



The peripherality of digital multimodal composing in Vietnamese EFL writing: a metaphor-based study of teacher cognition

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Abstract

Digital Multimodal Composing (DMC) represents a significant pedagogical shift in Second Language (L2) writing, transitioning from monomodal text to multimodal semiotic orchestration. While DMC has gained global traction, research on its application in Vietnam remains limited, indicating a need to understand how individual lecturers make sense of its still peripheral status in their own teaching contexts. This qualitative multiple-case study (Stake, 2006) examines how three Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers conceptualize DMC integration through metaphor analysis. Treating each participant as a bounded case, cross-case synthesis identified three metaphorical frameworks: the “Staircase” (systematic institutionalization), the “Evening Gown versus Swimsuit” (context-appropriate selection), and the “Spiral” (iterative refinement). Across these three cases, the metaphors point to an emergent “structural trilemma”. This trilemma is conceptualized as an interpretive construct rather than a fully established model, encompassing institutional barriers such as assessment misalignment and infrastructure gaps, pedagogical integrity concerns related to skill-erosion fears, and tensions between engagement and academic rigor. Findings indicate that, for these participants, DMC was positioned as supplementary rather than a replacement for print-based writing, reflecting a locally rational adaptation to systemic constraints. Implications emphasize cautious assessment reform and genre-differentiated application, with the recognition that broader multi-site research is needed before stronger claims can be made.

Keywords: Digital multimodal composing, EFL writing, teacher cognition, metaphor analysis, Vietnamese context

Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed literacy practices worldwide, shifting writing from monomodal text production to multimodal composition that integrates verbal, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes (Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Empirically, multimodal text literacy has been institutionalized as an academic literacy in countries such as Singapore and Australia (ACARA, 2014; Ministry of Education Singapore [MOE], 2020). Digital Multimodal Composing (DMC), which has been defined as the creation of meaning through the orchestration of diverse semiotic resources via digital platforms, has emerged as a critical competency for 21st-century communication (Ci & Jiang, 2025; Jewitt, 2008; Mills, 2010). This theoretical evolution from traditional literacy through multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 1996) to contemporary DMC (Hafner & Ho, 2020; Jiang, 2017) reflects a fundamental reconceptualization of what it means to be literate in an increasingly digitized multimodal world. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, DMC offers transformative affordances: enhanced students' engagement and motivation (Jiang & Hafner, 2025), critical thinking and creativity (Jiang, 2022), and communication and digital skills essential for contemporary workplaces (Yi et al., 2020). Despite growing recognition of DMC's pedagogical potential and alignment with global literacy trends (Lee, 2019; Maghsoudi et al., 2022; Xu, 2023), in many EFL contexts, digital multimodal work must compete with assessment systems and teaching traditions that continue to privilege print-based writing, making DMC difficult to legitimize as part of accountable writing instruction (Jiang et al., 2020; Zhang & Peng, 2025).

Vietnam presents a compelling case for examining this integration challenge. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has mandated digital transformation via Circular 02/2025/TT-BGDĐT, which requires learners to create and edit digital content in different formats (MOET, 2025a), while Prime Minister's Decision No. 2371/QĐ-TTg aims to position English as Vietnam's second language by 2045 (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025). Yet, empirical studies reveal a persistent policy-practice paradox. Despite progressive rhetoric, EFL writing pedagogy remains dominated by print-centric, product-oriented instruction driven by high-stakes examinations such as IELTS, VSTEP, and university entrance tests (Nguyen, 2025; Trinh & Pho, 2024). As a result, DMC may be endorsed at the level of policy and principle yet remain peripheral in classroom practice, especially when lecturers are held accountable primarily for conventional writing outcomes.

This policy-practice gap suggests that the issue is not simply whether DMC is pedagogically valuable, but how lecturers interpret its place within competing institutional, curricular, and pedagogical demands. In this respect, teacher cognition becomes central, as lecturers' beliefs shape how DMC is interpreted, justified, adapted, or resisted in actual writing instruction (Borg, 2003, 2015). Metaphor analysis is therefore especially useful because it makes such tacit sense-making more visible by showing how unfamiliar or contested pedagogical phenomena are understood through familiar conceptual frames (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In educational research, analyzing teachers' spontaneous metaphorical language has yielded rich insights into pedagogical philosophies, professional identities, and stances toward reform (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Martínez et al., 2001). However, while studies have begun to explore teachers' attitudes toward multimodality (Şahin & Altay, 2024; Tan & Matsuda, 2020), less is known about their deep conceptual beliefs and the images or metaphors they use to interpret DMC (Cao & Mao, 2025).

Against this background, Vietnamese EFL writing lecturers offer a revealing case for examining how DMC becomes positioned as peripheral under conditions of structural contradiction. Rather than making claims about Vietnamese EFL writing as a whole, this study investigates how three lecturers conceptualized DMC in their own teaching contexts and how those

conceptualizations help explain its continued peripherality. It addresses the following research question:

RQ: What metaphors do Vietnamese EFL writing lecturers use to conceptualize DMC integration, and how do these metaphors explain the continued peripherality of DMC in their teaching contexts?

Literature Review

Digital Multimodal Composing: Definitions and Pedagogical Rationales

DMC refers to texts integrating linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes through digital affordances (Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2010; New London Group, 1996). Unlike monomodal writing, DMC requires deliberate rhetorical choices about modal orchestration and how design decisions shape communicative impact (Bezemer & Kress, 2015).

In EFL contexts, DMC offers multiple affordances. It can lower affective barriers for linguistically struggling students (Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016), promotes authentic communication through real-world genres (Jiang & Hafner, 2025), fosters higher-order thinking including design thinking and multimodal rhetorical awareness (Ci & Jiang, 2025; Jiang, 2022; Xu et al., 2025), and repositions students as active knowledge designers rather than passive consumers (Pham & Li, 2023; Tian & Deng, 2024).

However, critics and cautious observers have raised concerns. Jiang and Ren (2021) analyzing Chinese EFL teachers' DMC ideologies, identified a persistent "print-centrism" rooted in examination pressures and beliefs that digital multimodal elements serve merely decorative rather than epistemic functions. Zhang and Peng (2025) documented teachers' worries about "skill erosion", particularly that over-reliance on visual modes might weaken students' grammatical accuracy and textual coherence. Bezemer and Kress' (2015) caution against "uncritical technological determinism", arguing that simply adding images or audio to assignments does not inherently deepen learning; rather, pedagogical intentionality and explicit instruction in multimodal rhetoric are essential.

Teacher Beliefs and Technology Integration

Teacher cognition research establishes that beliefs defined as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996, p. 103) profoundly shape instructional decisions, often exerting stronger influence than formal knowledge acquired through professional training (Borg, 2003, 2015; Pajares, 1992). Beliefs function as cognitive filters through which teachers interpret curriculum mandates, assess student needs, and evaluate pedagogical innovations. Crucially, beliefs are context-sensitive and dynamic: formed through teachers' own learning experiences, modified by classroom practice, and constrained by institutional structures (Salimi et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

In educational technology contexts, multiple belief dimensions predict adoption patterns. Multiple belief dimensions shape adoption: epistemological and self-efficacy beliefs determine whether teachers integrate student-centered or digital tools (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Holden & Rada, 2011).

Ertmer's (1999) influential distinction between first-order barriers (extrinsic factors) and second-order barriers (intrinsic factors) highlights that addressing infrastructure alone insufficiently drives change; transforming beliefs is essential yet challenging. However, recent scholarship critiques this binary, arguing barriers interact dynamically: poor infrastructure reinforces

negative beliefs, while supportive structures enable belief revision through positive experiences (Hew & Brush, 2007).

DMC adoption is deeply influenced by teacher cognition. Zhang and Peng (2025) demonstrate beliefs act as filters determining which technologies are adopted and how. If teachers perceive DMC as “decorative” rather than central to literacy, integration remains superficial. Jiang and Ren (2021) identified three ideological stances among Chinese teachers: “techno-enthusiasts” embracing DMC, “pragmatic selectors” using multimodality for motivation while maintaining print primacy for assessment, and “print-traditionalists” viewing DMC as peripheral. These stances were fluid, shaped by institutional context and student demographics.

Metaphor as a Window into Teacher Cognition

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) established metaphors as fundamental cognitive structures mapping abstract domains onto concrete experiences. Metaphors thus reveal implicit assumptions, values, and epistemological commitments that may remain unarticulated in direct discourse (Cameron & Low, 1999).

Educational researchers leverage metaphor analysis to access teachers’ tacit belief systems. Alger (2009) demonstrated that identifying teachers’ dominant metaphors provided leverage for professional development: making implicit beliefs explicit enabled critical reflection and potential revision. Cao and Mao (2025) pioneered the use of metaphor analysis in DMC research, revealing Chinese EFL teachers’ complex and often ambivalent beliefs. The metaphors identified such as “bridge, tool, double-edged sword”, and “uncharted territory” variously framed DMC as connective yet instrumental, versatile yet utilitarian, beneficial yet risky, and innovative yet uncertain. Significantly, metaphor analysis exposed contradictions between explicit survey responses and implicit beliefs: teachers rating DMC favorably on Likert scales employed metaphors encoding caution, skepticism, or resistance. This methodological insight underscores metaphor elicitation’s value for accessing cognitive and affective dimensions that participants may suppress in direct questioning due to social desirability or professional expectations.

Vietnamese EFL Writing Pedagogy: Challenges and Imperatives

Vietnamese EFL writing instruction inherits multiple influences creating contradictory pressures. Confucian-heritage cultures emphasize textual authority, model text mastery, and teacher-centered transmission, fostering risk-averse writing adhering to prescribed forms (Hang, 2021; Trinh & Pho, 2024). Empirically, product-oriented instruction dominates: teachers assign topics, students draft individually, assessment focuses on final texts with minimal process feedback (Pham et al., 2020; Truong, 2023). Form-focused pedagogies prioritize grammatical accuracy over rhetorical effectiveness (Ngo & Trinh, 2011). These traditions intersect with large class sizes (50–70 students), limited instructional time (Phuong, 2021), and teacher preparation gaps that many instructors lack specialized writing pedagogy training (Ho et al., 2025).

Vietnam’s high-stakes examination culture creates powerful washback effects. University writing courses prepare students for standardized tests, remaining resolutely print-centric, timed, and accuracy-focused (Nguyen, 2025). Teachers therefore face conflicting demands: policy rhetoric promotes communicative instruction, while institutional accountability rewards exam pass rates and conventional writing performance. Infrastructure disparities exacerbate these challenges: elite urban private universities may have multimedia labs and reliable connectivity, whereas many public institutions struggle with overcrowded classrooms, unstable internet, and outdated equipment (Nhung et al., 2025).

Theoretical Underpinnings

This research draws upon three complementary theoretical frameworks to examine Vietnamese EFL lecturers’ DMC beliefs and metaphorical conceptualizations. First, Borg’s Teacher Cognition Theory (2003, 2015) guides analysis of how beliefs form through professional biographies and classroom experiences while remaining dynamically responsive to contextual constraints, explaining why espoused beliefs may diverge from enacted practice. Second, Social Semiotic Theory of Multimodality, primarily developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), provides epistemological foundations for evaluating DMC conceptualizations, theorizing how different modes (linguistic, visual, audio) carry distinct affordances requiring strategic design thinking rather than additive ornamentation. Third, Warschauer’s Ecological Model (2003) contextualizes beliefs within institutional systems, arguing that technology integration depends on interdependent physical, digital, human, and social resources, with gaps in any dimension undermining adoption. Together, these frameworks enable analysis of Vietnamese lecturers’ DMC beliefs as situated rationalities shaped by individual cognition, modal epistemology, and systemic ecological constraints.

Methodology

This qualitative multiple-case study employed semi-structured interviews and metaphor elicitation to examine Vietnamese EFL writing lecturers’ beliefs about DMC. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for exploring subjective meanings and contextualized experiences in educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, metaphor analysis allows researchers to access implicit cognitive frameworks that may not be fully articulated in direct discourse (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Table 1 summarizes the anonymized participant profiles.

Research Context and Participants

Three EFL writing lecturers (pseudonyms T1–T3) were selected using purposive sampling targeting diverse professional profiles (Patton, 2015) to capture diverse perspectives shaping teacher cognition (Borg, 2015). Variation was introduced across career stage (3, 10, and 30 years of experience), institutional context (public and private universities), and professional

Table 1. Anonymized participant profiles

Participant	Career stage	Institution type	Teaching context	Professional background
T1	Senior lecturer	Public university	EFL writing and general English; large classes	Postgraduate qualification; periodic ELT and technology-related professional development
T2	Mid-career lecturer	Private university	Academic/IELTS-related writing; medium-sized classes	Postgraduate qualification; experience in multimodal or design-oriented communication
T3	Early-career lecturer	Public university	Foundational and academic EFL writing; large classes	Postgraduate qualification; general institutional IT training

background (TESOL training, multimedia design expertise, and general IT training). Each lecturer was treated as a bounded case, enabling cross-case analysis to identify shared patterns and distinctive conceptualizations of DMC integration (Stake, 2006).

Although the sample size is small, it is appropriate for a multiple-case qualitative design focused on analytic rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). What is termed here a structural trilemma is best understood as an interpretive construct that emerged across these three cases, rather than as a settled explanatory model for Vietnamese EFL writing more broadly. It captures the recurrent tensions such as assessment misalignment, pedagogical integrity concerns, and infrastructure inequity that were independently articulated by all three participants and that resonate with existing research on technology integration in education (Ertmer, 1999; Warschauer, 2003; Zhang & Peng, 2025). Future research employing larger samples or survey methods could examine whether similar tensions recur across wider populations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through one audio-recorded, semi-structured interview with each participant (three interviews in total), each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefly introduced to several examples of DMC combining text, images, audio, and video in order to ensure a shared baseline understanding of the concept. These examples were deliberately selected to represent neutral informational and educational formats rather than persuasive or stylistically distinctive multimodal genres. The intention was not to model particular metaphorical framings of DMC but to provide a minimal conceptual reference point so that participants could recognize the phenomenon under discussion. At the same time, because these examples were shown immediately before the interview, they may have shaped how participants framed DMC in the moment; this possibility is therefore considered explicitly in both the analysis and the limitations. The interview protocol explored participants' professional background, pedagogical beliefs, conceptualizations of DMC, and perceived opportunities and constraints in integrating multimodality into writing instruction.

A key component of each interview was metaphor elicitation. During the interview, participants were invited to imagine a visual representation of their beliefs about the feasibility of integrating DMC and to produce an initial hand-drawn sketch of that image while they explained it verbally. After the interview, participants were asked to revisit and refine their sketches, using any tool of their choice (pen and paper, digital drawing application, or presentation software), and to send the revised versions to the researcher within several days. Both the in-interview sketches and the post-interview revised sketches were then analyzed together with the interview transcript as elicitation artefacts that supported, rather than replaced, the verbal explanations of each metaphor. Figures 1–3 present the revised participant sketches discussed in the Findings section. Interview questions were adapted from Cao and Mao (2025). Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and then transcribed and translated into English by the bilingual first author.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combined with metaphor-focused interpretation. Each transcript was read alongside the participant's in-interview and revised sketches and then open-coded to identify salient belief statements related to DMC integration. A total of 87 initial codes were generated across the three cases. To enhance methodological transparency, Tables 2 and 3 report the descriptive distribution of

Table 2. *Distribution of the 87 initial codes across 12 subthemes*

Domain	Subtheme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
DMC conceptualisation	Initial familiarity and definitional understanding of DMC	8	9.2
DMC conceptualisation	DMC as complementary rather than replacement	6	6.9
DMC conceptualisation	DMC as a scaffold for idea generation and multimodal expression	5	5.7
DMC conceptualisation	Metaphorical framings of feasible integration pathways	4	4.6
Institutional constraints	Assessment misalignment and paper-based examination regimes	10	11.5
Institutional constraints	Lack of formal framework/coursebook and targeted professional support	7	8.0
Institutional constraints	Infrastructure and resource inequality across institutions	7	8.0
Pedagogical integrity	Erosion of core writing skills and AI overdependence	9	10.3
Pedagogical integrity	Learner preparedness gaps in aesthetic/design competence	5	5.7
Pedagogical integrity	Need for staged, level-appropriate, and human-guided implementation	7	8.0
Engagement-rigor tension	Motivational and expressive affordances of DMC	10	11.5
Engagement-rigor tension	Real-world relevance versus academic-writing rigor	9	10.3

Table 3. *Summary distribution of codes across the four higher-order domains*

Higher-order domain	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
DMC conceptualization	23	26.4
Institutional constraints	24	27.6
Pedagogical integrity	21	24.1
Engagement-rigor tension	19	21.8
Total	87	100.0

these initial codes across 12 subthemes and four higher-order domains. These frequencies are presented as an audit trail of coding density rather than as inferential statistics; in qualitative inquiry, more frequent codes are not necessarily more conceptually important. Nevertheless, the distribution helps indicate which concerns and affordances recurred most visibly across the dataset before metaphor-based cross-case interpretation was undertaken. The 87 codes were grouped through axial comparison into 12 subthemes and then into four analytically derived domains: DMC conceptualization, institutional constraints, pedagogical integrity, and engagement-rigor tension.

For descriptive purposes, each coded segment was counted once under its most salient initial code. Where a segment could plausibly be read under more than one label, the count was assigned to the analytically dominant code in order to avoid artificial inflation. The resulting frequency profile should therefore be read as a transparent summary of recurrence across the three cases, not as a substitute for interpretive depth.

As Tables 2 and 3 indicate, institutional constraints accounted for the largest share of the initial coding ($n = 24$, 27.6%), closely followed by DMC conceptualization ($n = 23$, 26.4%), pedagogical integrity ($n = 21$, 24.1%), and engagement-rigor tension ($n = 19$, 21.8%). At the subtheme level, assessment misalignment and motivational or expressive affordances were among the most recurrent code clusters, suggesting that participants consistently framed DMC through a double lens of pedagogical promise and structural constraint.

Metaphorical expressions were analyzed using Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor framework (1980) to identify underlying source-domain mappings. Each participant's dominant metaphor, as expressed both verbally and in the accompanying sketches, was treated as a case-level interpretive lens, and cross-case synthesis (Stake, 2006) was then used to compare convergent tensions across the three cases. This process generated what is referred to in this paper as an emergent structural trilemma, a case-derived interpretation of how institutional, pedagogical, and engagement-related constraints were jointly reasoned through by the participants, rather than a generalizable model.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, and iterative revisiting of raw transcripts to ensure themes remained grounded in participant discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking focused on both interpretation and translation: participants reviewed the researcher's thematic interpretations as well as the English translations of selected Vietnamese excerpts to confirm accuracy and intended meaning. Although no formal Institutional Review Board approval was required at the time of data collection, the study followed standard ethical procedures: all participants gave informed consent prior to the interview, participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time, audio recordings were stored securely by the first author, and pseudonyms (T1–T3) are used throughout. Because the dataset is small and context-specific, the manuscript also minimizes institutional and biographical detail in order to reduce deductive disclosure risk.

Findings

Metaphorical Frameworks and Conceptualizations Revealing the Peripherality of DMC

All three participants positioned DMC as supplementary rather than replacement for print-based writing, but they did so through different rationales and metaphorical logics. Their accounts therefore reveal not a single view of DMC, but three case-specific ways of reasoning about feasibility, value, and curricular fit.

Staircase: Systematic Progression with Foundational Support

T1 positioned DMC as complementary and emphasized the need for systematic curriculum alignment before implementation. She stated:

Students need fundamental writing skills first: thesis statements, topic sentences, coherence before using multimodal tools. DMC is an enhancement, not a foundation.

She articulated complementarity as “parallel development”:

DMC and traditional writing are complementary and should develop in tandem.

She defined DMC through “visual techniques” and “visual images”, noting that “DMC requires visual literacy and is more suited to communication-oriented topics than to abstract, conceptual ones”. This genre-based distinction reflects a sophisticated recognition of modal affordances: visual-audio modes excel at persuasion and quick information capture, whereas extended prose supports complex logical development.

To conceptualize her vision of DMC integration, T1 sketched it as an upward staircase (see Figure 1):

The base must be a well-developed coursebook or framework. From there, we move step by step, from simple image-based descriptions to more complex productions with sound, video, and personal voice recordings. A rising arrow from bottom to top symbolizes each learner’s capacity to develop at their own pace.

This metaphor emphasizes systematic scaffolding and gradual progression. It reflects her belief in step-by-step organized implementation: start with low-stakes DMC tasks, then build

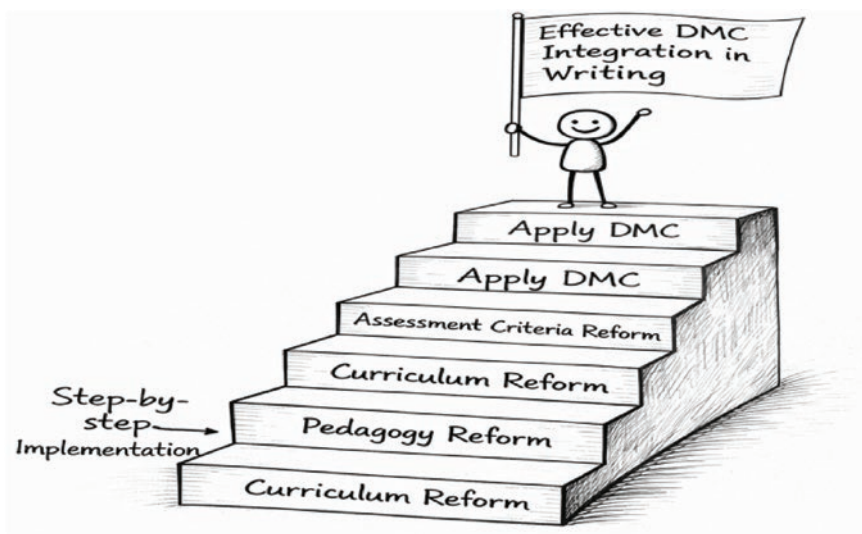


Figure 1. T1’s visualization of DMC integration (as a staircase)

to more elaborate multimodal compositions. Her fear of “chaos” drives a desire for standardized curricula before implementation. In fact, the staircase imagery suggests stability as the base and upward movement, implying that with proper foundation such as suitable curriculum, DMC can climb in complexity without losing balance. It also conveys hope and possibility: at the top lies sophisticated multimodal fluency.

Evening Gown versus Swimsuit: Context-Appropriate Selection

T2 viewed DMC as complementary but emphasized its context-dependent appropriateness. She distinguished sharply between student proficiency levels and genre contexts:

For lower-level students (A2-B1), visual elements help organize ideas and motivation. But for advanced academic writing, DMC may distract from deep argumentation.

Moreover, she identified a “less is more” design principle in DMC, where messages are condensed into slogans and bullet points supported by visual layout. For lower-level students, DMC serves motivational and scaffolding functions. However, for advanced writing, she perceived potential conflict:

Students spend hours perfecting fonts and transitions... but when I read the script, the logic is weak. That worries me for their future academic work...

She assumed that DMC’s aesthetic minimalism contradicts academic writing’s demand for explicit elaboration, complex syntax, and sustained argumentation. This aesthetic-functional tension suggests DMC and traditional writing may serve incommensurable purposes rather than simply complementing each other.

To explain her stance, T2 employed a striking dual metaphor contrasting garments serving different purposes (see Figure 2):

DMC’s like choosing between an evening gown and a swimsuit. An evening gown’s beautiful at a gala because it dazzles... but if you try to swim in it, you’ll drown... Academic writing’s like a streamlined swimsuit... When you enter the water, you must survive through your own internal strength, logic, and sentence arrangement.

This metaphor reflects context-dependency. DMC is eye-catching and engaging but may hinder the core task if misapplied. It also highlights a functional versus aesthetic distinction. Academic writing values cognitive clarity, while DMC values visual appeal. Underlying this is a cautionary belief: if used in the wrong context such as high-stakes academic testing, DMC could impede performance.

Spiral: Iterative Refinement Toward Integration

T3 viewed DMC as a stepping stone, allowing students with limited English proficiency to express complex emotions and ideas through imagery and sound. In other words, she positioned DMC as scaffolding for idea generation:

Images and sounds help students express emotions and textual meanings more easily, particularly benefiting lower-proficiency learners.



Figure 2. T2's visualization of DMC integration (as an evening gown versus swimsuit)

However, she emphasized DMC as “pre-writing support” for “brainstorming writing ideas” leading to traditional text production, maintaining print literacy’s primacy.

Students create mood boards or collect images to visualize their arguments, but the final product is always a written essay because of the exam... Multi-modal skills are useful, but students' careers will depend on their ability to write clear, logical academic texts. We can't lose that sight.

This reflects an additive rather than transformative conceptualization of multimodality.

T3 visualized DMC integration into EFL writing as a spiral (see Figure 3):

It starts from the bottom with belief in feasibility. As you ascend, you must refine after each application. When reaching the peak... applying new technology while maintaining core writing skills.

She envisioned DMC integration as a spiral staircase, where the base represents teachers' initial willingness to experiment with new technologies and the top symbolizes an ideal integration of digital tools with core writing skills. Each loop of the spiral reflects a cycle of implementation and refinement, emphasizing that integration develops through iterative practice rather than a single pedagogical shift. Crucially, the spiral suggests that the process is never linear, but evolves in circles, always ascending. The metaphor also stresses balance that at each level, one must maintain core skills while incorporating digital tools. Ultimately, the goal is not replacing one mode with another but reaching a harmonious integration of both multi-modal and linguistic practices.

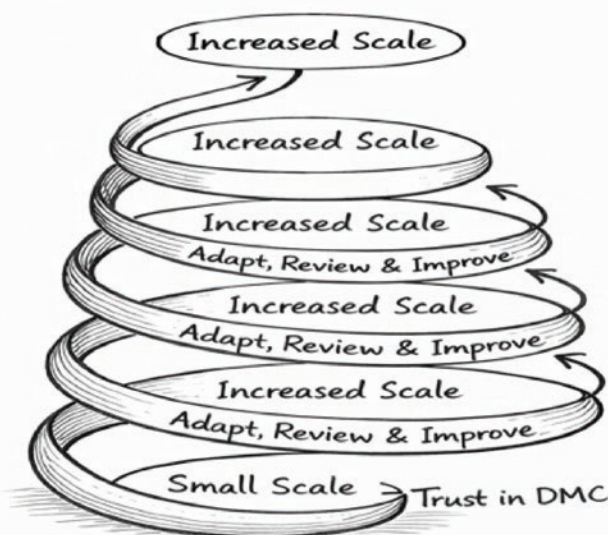


Figure 3. T3's visualization of DMC integration (as a spiral)

These metaphors together reveal that all participants share a vision of DMC integration as progressive and scaffolded, yet they vary in emphasis. T1's and T3's metaphors both stress gradualism and foundation, but T2's metaphor underscores contextual fitness and the risk of mismatch, highlighting an implicit concern for maintaining academic rigor within multimodality. T1 views the lecturer as an implementer of standards, T2 as a critical selector, and T3 as a reflective practitioner.

Structural Trilemma: Institutional Constraints, Pedagogical Integrity, Engagement-Rigor Tension

All participants identified a recurring tension among three competing demands, which collectively formed a structural trilemma explaining why DMC remains peripheral despite acknowledged benefits.

Institutional Constraints

Participants reported systemic barriers that limited DMC implementation, even when pedagogically desired. Firstly, all identified assessment misalignment as the primary barrier. T1 explained:

It's illogical to teach digital skills but have paper-based final exams... graded by external examiners who have no rubric for multimodal work... It feels irresponsible...

T2 added:

Students ask me: "Will this multimodal project help my final grade?" I must be honest: "No, your grade depends entirely on your written exam". They lose motivation immediately... The biggest barrier's the examination system with centralized paper tests.

This washback effect incentivizes prioritizing exam-oriented skills over DMC experimentation. Secondly, infrastructure deficits compounded challenges. Infrastructure gaps were particularly acute in public universities. T1 described:

Our classrooms have projectors, but the Wi-Fi is unreliable. Students can't upload videos during class. Some don't have laptops; they work on phones.

T3 contrasted her current public university experience with private university training:

In the private university, every classroom had high-speed internet, editing software, even cameras that students could borrow. Here, I'm lucky if the projector works.

Meanwhile T2 who has been working at a private university did not mention connectivity issues, highlighting public-private equity gaps.

Finally, absence of official frameworks compounded uncertainty. T2 stated:

There's no guidance from the Ministry or our university about how to integrate DMC, how to assess it, what weight it should have. We're inventing everything from scratch.

Accordingly, T1 uniquely emphasized lack of pedagogical frameworks: "No official textbook or framework....easily becomes fragmented", reflecting her cultural preference for centralized curricular guidance.

Pedagogical Integrity

Participants worried that DMC might erode core academic writing skills if implemented without careful scaffolding. T1 expressed:

The digital tools' convenience makes many students lazy. They just copy from available sources instead of thinking for themselves. That's why I go back to using paper-based writing.

She emphasized that this undermined the pedagogical goal of developing independent thought and authentic voice. Accordingly, T3 located the principal obstacle not in infrastructure or resources, but in a deeper definitional contestation over what legitimately constitutes "writing skills":

Digital technologies may distract from learners' core writing skills and reflect competing views of what counts as writing... between traditional emphases on grammar and accuracy and newer priorities of idea presentation and meaning-making...

Therefore, T3 elaborated on the equity and validity concerns:

Students will ask: "Are you testing my digital skills or writing skills?"

Moreover, T2 leveraging her background in multimedia design expressed concern that DMC might prioritize visual polish over substantive argumentative development:

I'm afraid that DMC focuses too much on design... it distracts from learners' core writing skills... If it's a multimodal product, the text portion must be very restrained... otherwise it's just decorative images for fun, and if we're still assessing the writing part, then it's not really DMC.

This concern reflected her “less is more” design philosophy, which created a tension that authentic DMC requires minimal text, but academic writing assessment demands substantial, logically developed prose.

Engagement-Rigor Tension

Despite acknowledging students' digital fluency and the motivational benefits of DMC, participants described a recurring tension between heightened engagement and the maintenance of academic rigor in writing instruction. T3 observed that digital multimodal activities generate substantial interest:

Students have a strong passion for using technology... They know how to use many tools... digital skills complement traditional writing, making lessons more lively.

She also highlighted the future benefits for students in real life that motivate them a lot:

Workplaces prioritize digital skills... Requiring pure paper writing may seem impractical to students.

Notably, both T1 and T3 emphasized students' technological readiness. T1 confirmed:

Students today have strong digital skills and learn quickly...

Moreover, T2 highlighted DMC's cognitive benefits:

The benefit's increased interest, helping students remember ideas longer (internalize) through drawing maps, decorating, and combining many data types instead of just using written text.

T3 similarly noted that visual and auditory modes provided alternative expressive pathways for students with limited linguistic proficiency, reducing frustration and encouraging participation:

Images and sounds make it easier for students to express ideas than words alone.

However, this enthusiasm was tempered by concerns about academic rigor. T2 cautioned:

DMC is suitable for lower-level learners, but at advanced levels it may diverge from academic writing, where I prioritize logical thinking and accurate language.

T3 also echoed this tension:

Worried about skill transfer to writing results may fluctuate when DMC occupies too much time.

These observations reveal a fundamental paradox that while DMC demonstrably increases motivation and participation, participants remained uncertain whether technological engagement yields sustainable improvements in core academic writing competencies.

Discussion

Prior DMC research has documented a spectrum of teacher positionings, ranging from enthusiastic advocacy to cautious skepticism, often foregrounding perceived affordances alongside concerns about skill erosion and assessment challenges (Jiang et al., 2020; Zhang & Peng, 2025). The present findings suggest that, in these three cases, lecturers' stances are best understood as situated conceptualizations shaped by assessment regimes, available resources, and professional judgements about what counts as responsible writing instruction. These observations are offered as case-grounded interpretations rather than as generalizations about Vietnamese EFL writing as a whole.

DMC as Supplementary: A Workable Theory of Practice under Constraint

Across the three cases, DMC was positioned as supplementary rather than as a replacement for print-based academic writing. This positioning is consistent with scholarship that argues for integrative rather than dichotomous relationships between multimodal and traditional composing (Hafner & Ho, 2020). From a teacher-cognition perspective, it may be read as a workable theory of practice shaped by professional biographies, classroom realities, and accountability pressures (Borg, 2003, 2015). Statements such as “DMC is an enhancement, not a foundation” and “the final product is always a written essay” suggest that these participants were calibrating innovation to what they regarded as pedagogically responsible within their own contexts.

From an ecological perspective, the lecturers appeared to manage risk by assigning DMC supportive roles, such as pre-writing or idea visualization, while protecting print literacy as the examinable core, since the assessment systems and infrastructure they described did not yet legitimize multimodal work as assessable academic writing (Warschauer, 2003). Their accounts of assessment misalignment, particularly paper-based final exams, resonate with washback evidence showing that high-stakes testing keeps writing instruction print-centric, timed, and accuracy-focused (Nguyen, 2025). In these cases, then, DMC's marginal status is better interpreted not as simple resistance to innovation but as a locally rational response to systemic incentives and constraints (Tan & Matsuda, 2020). The pre-interview DMC examples may also have shaped how participants articulated this supplementary positioning, a possibility revisited in the limitations.

Taken together, the three metaphors show how lecturers justify DMC's supplementary status through distinct logics of sequencing, contextual fit, and adaptation within their institutional contexts.

Staircase: Sequencing as a Condition of Legitimacy

The staircase metaphor frames DMC integration as staged progression anchored by a “foundation”, such as an official framework, and by incrementally increasing task complexity. Through Borg's (2015) lens, the metaphor may reflect T1's long experience working within centralized curriculum expectations and her preference for institutionally validated sequencing. It also

suggests that, in her reasoning, linguistic control remains a prerequisite for multimodal design, not because multimodality is dismissed, but because writing courses are expected to secure transferable academic argumentation. In this sense, the metaphor resonates with Jiang and Ren's (2021) discussion of print-centrism in examination-oriented contexts, while remaining a case-based interpretation rather than evidence that modes are inherently hierarchized in the same way across settings.

Her account likewise reflects ecological caution: sustainable adoption may depend on the parallel development of frameworks, training, and infrastructure rather than on technology availability alone (Warschauer, 2003).

Evening Gown versus Swimsuit: Context-Appropriate Selection as the Core Principle

This dual metaphor frames the central issue as contextual appropriateness rather than technological enthusiasm. In these data, T2's multimedia design background appears to sharpen her sensitivity to an aesthetic-functional tension: multimodal richness can attract attention and support accessibility, yet it may also be viewed as misaligned with genres valued in print-centric assessment systems. From a social semiotic perspective, this does not establish that visual modes are merely decorative; rather, it shows how local assessment cultures may lead a lecturer to interpret them in that way (Kress, 2010). The metaphor is analytically useful because it captures how multimodality is being re-read through the expectations of academic writing, rather than because it settles the theoretical status of multimodal meaning-making. This interpretation aligns with research showing that examination-driven environments can encourage teachers to treat multimodal elements as supplementary rather than epistemic resources (Jiang et al., 2020; Zhang & Peng, 2025).

Spiral: Iterative Refinement under Ecological Constraints

The spiral metaphor conceptualizes integration as repeated cycles of implementation and refinement. This pattern is broadly consistent with Borg's account of teacher cognition as dynamic and responsive to practice, particularly for earlier-career lecturers whose beliefs are still being consolidated through classroom experience (Borg, 2003, 2015). It also resonates with Kress's emphasis on design as iterative orchestration rather than one-off performance (Kress, 2010). In the present case, the metaphor suggests a willingness to experiment while remaining responsive to resource variability and pedagogical uncertainty. It may therefore be read as a case-based expression of adaptive reasoning under constrained conditions rather than as a generalized developmental pathway for DMC integration.

In conclusion, these metaphors do not simply reflect personal taste. Rather, they encode three complementary integration logics: sequencing, context-appropriate selection, and iterative adaptation which collectively explain why DMC is positioned as supplementary under current institutional conditions. In this sense, these metaphors do what Cao and Mao (2025) argue metaphors can do that they render visible the tacit cognitive architecture beneath teachers' "opinions".

The Structural Trilemma: Why DMC Remains "Supplementary" under Institutional Accountability

Across the three cases, what may be described as a structural trilemma emerged from the interaction of institutional constraints, pedagogical integrity concerns, and engagement-rigor tension. In this article, the trilemma is offered as an interpretive construct derived from these cases rather than as a robustly established explanatory model for Vietnamese EFL writing more broadly. Institutional constraints included assessment misalignment and infrastructure limitations; pedagogical integrity concerns centered on fears of skill erosion, over-reliance

on available sources, and questions of validity; and engagement-rigor tension was expressed through the perceived gap between motivation or relevance and demonstrable academic writing development. The usefulness of the construct lies in showing how these pressures can reinforce one another within the participants' reasoning.

Theoretically, the trilemma reflects systemic misalignment: beliefs become protective when accountability standards are at stake (Borg, 2015), multimodal orchestration lacks institutional recognition as assessable writing (Kress, 2010), and physical, human, and social resources are insufficiently aligned to sustain DMC as a core instructional component (Warschauer, 2003). These links should be read as analytic inferences from the present cases rather than as claims of system-wide causality.

The engagement-rigor paradox is particularly instructive. Lecturers describe strong motivational benefits and practical relevance yet remain uncertain whether engagement reliably converts into measurable improvement in advanced academic writing. This tension maps onto DMC teacher-belief research documenting concerns about skill erosion and superficial integration when DMC is framed as unassessed or decorative (Jiang et al., 2020; Zhang & Peng, 2025). Moreover, it is structurally reinforced by washback: when outcomes are evaluated through print-centric exams, the most rational pedagogical investment remains print-based writing development (Nguyen, 2025).

The study also illustrates how teachers' metaphors may reveal tensions not only between pedagogical innovation and institutional constraints but also between theoretical understandings of multimodality and locally embedded beliefs about what counts as legitimate academic writing.

Implications

The implications below are framed as provisional responses to the categories and tensions identified across these three cases. They are offered as cautious, context-sensitive directions for settings with comparable assessment cultures, institutional arrangements, and material conditions, rather than as system-level prescriptions.

First, assessment alignment appears to be the most salient issue in the present cases. The lecturers' supplementary positioning of DMC suggests that, without institutional criteria recognizing multimodal orchestration as part of writing competence, DMC is likely to remain peripheral where high-stakes assessment continues to privilege print-centric, timed, and accuracy-focused writing (Nguyen, 2025; Zhang & Peng, 2025). Where programs have sufficient curricular and infrastructural flexibility, small program-level pilots could test whether modest rubric adjustments or dual-format assignments make DMC more instructionally viable without displacing core academic-writing expectations (Kress, 2010; Yu et al., 2024). Such pilots should examine not only student engagement but also the transparency, reliability, and fairness of judgments about written and digital multimodal meaning-making.

Second, because lecturers evaluated DMC primarily through concerns about validity, integrity, and genre fit, professional development in comparable settings may be more useful when it focuses on orchestration and genre reasoning rather than on tool skills alone. Support may be most effective when it helps teachers judge when DMC is appropriate, how it can be scaffolded, and how rhetorical choices can be assessed in relation to task purposes and genre expectations (Kress, 2010; Le et al., 2025; Tour & Barnes, 2022).

Third, metaphor elicitation may be useful in teacher education as a diagnostic and reflective tool (Borg, 2015; Cao & Mao, 2025; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In these cases, the metaphors condensed lecturers' assumptions about sequencing, appropriateness, and adaptation, making otherwise tacit reasoning available for discussion. Used alongside, not instead of opportunities

to design, trial, and evaluate DMC tasks, metaphor elicitation may help teacher educators identify the assumptions that professional learning needs to address before new multimodal tasks or assessment reforms are introduced.

Fourth, infrastructure equity should be treated as a fairness and validity issue. In the present study, unequal access to connectivity and devices shaped what lecturers considered pedagogically feasible. For comparable contexts, this implies that attempts to expand DMC should examine infrastructural disparities not simply as logistical inconvenience but as a condition affecting the credibility and fairness of digital multimodal assessment (Nhung et al., 2025; Warschauer, 2003). Programs should therefore consider access audits, institutionally provided resources, and equivalent pathways for students whose device or connectivity access differs.

In brief, these implications suggest that more substantive DMC integration is unlikely to arise from teacher enthusiasm or technological provision alone. It requires alignment among assessment criteria, genre-sensitive professional learning, reflection on teachers' practical reasoning, and equitable material conditions. In similar settings, DMC is therefore best approached as an institutional design challenge rather than as an individual teacher-adoption decision.

Conclusion

This study contributes an empirically grounded account of how three Vietnamese EFL writing lecturers conceptualized DMC within a policy-assessment ecology that simultaneously mandates digital competence and stabilizes print-centric definitions of academic writing. Rather than treating lecturers' positions as simple endorsement or resistance, the findings suggest that, in these cases, DMC was positioned as supplementary because the participants reasoned through what is described here as an emergent structural trilemma: assessment misalignment, pedagogical integrity concerns, and engagement-rigor tensions jointly delimited what could be enacted and justified in their writing classrooms (Borg, 2015; Kress, 2010; Warschauer, 2003). The study's contribution is therefore not to offer a definitive explanation for Vietnamese EFL writing as a whole, but to propose a tentative analytic lens for understanding why DMC adoption may stagnate even where its benefits are recognized. Broader multi-site research is needed before stronger system-level claims can be made.

Methodologically, the study illustrates how metaphor elicitation can extend belief research by accessing tacit integration logics that are not easily captured through attitude measures alone. The metaphors "Staircase", "Evening Gown versus Swimsuit", and "Spiral" function here as case-based cognitive models foregrounding sequencing and prerequisites, genre-fit and aesthetic-functional tension, and iterative adaptation under resource variability. In this sense, metaphor analysis offers a tractable way to connect individual cognition, modal affordances, and institutional ecologies, while remaining appropriately scaled to a small-case qualitative design (Cao & Mao, 2025; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the pre-interview DMC examples were selected for neutrality, their presentation immediately before metaphor elicitation may have exerted a priming effect on how participants subsequently articulated their metaphors about DMC integration. Some metaphorical expressions may therefore reflect framings that were co-constructed in the interview situation rather than entirely pre-existing cognitive schemas. Future studies might administer the metaphor task before any stimulus exposure, or use a time-delay design, to isolate dispositional from stimulus-induced cognition more clearly. This caution is also important for interpreting the discussion above: the metaphors are treated here as situated accounts shaped by both prior beliefs and the interview context, rather than as unmediated access to stable inner cognition. Second, the data are derived primarily from interviews and elicited metaphors (in-interview sketches and post-interview revised sketches);

future studies should triangulate stated beliefs with classroom observation, student artefacts, and assessment documents to examine belief-practice alignment more directly. Third, although participants reviewed both the researcher's interpretations and the English translations of selected Vietnamese excerpts, cross-language qualitative analysis inevitably involves some degree of interpretive mediation. Future studies may strengthen linguistic validation further through independent back-translation or additional bilingual review. Fourth, the study is based on three lecturers from universities in Ho Chi Minh City; although the sample includes both public and private sectors, it cannot capture the full geographical and infrastructural diversity of Vietnamese higher education. Future research could examine whether similar tensions recur across institutions and regions, trace how metaphors shift longitudinally under professional development and assessment reform, and prototype DMC assessment criteria to explore whether curriculum-assessment alignment can reposition DMC from peripheral enrichment to accountable composing practice (Yu et al., 2024).

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