

A Multimodal Social Semiotic Approach to TESOL Educator Professional Development

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Abstract

This empirical study presents a pioneering professional development intervention aimed at enhancing the online teaching skills of TESOL educators. The study responds to the need for effective online TESOL methodologies (e.g., Hubbard, 2013; Hubbard & Levy, 2006), catalysed by the shift to remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The intervention, originally planned as face-to-face workshops, was shown to be highly adaptable, reflecting real-world changes to teaching environments, and was reworked to be delivered online to a cohort of TESOL educators from around the world. The intervention focused on helping educators apply the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2001) to their online teaching but was designed, developed, and delivered through a multimodal social semiotic lens (e.g., Kress, 2010). The intervention's design incorporated elements of the ADDIE model (Analyse, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) (e.g., Gustafson & Branch, 2002), emphasising the integration of theory and practice in online TESOL contexts. Participants engaged with tasks designed to promote higher-order thinking and understanding of the CoI's teaching, social, and cognitive presences, and was enhanced through the use of various semiotic resources.

Keywords: Social Semiotics, Multimodality, TESOL, Teacher Training, Online teaching and learning, Online learning environments, Learning management system, Community of Inquiry

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Introduction

Multimodal social semiotic resources such as video, text, icons and emoji, and layout play a pivotal role in creating meaningful interactions in Online Learning Environments (OLEs). This paper explores the impact of these semiotic resources on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) instructors' online teaching by presenting a case study that describes a professional development intervention. The intervention was designed to equip TESOL instructors with the necessary skills and confidence to utilise semiotic resources to establish and maintain social, cognitive, and teaching presence in their OLEs. These presences form the constituent parts of Garrison et al.'s (2001) Community of Inquiry (CoI). The CoI is widely used to understand and evaluate online teaching and learning (Jan et al., 2019; Stenbom, 2018). To understand the effectiveness of the approach used in the intervention, participants ($N = 16$) responded to a modified CoI survey instrument (Arbaugh et al., 2008) and the OLEs of a sample of participants ($n = 7$) were examined, both before and after the intervention, using the Multimodal Community of Inquiry approach (Lumsden, 2022; Lumsden et al., 2024).

Rationale

Instructors often struggle to effectively utilise semiotic resources in their online teaching. This can be attributed, in part, to limited institutional support in providing teachers with training and resources to confidently integrate semiotic resources into their OLEs (e.g., Bolliger et al., 2014). Thus, the rationale for the professional development intervention described here was twofold. First, professional development is central to TESOL teacher education, where teachers are expected to constantly reflect on and enhance their teaching practices (e.g., Farrell, 2007). Additionally, there is a significant gap in TESOL teacher training programs. Trainee teachers often receive little in the way of preparation for teaching online (Hubbard, 2021), and this has only become more apparent as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Methodology

The CoI Framework (Garrison et al., 2001) is a widely used model for understanding and evaluating online teaching and learning (Stenbom, 2018). The framework posits that successful online learning experiences are based on three core presences:

1. Teaching presence, which involves the instructor's role in guiding students through clear instructions, discussions, feedback, and technical support.

2. Social presence, the establishment of a sense of community among participants, where emotions (affect), open communication, and group cohesion foster a supportive learning experience; and
3. Cognitive presence, which focuses on learners' ability to construct meaning through sustained reflection and discourse, engaging in critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration.

The CoI Framework highlights the interconnectedness of its three presences, stressing the need to consider all three for effective online learning design. This paper introduces an innovation by applying multimodal social semiotics to online teaching, expanding beyond the traditional focus on written and spoken language in CoI research. This new approach, called The Multimodal Community of Inquiry (Lumsden, 2022; Lumsden et al., 2024), explores the impact of various semiotic resources on establishing a CoI.

Multimodal social semiotics is an approach to examining communication with the understanding that communication can be affected through the use of socio-culturally and contextually defined semiotic resources (Kress, 2010). Traditionally, written and spoken language are both the most studied and used semiotic resources, but others have utility in online language teacher training. For example, images can be used to activate students' schema before introducing new vocabulary, and videos of classroom techniques are also common resources in TESOL instructors' OLEs.

Analysing the use of semiotic resources in TESOL instructors' OLEs thus allows researchers to identify those resources that have the potential to help establish and maintain the CoI presences (in addition to the heavy lifting done by written and spoken language) and informs the kind of professional development that addresses the gap in institutional support instructors experience.

The professional development intervention described here forms part of a larger, mixed-methods study conducted across three universities in Australia and South Korea where participants taught in postgraduate-level English language teacher training programs. In addition to quantitative data gathered through a modified CoI survey, a "survey of practice" approach was used incorporating semi-structured interviews with TESOL instructors and a content analysis of their OLEs before and after the intervention. The intervention was guided by the ADDIE model (e.g., Boyman et al., 2020) to systematically develop and deliver a four-hour asynchronous professional development module online built on the Notion platform (Notion Inc., 2024). Notion was chosen as the learning management system (LMS) for its flexibility in presenting content, user-friendly interface, and ability to embed various multimedia elements.

The intervention adopted a linear structure with four parts. Each part focused on one of the CoI presences and identifying use cases for different

social semiotic resources in supporting TESOL teacher training. The final part of the intervention asked instructors to develop and document a goal for implementing what they had learned from the professional development module into their own OLEs.

Results

Analysis of the data gathered using the CoI survey instrument and from the survey of practice found that:

1. Instructor-participant's understanding of the CoI Framework increased, and they could identify how individual semiotic resources in their OLE might contribute to social, cognitive, and teaching presence.
2. Instructor-participants were able to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals for incorporating content from the intervention into their own OLEs.
3. There was a notable increase in the frequency of instructor-created video observed in instructor-participants' OLEs after the intervention, and
4. Instructor-participants could more confidently and accurately reflect on elements of user interface and user experience (UI/UX), characterised as "layout", when describing their OLEs.

Discussion

The intervention's use of video is particularly relevant given the increasing reliance on video in digital education. Videos facilitate multifaceted engagement with content and increase a teacher's presence in an OLE. In post-intervention interviews, participants reported that videos, especially those featuring them speaking to the camera, fostered a sense of community and intimacy. Participants' students, who also responded to a CoI survey, identified video as the most influential semiotic resource for establishing a sense of connectedness (social presence) online. Videos allow for nuances of tone, facial expressions, and body language, conveying empathy and establishing rapport—key components of effective teaching and crucial for helping students negotiate meaning, which is often diluted in text-based online interactions.

The intervention also underscored the importance of layout in OLEs. Instructor-participants reported that clear, consistent layouts helped minimize cognitive overload, supporting focused learning by reducing extrinsic information often associated with poorly organized digital content.

The integration of semiotic resources in the intervention revealed that while they are highly beneficial, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful incorporation into course design. This integration requires a deep understanding of the course content, the needs of the learners, and mastery of the affordances of the LMS. Therefore, the intervention focused not only on the use of semiotic resources but also on developing instructor-participants' competencies in designing and delivering content that maximises their potential.

Conclusion

The findings from this study affirmed the effectiveness of a professional development intervention focused on enhancing the use of semiotic resources in online TESOL. By concentrating on strategic elements such as layout, icons and emoji, and particularly video, the intervention significantly improved the participants' capacity to design engaging and pedagogically robust online learning experiences for their students. Further research should explore the long-term impacts of such interventions and consider their applicability across different disciplines and educational contexts, potentially contributing to the development of online teaching pedagogy.

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