

Multiliteracies: A Promising Method of EFL Classrooms in Thailand

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Abstract

The term multiliteracies has been coined by a group of scholars who realized importance of the fast change of technology, increasing people's awareness of cultural diversity, and global connectedness that would change the way people communicate. The change influences the evolving nature of texts and messages that are presented through different channels. As a result, a pedagogy of multiliteracies required different way of thinking about texts and assessment (Jacobs, 2013, p. 623). As English is a prevailing means for global communication, and is presented through different kinds of channels, modes, and media, English language teachers and learners are required to possess three multiliterate skills: proficiency of the language, awareness of global diversity, and interpretation of meaning from multimodal texts. This paper aims to address (1) how multiliteracies pedagogy influences learning and instruction in the 21st century, especially in the English language classrooms, and (2) to discuss the plausibility in incorporating multiliteracies in the Thai EFL classrooms. The paper gives an insight of how EFL teachers in Thailand should be informed about the evolving nature of meaning-making of the texts of English in different forms and channels.

Keywords: multiliteracies, English as a foreign language, Thailand

■ Introduction

In the past century instructional materials were commonly in the printed format. Literacy and, perhaps language learning, at that time, was the ability to read and write the printed form of materials such as textbooks, articles, and stories, allowing limited resorts for listening and speaking. Because of fast transformation of technology, during the recent years quite a number of educators have been discussing about an integration of technology with increasing awareness of cultural diversity and global connectedness for a "shift" of 21st century education (Borsheim, Merritt, & Reed, 2008, p. 87). The shift discloses the impact of communication technologies and multimedia on the evolving nature of texts or messages, and thus influences changes of instructional strategies. According to the New London Group (1996, p. 68), the shift in global connectedness, cultural diversity, and fast evolution of technology influences people's lives and requires their interaction with diverse groups of people every day. In addition, everyday interactions do not occur solely in face-to-face situations, but also through digital interactions such

as the Internet, emails, media, and so on. Moreover, diverse groups of audience, such as ethnics, social classes, or languages, are more accessible to those channels than to the only one homogeneous group participants in communication.

Diverse channels of interaction also influence a larger context such as commercial or trading. For example, global connectedness changes the way the companies around the world access to their customers. The change also influences that most companies have been transformed into 'global' trading level because their products and services are now accessible from customers worldwide with only one click from remote locations. This diversity also influences how to draw attention of potential customers. For example, Sinclair (2015) pointed out that the traditional model of advertising as the intermediary between industries and consumers is now under challenge from the new forms of social communication afforded by the Internet. Such transformation forces a critical review of how advertising was and will be understood by the

advertising agencies, and how the target audience will interpret these advertisements that are expected by the advertising agencies and the companies.

In addition, issues and topics that were previously communicated through a language within limited groups of people or channels have suddenly transformed through various means of communication accessible to all. The availability of this information is, however, embedded by different perspectives, thoughts, and values, and thus places a new form of literacy on the viewers and readers of such materials, channels, or messages (Kalantzis, as cited in New London Group, 1996). The perspectives, thoughts, and values embedded in the changes of communication in everyday life such as work, public, private, and thus require people to change the way that they interpret the texts and perform tasks and other fundamentals on a daily basis. In this era, people must possess 'multiskills' that they need to acquire new types of literacy and interact in more diverse ways.

English, as a prevailing means of international communication, is used as a bridge to the realization of the 'meaning', together with embedded cultural values of the various message modes. The English speakers or learners of the English language have to learn both diverse modes of the message, and how the language is used to make meaning through the particular message produced by diverse groups of people through different channels of communication. The issue of multiliteracies in the English classrooms is, therefore, similar to the way people in this era have to learn how to interpret the multimodal texts and perform tasks, adding up with the use of English as a means of communication of those texts. English language learners may find it is difficult for them to use and interpret meanings from different text types in English. Moreover, it is also difficult for English teachers to prepare English instruction that enhances students' engagement through multimodal designs of the text, while preserving students' backgrounds, perspective, prior knowledge, identities, and other psychosocial factors (Ajayi, 2011).

The objectives of this paper are twofold. First, it addresses how multiliteracies pedagogy shapes learning and instruction in the 21st century, and successful cases of multiliteracies in the ESL and EFL classrooms. Second, this paper aims to discuss plausibility in incorporating multiliteracies instruction in the EFL classrooms in Thailand. The organization of the paper is divided into five sections. It starts with a description of multiliteracies, multiliteracies pedagogy, multiliteracies in the English language classrooms, current EFL status in Thailand, and incorporating multiliteracies in the EFL classrooms in the Thai context.

■ Describing Multiliteracies

A group of 10 literacy educators met together in New London in the US state of New Hampshire. They agreed upon an advocate of a new approach in the literacy teaching in response to rapid changes of global interconnectedness and technologically communicative environment (New London Group, 1996). The New London Group proposed that [in 2006] a new trend of literacy teaching should be broader from the previous era. That is, the literacy teaching which has long been focused on learning of linguistics properties and structures of the language should be turned to a communicative approach. Teaching of language for communicative purpose should include a multimodal form of texts (such as visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes), with a culturally-focused instruction.

The New London group further stated that the term 'multiliteracies' has two powerful propositions in the changing era of the communicative environment. First, it concerns the diverse channels and media of communication that are tied to the technological development of multimedia, mass media, internet, and social networks. Second, the term 'multiliteracies' pertains to an awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity as a consequence of mobility of global citizen and marketing. The linguistic awareness and cultural diversity are related because the production of texts is partially attributed to the diversity of cultures and

subcultures across the globe (Mills, 2009). According to Kalatzis & Cope (2005), multiliteracies have been known as the framework of ‘knowledge process’—the process that includes (1) experiencing known and new texts, (2) conceptualizing by naming and theorizing, (3) analyzing functionally and critically, and (4) applying appropriately and creatively. Multiliteracies are thus the process of knowledge that ranges from perception to process, and application of knowledge.

■ A multiliteracies pedagogy

A multiliteracies pedagogy focuses on modes of representation that is broader than the concept of language teaching. In this way, the New London Group (1996) proposes a model for multiliteracies instruction. According to the New London group, four recommended components of the pedagogy of multiliteracies include Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transform Practice. Each component is discussed in the following sections.

Situated Practice is constituted by immersion in meaningful practices and texts of all kinds within a community of learners. This pedagogy integrates learners’ previous and current experience with their learning community and the texts with which they come into contact that originate beyond the community they belong. It is also aimed at constructing a supportive atmosphere for learners to feel secure in taking risks, going out of their comfort zone, and trusting guidance from their peers and teachers.

The second component of the pedagogy is Overt Instruction. This component includes all active intervention that teachers and other experts use to scaffold learning activities. Overt instruction also implies the use of meta-languages, or languages of reflective generalization that describe the form, content, and function of the discourse practice under scrutiny. This component is essential for instruction in literacy across cultures and text types.

The goal of Critical Framing, the third component, is to help learners focus on the literate practice that was introduced in situated settings. Multimodal texts that have been presented in situated settings may be

unfamiliar to them. The purpose of critical framing is to create conscious control and understanding based on Overt Instruction and learners’ prior knowledge and problem-solving skills, relevant to their backgrounds, values, and social textual practice. In the stage of critical framing, the learners will gain awareness of different personal backgrounds, values and practices from the medium they have learned. They will critique the medium constructively, accommodate the newly adjusted knowledge, apply the new knowledge, or even innovate their own, based on the old communities and the new ones.

The last component, Transformed Practice relates to the idea that teachers develop ways in which learners are able to reflect new practices embedded in their own goals and values and ways of using and interpreting texts of various kinds. Learners are expected to be able to perform what they acquired through Overt Instruction and Critical Framing. That is to say, they will demonstrate how they accommodate, transfer, apply, revise, or modify what they have learned into practice.

Anstey (2002) supports the multiliteracies pedagogy as a promising instructional approach in the 21st century. He claims that literacy education should shift its focus to not only on the mastery of the ‘old-fashioned’ literacy skills, but expand the scope of literacy to diverse social contexts. Literacy education must foster learners’ attitudes and skills needed for evolving language in multimodal modes through different channels.

A showcase of multiliteracies pedagogy for learners was undertaken by Angay-Crowder, Choi, and Yi (2013). The team of researchers used a digital storytelling to teach literacy to middle school multilingual students. The researchers adopted the four-stage practice in teaching multiliteracies to the learners. To raise the learners’ awareness and make connections to what they were learning in the later stage, in the situated practice the learners had conversation with their peers about the topics ranging from sociopolitical to their personal interest for the purpose that the students were able to critically reflect their selection

and to frame their choices. Later, overt instruction was employed to scaffold their activities and to give explicit information about the nature of digital storytelling, which required multitasking such as texts, pictures, sounds, and technology. After explicit instruction, the students learned to accommodate their prior knowledge, task, and story to design the products and finally they progressed from the current stage of knowledge and background to learn more, not only expanding knowledge of the content and language, but also the ability to use and synergize different sources and tools to make their own presentation. In addition, literacy education needs to focus on critical evaluation and interpretation of the texts such as inherent central ideas that are intentionally presented via selected modes or channels. The practical shift of multiliteracies pedagogy will enable learners in the 21st century to take more informed and critical control of the understanding in the schools, workplaces, public, and private lives.

Thus, literacy education in the 21st century should develop students' understanding that (1) texts

are constructed and have particular social and cultural background and values, (2) a variety of representational forms are incorporated different types of grammar and semiotic systems, (3) the readers or the viewers may need to interpret the text's meanings by the use of different grammars and semiotic systems, (4) various forms of text, through different channels are still evolving with technological advancement, so they need to keep pace for these changes, (5) contextual factors such as social and cultural background, values, economic and political environments influence the way of how the texts are interpreted or perceived, and (6) there is a need to consider all possible meanings of the text, and how the text is constructed from the reader's perspective.

Kalantzis & Cope (2008) illustrate that the multiliteracies pedagogical activities should involve a variety of representational modes. Table 1 presents an outline of various modes of textual representation, apart from a conventional printed mode.

Table 1 Examples of textual representational modes

Modes	Examples
Written Language	Writing and reading of handwriting, the printed page, and the screen
Oral Language	Producing and listening of live or recorded speech
Visual Representation	Still or moving image, sculpture, craft, view, vista, scene, perspective
Audio Representation	Music, ambient sounds, noises, alerts, hearing, listening
Tactile Representation	Touch, smell, and taste Forms of tactile representation including kinesthesia, physical contact, skin sensation, grasp, manipulable objects, artifacts, cooking and eating, aromas
Gestural Representation	Movements of the hands and arms, expression of the face, eye movements and gaze, demeanors of the body, gait, clothing and fashion, hair style, dance, action sequences, timing, frequency, ceremony and ritual
Spatial Representation	Proximity, spacing, layout, interpersonal distance, territoriality, architecture/building, streetscape, cityscape, landscape

(Source: Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, pp. 203-204)

As can be seen from Table 1, to develop literacy skills for learners in the 21st century cannot be upon only the linguistic source, or old-fashioned ways of approaching the teaching of reading. Texts or messages are in multimodal modes of presentation. Therefore, teachers have to acquaint the learners with the way and how the texts are presented. Moreover, the learners need to accommodate themselves in interpreting the texts and think of how they can produce their own texts for ultimate communicative achievement.

■ Multiliteracies and Its Implications in the English Classrooms

Critical studies of English language learners in both ESL and EFL have shown that learners are not rigid in their understanding of different cultures influencing the use of English language (McKinney & Norton, 2008). Learners are consciously able to reflect, contest, critique, affirm, or reject messages as they take the position of active meaning makers (Souzandehfar, Saadat, & Sahragard, 2014). McKinney & Norton (2008) contend that English language learners use their prior experience to critically analyze and select their own social words. They further suggest that it is urgent for the researchers in education to develop a framework of critical multimodal analysis such as how students are aware of social and cultural values to critically interpret multimodal texts presented through diverse means for meaning-making (Ajayi, 2011). Few studies, to date, show that studies on language as a means of communication are just to describe characteristics of multimodal texts, but not how multiliteracies are used as a complement of critical evaluation to the texts and materials (Janks & Comber, 2006; Jewitt, 2008; Lemke, 2005). Thus, how to endorse multiliteracies as a promising pedagogy is still in questioned.

A handful of studies in the ESL and EFL contexts have addressed successful adoption of the pedagogy of multiliteracies in teaching and preparing teachers of English (Ajayi, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; Lotherington, 2007; Nasir, Hand, & Taylor, 2008; Tan, 2008). For example, Kalantzis and Cope's (2008, p. 203) study shows that the idea of multiliteracies ad-

resses some of the key dimensions of the change in the communicative environment. Many kinds of English literacy at work are accompanied by different cultural, social, or professional contexts. Apart from the context, it is about the nature of communication technologies that makes meaning become multimodal such as visual, audio, gestural, and spatial patterns of meaning. Additionally, the study of using digital storytelling reported its success in enhancing learners' language and multiliteracies skill (Angay-Crowder, Choi, & Yi, 2013).

Lotherington (2007, p. 819) emphasizes the increase of multicultural, multilingual, and multimodal modes of communication in the era. He also points out that English language and literacy have to be critically evaluated. Due to fast change of technologies, the language and literacy teaching need to keep updated. Therefore, text, and norms of discourse and practices are always modified, expanded, and reinvented in response to new media and global connectedness. Teaching of English thus needs to be reconceptualized. For students to be successful in using English, teaching only the linguistic aspects is not adequate. Teachers need to provide and master the students in the use of the language content in diverse contexts. Moreover, the language can be expressed through different communicative channels, or forms. For example, messages of the same meaning could be expressed through pictures, short messages, video clips and so on. Apart from that, students need to learn that through different forms of the messages, the meaning can also deviate from the other channels or forms through which they have been expressed. For example, the advertising agency needs to plan carefully to use few letters and paste meaningful and eye-catching photo to attract the audience to advertisement on the billboard in a limited space. However, it is not good to employ the similar technique in textbooks because a textbook does not limit the space for the author to provide information. If the authors provide very little information of the topic, it would confuse the readers, and thus impedes the readers to follow the flow and content the author wants to present. Moreover, as

English becomes an international language for education and commercial purposes, and it thus now belongs to global citizens. English is used to express ideas and speakers' point of view, which is reflected from their background and prior knowledge. Thus, teaching of English in this era needs to include awareness of linguistic and cultural sensitivity, as well as inclusiveness of groups of learners with diverse backgrounds.

In Iran, Souzandehfar, Saadat, and Sahragard (2014) found that Iranian students demonstrate that they are able to situate the meanings of the advertising texts in specific contexts that reflected social and cultural experience of advertising agencies. The students also acknowledge the use of multimodal resources to enhance their language and literacy development. The use of multiliteracies pedagogy thus permits students to foster their English literacy practices by offering them the opportunities to create new identities from their original background with the newly created one of their own.

Moving to Singapore, one of the AEC members, Tan (2008) implemented multiliteracies pedagogy in literacy programs across different educational levels and contexts, especially for those of lower SES background and from families, where English is not the first language. She found that the framework of multiliteracies helps to resolve education disparities among learners of diverse cultural backgrounds, linguistic abilities, and academic achievements.

In summary, although previous studies suggested that English teachers and researchers could not provide empirical studies on the use of multiliteracies to leverage critical interpretation and use of the texts and materials in multimodal forms, some successful cases of implementing multiliteracies in the English language classrooms were evident. However, no such studies have been undertaken among EFL classrooms in the Thai context.

■ English as a Foreign Language in Thailand

English has become second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) in a number of territories. It provides real opportunities for growth and development in

many life aspects such as education, business, and tourism. The British Council (2013) estimates that there are now more than two billion people having a certain level of English competence.

Diversity awareness does not seem problematic in countries with large numbers of immigrants like the United States or Australia because the schools are increasingly heterogeneous with diverse races, languages, and cultures. Teachers in these countries seem well aware of how to make pedagogical choices that integrate English language learners' perspective such as their prior experiences and identities into a multiliteracies pedagogy (Ajayi, 2009). The population of Thailand, however, is homogenous. In other words, Thai and Thai Chinese make up of more than 90% of Thai population. Therefore, a perception of diversity among Thais is rather limited, as compared to the nations with a large number of immigrants like the USA, Australia, and the UK. However, communication technology has now added diversity to those homogenous cultures like Thailand. Technologies have often connected people around the globe through texts. Therefore, English teachers in Thailand have to both teach essentials of the English language and provide so-called English-medium texts that represent viewpoints from different backgrounds.

Apart from the classroom setting, English is a common language used as a means of communication among the speakers who do not share the same L1. In other words, English has a lingua franca status across business settings in Thailand. Moreover, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has launched its ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by the end of 2015, and has designated English as its official language for the organization (Krasnick, 1995). Therefore, it is unavoidable that Thais need to possess certain level of English competence in order to communicate successfully with people of other ASEAN member countries.

In the new millennium, Thailand education has shifted its focus in preparing learners to follow international standards requiring students to deal with texts from a variety of cultures and in a variety of forms.

For example, Thailand joins the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), aiming at pushing its educational standard at a globally recognized level. It adopts PISA assessment and evaluation to assess achievements of its learners (OECD, 2016).

The PISA standard focuses on the whole educational process. It calls for Thailand's educational reform, ranging from curriculum, teaching and instruction, assessment and evaluation to promote critical thinkers, independent learners, and problem solvers. According to PISA, learners in the 21st century must possess basic competency including language, digital literacy, critical thinking. These skills are necessary for people in this era because they facilitate the way in which the people gain accessibility to information, innovation, economic, social, academic, and professional changes. Therefore, the multiliteracies pedagogy, which provides a full range of the skills the learners need to possess, is a promising method to foster the learners to enter in this world of rapid change.

As above mentioned, the task of language users, or learners, is not only how to interpret and select the right lexis, accurate syntax and structure, but the learners need to understand, or are able to interpret the viewpoints, values, and attitudes that accompany the messages in different modes. Therefore, it is more challenging for the language learners to extend from the target language knowledge to the meaning that are presented in a variety of forms through diverse channels. Thus, teachers need to alter teaching methods and techniques to provide and familiarize learners to achieve these skills.

■ Multiliteracies and Teaching: The Move for EFL Classrooms in Thailand

It can be seen that the multiliteracies pedagogy has become a promising method of EFL classrooms in Thailand, for it provides a combination of the English language in a diverse form of the message. The pedagogy has successfully implemented for learners in culturally diverse classrooms, and the English language learners from different backgrounds, with a broader representative platform for meaning

making. A pedagogy of multiliteracies has been proven as an effective intervention to enhance English language learners for both language and literacy skills. Specifically, a focus on the multiskill raises learners' awareness of a growing numbers of different text types, resulted from fast technological advancement, that carry different meaning in the contemporary world. The multiliteracies pedagogy, therefore, provides the learners an opportunity to critically investigate and produce different meanings embedded in different text types that are presented through different means. EFL teachers in Thailand can incorporate the idea of multiliteracies that messages are presented through various channels, forms, or media by diverse groups of people with different backgrounds, cultures, values, and origins. As English designates its role as an international language now, Thai EFL teachers and learners need to be aware that the English language is not possessed by only a group of native English speakers. In fact, the English language is a language of the world that different cultures and values are embedded. Even more challenging that when the language can be expressed through different channels, forms, and media, it can be interpreted in different ways, and thus different meanings. Therefore, EFL teachers in Thailand have to make the learners ready to interpret those texts embedded with different meanings, forms, and channels, while noticing that differences in values, attitudes, and cultures are carried over by those messages. To achieve understanding of the message (or the language), the learners need to possess critical thinking ability to interpret and produce meaningful language in a proper way.

■ Conclusion

In summary, this literature reviews and relates implications for a multiliteracies pedagogy, successful cases in neighboring countries, and challenges for Thai EFL teachers in a way to promote new literacies through the study of the English as a foreign language for the learners in Thailand. The review resides on the idea that globalization makes people's lives change and thus instruction needs to change to keep

pace with what learners need to fully participate in this global community. The learners, therefore, are required to possess multiskills for their life. Literacy in the current world associates with new technological competence and social diversity. Learners need to acquire a variety of different literacy skills and to interact appropriately in the global context through the use of language, especially English—the international medium of communication among the global citizen. Teachers need to be aware of the literacy practices of their students. Students in this era are in a multiliterate world and make use of multimodal texts at all times. Teachers need to help them understand that these forms change the way people communicate, think, act, and believe. The world is no longer in a printed book culture. Now materials and media are entirely on-line, with page layouts that look very different from the standard hard copy. Students now search google for information; they no longer go to the library and use an encyclopedia. Teachers thus need to teach students about these new technologies and forms of communication, and how to ‘read them’ critically, and interpret the various cultural perspectives that are embodied in these new multitext-types.

The New London Group has coined the term multiliteracies to focus on the way that the literacy education needs to change in order to address the social diversity, technology, and globalization of the new and dynamic global situation. Multiliteracies promotes learners’ mastery in communication, and the ability to critically analyze, deconstruct, interpret, reconstruct, or innovate a wide range of representational forms of the texts, as well as different social perspectives associated with such forms.

Essentially, as teachers of English, to adopt the pedagogy of multiliteracies in the classroom practices does not only to raise awareness of the English language learners the multiple forms of messages or texts and how to process and produce those messages or texts, but they will also learn that the world is diverse, yet interconnected. The job for EFL teachers, especially target audience here—EFL teachers in Thailand, is to realize that they have to enhance

the learners’ English competence, while enacting awareness of how to interpret the meaning of multimodal messages that are presented through diverse channels of communication, and how to navigate those channels of communication for expanding their own knowledge of themselves and of others in the world.

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