological skills included video editing software (75%) and presentation software (75%). Almost half of the participants were also familiar with photo taking (65%) and filming (55%)

on cellphones and digital cameras. In addition, the participants knew audio recording on a recording device (55%), but not with audio recording software (15%).

Table 1. Computer and technological skills

		count	% of responses	% of cases
Before doing the project, I was familiar with…	at least one video editing software	15	19.0%	75.0%
	at least one audio recording software	3	3.8%	15.0%
	at least one photo editing software	7	8.9%	35.0%
	at least one comic creation software	1	1.3%	5.0%
	at least one storyboarding software	1	1.3%	5.0%
	at least one presentation software	15	19.0%	75.0%
	at least one animation software	1	1.3%	5.0%
	taking photos with digital cameras or cellphones	13	16.5%	65.0%
	filming with digital cameras, camcorders, or cellphones	11	13.9%	55.0%
	audio recording with a certain recording device	11	13.9%	55.0%
	other	1	1.3%	5.0%
Total		79	100.0%	395.0%

Table 2. Learning new computer and technological skills

		count	% of responses	% of cases
To complete the project, I learned …	at least one video editing software	18	20.7%	90.0%
	at least one audio recording software	2	2.3%	10.0%
	at least one photo editing software	9	10.3%	45.0%
	at least one comic creation software	7	8.0%	35.0%

	at least one storyboarding software	3	3.4%	15.0%
	at least one presentation software	12	13.8%	60.0%
	at least one animation software	1	1.1%	5.0%
	Photo with digital cameras or cellphones	12	13.8%	60.0%
	filming with digital cameras, camcorders, or cellphones.	10	11.5%	50.0%
	audio recording with a certain recording device	13	14.9%	65.0%
Total		87	100.0%	435.0%

Apparently images were an indispensable multimedia element in multimedia writing (100%). Text (70%), narrative (80%), music (65%), and videos (60%) were frequently used. The comic element was the least used multimedia element (20%).

Table 3. The multimedia elements used in the project

		count	% of responses	% of cases
	images	20	22.7%	100.0%
	text	14	15.9%	70.0%
	oral narrative	16	18.2%	80.0%
The multimedia elements in my project included …	music	13	14.8%	65.0%
	(non-musical) audio	9	10.2%	45.0%
	videos	12	13.6%	60.0%
	comics	4	4.5%	20.0%
Total		88	100.0%	440.0%

Video editing software was the digital tool used by all participants in the multimedia writing project (100%). The cellphone with camera was also commonly used (60%). The use of digital tools for audio recording (20%), photo editing (25%), comic creation (10%), storyboarding (15%), presentation (30%), and animation (15%) were relatively low.

Table 4. The digital tools used in the project

		count	% of responses	% of cases
	video editing software	20	31.7%	100.0%
The digital tools used in the project included …	audio recording software	4	6.3%	20.0%
	photo editing software	5	7.9%	25.0%
	comic creation software	2	3.2%	10.0%

	storyboarding software	3	4.8%	15.0%
	presentation software	6	9.5%	30.0%
	animation software	3	4.8%	15.0%
	mobile apps	7	11.1%	35.0%
	a cellphone with camera	12	19.0%	60.0%
	other	1	1.6%	5.0%
Total		63	100.0%	315.0%

While the mean responses to most of the items were positive, two relatively lower means were noticed. First, while the participants that multimedia writing was more challenging (Q4, mean=4.45, SD=.605), required more work (Q3, mean=4.45, SD=.686), felt more motivated (Q6, mean=4.05, SD=.999), and described it as a positive experience (Q5, mean=4.45, SD=.750), they did not show the preference of multimedia writing over text essay writing (Q1, mean=3.60, SD=.995). Second, the participants slightly disagree that application of computer and technology skills on the multimedia writing project was not a problem to complete the project (Q8, mean=3.60, SD=.995).

Table 5. Students' perception toward the project

Statements	Percentage of responses					Mean	SD
	5	4	3	2	1		
(1) I would prefer doing the project to writing a text essay.	5%	5%	30%	45%	15%	3.60	.995
(2) Multimedia writing is a more real-life writing task than text essays.	40%	40%	20%	0%	0%	4.20	.768
(3) The project required more work than the text essay.	55%	35%	10%	0%	0%	4.45	.686
(4) Doing the project was more challenging than writing the text essay.	50%	45%	5%	0%	0%	4.45	.605
(5) It was a positive experience to do the project.	60%	25%	15%	0%	0%	4.45	.759
(6) I was more motivated to do the project.	40%	35%	15%	10%	0%	4.05	.999
(7) I was more involved or engaged in the project than the text essay.	25%	45%	25%	5%	0%	3.90	852
(8) Computer and technology skills did not pose a problem to complete the project.	10%	25%	30%	25%	10%	3.00	1.17
(9) The project could communicate my argumentative messages more persuasively to readers than the text essay.	30%	40%	30%	0%	0%	4.00	.795
(10) The project was more effective to help me express my arguments as a whole than the	40%	40%	20	0%	0%	4.20	.768

text essay.							

Note. 5= Strongly Agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neutral, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree

3.2 Qualitative results

The participants' responses to the multimedia writing project are summarized as below.

3.2.1 The strength of the project

The use of multimedia elements such as photos, videos, and music was considered as the strength of the multimedia writing project because the text essay was turned into be more communicative and persuasive, which corresponds to the survey results (Q9, mean=4.00, SD=.795; Q10, mean=4.20, SD=.768).

"My project included photos, videos, key words, music, and the voice-over. I think these multiple elements enrich my project and they are the strength of my project."
(S2)

"Pictures. I think the pictures draw more attention to the viewers or readers. I put a lot of interesting pictures into the project." (S14)

3.2.2 The weakness of the project

Although the participants used multimedia elements, they thought that they were not make the best of the multimedia features and often troubled by the integration of multimedia elements with the text.

"My computer skill is the biggest weakness. I have to make much more effort than other classmate to complete this project." (S10)

3.2.3 How multimedia writing differs from text essay writing

In addition to technical difficulties during the production of multimedia writing, the process of meaning creation was the main concern of the participants. Some participants worried that the multimedia elements were not able to

"This project was more complicated since we had to organize the structure of the video, have the whole picture of the project in mind, and make sure that every part of the film was coherent. It's not just about writing but skills of constructing something in your mind and completes it step by step." (S2)

3.2.4 The problems or difficulties of transforming the text into the multimedia form

The choice of the appropriate multimedia element is the constant difficulty for the participants. Since it was the first time for the participants to engage in multimedia writing, they did not build up sufficient multimedia proficiency and technological skills. Therefore, choosing the multimedia elements for the multimedia writing project often became a dilemma of multimedia selection.

"The first difficulty was to decide what kind of the multimedia form I wanted to choose. It's a little bit hard to image what my project would be like in the end since I had never made this before." (S6)

"We needed to write down our manuscript and revised it again and again. Then you had to be familiar with at least one audio software to complete your project. You recorded your audio file and edited it step by step. Finally you put all your work together like a movie for demonstration." (S14)

4 Conclusion

The findings of the study could be summarized as below. First, the major multimedia element the participants chose to use in multimedia writing was images, along with sound, videos, music, and oral narrative. Second, the participants' perceptions of the transformation from text to multimedia writing were generally positive. For further research, the process how meaning creation in the multimedia form is constructed is worth of investigation to shed more lights on multimedia writing.

References

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Appendix

The Survey of Multimedia Writing Project

Part A. Computer and Technology Skills
1. Before doing the project, I was familiar with ... (choose all that apply)
☐ at least one video editing software (e.g., Movie Maker)
☐ at least one audio recording software (e.g., Audacity)
☐ at least one photo editing software (e.g., Photoshop)
☐ at least one comic creation software (e.g., Comic Life)
☐ at least one storyboarding software (e.g., Storyboard That)
☐ at least one presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint)
☐ at least one animation software
☐ taking photos with digital cameras or cellphones
☐ filming with digital cameras, camcorders, or cellphones.
☐ audio recording with a certain recording device (e.g., cellphones)
☐ other (Please specify _____)

2. To complete the project, I learned ... (choose all that apply)
☐ at least one new video editing software (e.g., Movie Maker)
☐ at least one new audio recording software (e.g., Audacity)
☐ at least one new photo editing software (e.g., Photoshop)
☐ at least one new comic creation software (e.g., Comic Life)
☐ at least one new storyboarding software (e.g., Storyboard That)
☐ at least one new presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint)
☐ at least one type of animation software
☐ taking photos with digital cameras or cellphones
☐ filming with digital cameras, camcorders, or cellphones.
☐ audio recording with a certain recording device (e.g., cellphones)
☐ other (Please specify _____)

Part B. The MULTIMEDIA ELEMENTS in the Project
The MULTIMEDIA elements in my project included… (choose all that apply)
☐ Images (e.g., photos, clipart)
☐ text
☐ oral narrative
☐ music
☐ (non-musical) audio
☐ videos
☐ comics
☐ other (Please specify _____)

Part C. The DIGITAL TOOLS in the Project
. The DIGITAL TOOLS I used to compose the project included… (choose all that apply)
☐ video editing software (e.g., Movie Maker)
☐ audio recording software (e.g., Audacity)
☐ photo editing software (e.g., Photoshop)
☐ comic creation software (e.g., Comic Life

☐ storyboarding software (e.g., Storyboard That)
☐ presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint)
☐ animation software
☐ mobile apps
☐ a cellphone with camera
☐ other (Please specify _____)

Part D. The perception and the attitude toward the project

	Strongly agree	agree	average	disagree	Strongly disagree
(1) I would prefer doing the project to writing a text essay.					
(2) Multimedia writing is a more real-life writing task than text essays.					
(3) The project required more work than the text essay.					
(4) Doing the project was more challenging than writing the text essay.					
(5) It was a positive experience to do the project.					
(6) I was more motivated to do the project.					
(7) I was more involved or engaged in the project than the text essay.					
(8) Computer and technology skills did not pose a problem to complete the project.					
(9) The project could communicate my argumentative messages more persuasively to readers than the text essay.					
(10) The project was more effective to help me express my arguments as a whole than the text essay.					

Note: 5= strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=average, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree

PART E.
6. What do you consider to be the strength of your project? Explain
Please explain in detail.

7. What do you consider to be the weakness of your project? Explain
Please explain in detail.

8. How does doing the project differ from writing text essays? Explain
Please explain in detail.

9. What were the problems or difficulties while you transformed the text essay into the multimodal form? Please explain in detail.