

Learning Multiliteracies: Lessons as a TESOL Teacher Educator

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Summary: A TESOL teacher educator shares her experience learning about multiliteracies and Learning by Design as part of her Fulbright grant experience, which involved coordinating a virtual exchange project. Learn about this flexible pedagogy and its value in creating modern, student-centered classrooms which emphasize intercultural communication. The author shares how the experience of learning multiliteracies helped her to think more critically about the role of the language teacher and teacher educator in transformative learning.

Keywords: multiliteracies, Learning by Design, virtual exchange, teacher training, intercultural communication

Introduction

My first exposure to the term multiliteracies was in the process of designing a Fulbright grant application. A university in Spain had received my proposal to use grant time as an opportunity to collaboratively design teacher-education materials which would be applied and used with students in both of our programs. My proposal was to develop a pilot semester of a virtual exchange, an educational opportunity for sustained intercultural collaboration via online technology between our students from geographically distant locations and different cultural backgrounds towards a shared aim (e.g., Helm, 2024). In this case, the aim of the virtual exchange would challenge students working within international groups to co-design and enact live online lessons for adult English language students. I proposed creating a teacher-education collaboration which could continue over multiple years so we could collect longitudinal data on students' interpretation of shared content and virtual exchange in our teacher education classes.

My Spanish host faculty were receptive to the ideas I proposed during our first meeting to formalize the grant proposal, but their feedback was that I would need to ground the project in multiliteracies. Multiliteracies was the subject of a large grant and research working group at my soon-to-be host university. As this was my first encounter with the term multiliteracies, I left the meeting and promptly downloaded the New London Group's (NLG, 1996) seminal paper from the *Harvard Educational Review* which coined the term. From that starting point, I would begin my exploration of multiliteracies over the next two years.

Reading and working with multiliteracies informed the design of the virtual exchange project, which took part during

my grant and was a transformative learning opportunity for me. I discovered the value in this flexible pedagogy which has been and continues to be a rich area of study in international research literature and instructional practice, and is highly relevant for language education contexts (e.g., Paesani & Menke, 2023; Zapata, 2022). Ultimately, I believe that multiliteracies is useful for language educators across multiple contexts, as they prepare to engage with diverse classroom communities of language learners, engage in teacher education, and while approaching professional collaborations. Therefore, it is my hope to share some of what I learned in that process from my initial impressions of its academic literature to takeaways after the conclusion of the grant year.

Initial Reactions: What Is (and Isn't) Multiliteracies?

Multiliteracies is a broader definition of literacy coined by an international group of educators in response to the growing need for a more nuanced approach to literacy education, beyond the traditional definition of reading and writing printed form in a standard national language (NLG, 1996). Multiliteracies recognizes that meaning-making includes the intersection of students' diverse lifeworld differences and multimodal/multiform texts. Texts in this case do not refer only to written texts but can also include multiple modes/forms of communicating including speech, sounds, images, objects, space, the body, or a combination. Multiliteracies also refers to a reflexive pedagogy grounded in inclusivity which emphasizes agency in learning and uses critical engagement with texts as a basis for meaning-making and designing/re-designing. Analyzing the meaning of a text requires asking questions about what the text is about,

who is responsible for the text, how the text is structured, the physical and historical context of a text, and why or what the text is for (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023).

I will admit that I had mixed reactions during my initial exploration of multiliteracies based on the NLG (1996) article and Cope and Kalantzis' (2000) book. I agreed with the NLG (1996) argument on the why of multiliteracies, namely that contemporary literacy education should acknowledge and celebrate students' lifeworld diversity and that being well-versed in critical thinking as well as designing texts through multimodal/multiform transpositions prepares students for modern – and often virtual – interactions. This idea of multiliteracies embracing meaning-making at the intersection of student lifeworlds differences, whether these be material, embodied, and/or symbolic differences and multiple modes/forms of communication described by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) made sense to me. On the other hand, the concepts felt theoretical in my initial readings, at least until I read some extensions of the pedagogy of multiliteracies in Learning by Design (LbD) (e.g., Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Zapata, 2022). I appreciated Zapata's (2022) preface of her book which shared that her motivation to write it was a common reaction from educators to want more guidance on what to do next after her multiliteracies workshops. I was a bit relieved to learn that it was not uncommon to feel this way. LbD offered clarification for educators on how to put multiliteracies into practice using four knowledge processes (experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing and applying) and intended to move beyond argumentative dichotomies of didactic vs. authentic pedagogy towards one which reflexively offered tools to address student needs through this repertoire of knowledge processes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015).

As a TESOL educator, I drew some connections between my initial readings on multiliteracies and arguments made in classic Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature. For example, Firth and Wagner's (1997) recommendation that language education move beyond several problematic dichotomies like native vs. nonnative speakers and cognitive vs. sociocultural lenses, to instead use more participant-centric perspectives. I thought this classic article aligned with multiliteracies in theme and the timeframe in which it was published. I also remembered Swain and Deters' (2007) article illustrating the shift in SLA research towards the social nature of language learning, situated learning (language socialization and communities of practice frameworks), poststructuralism, and dialogism. I thought about how these shifts in SLA aligned with training in multiliteracies because the pedagogy can provide a wide lens with which to situate pedagogical choices, orienting these choices towards students' needs. Because multiliteracies covered a lot of ground, I found myself making a list in parallel of what is *NOT* multiliteracies, with the intention of clarifying the concepts for myself. An abbreviated list of things that

are *NOT* multiliteracies, inspired by Cope & Kalantzis (2024) is found below:

- Limited to one standardized/idealized version of reading and writing in a target language
- Discriminatory towards students' diverse lifeworlds
- Ignoring social justice issues
- Reliant on passive learning with teacher-fronted instruction
- Fearful of technology
- Emphasizing only individual intelligence/cognitive ability
- Intending to create uniform, compliant citizens

In general, multiliteracies is *NOT* an "Old narrowly textbound approach to literacy" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023, p. 29).

While I would never knowingly intend to implement this list above in a classroom (and hope others feel the same), having it written helped me to think critically about the choices I was making in teacher training and lesson design with my own groups of students. For example, was I creating sanitized lessons that were meant to teach language at a superficial cultural level? If I avoided tougher and sensitive issues like the immigrant experience in a classroom because of a desire to focus more time on teaching grammar and vocabulary, for instance, was I reducing broader learning opportunities for my students? My takeaways from the initial exploration of multiliteracies is that teaching with this philosophy means using authentic texts and creating lessons that do not shy away from emotions, that provoke critical thinking, implement technology thoughtfully, and offer students various creative ways to approach and respond to content.

Explaining and Applying Multiliteracies: Learning by Design and Virtual Exchange

After initial readings, the next step in my multiliteracies journey was to learn more about its application to classroom settings and design instructional materials for communicating this to teacher training courses. This was in preparation for a virtual exchange which tasked teachers in training with designing lessons for use in synchronous online teaching. I understood how multiliteracies invites educators to begin with backwards design, the identification of learning objectives first before deciding on what the evidence of these learning objectives will be and concluding with the plan for the instructional experiences that support these goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Therefore, student teachers needed to grasp backwards design. The knowledge processes in Learning by Design (LbD) (Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Zapata, 2022) were helpful guides for considering various instructional experiences to guide learners. Reflecting on the knowledge processes in LbD, *experiencing, con-*

conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying represented steps that can be taken to guide students through lessons. I appreciated the helpful diagram which shared the knowledge processes as Kalantzis and Cope (2010) described them, also available in the visual overview of their website, [New Learning Online](#). While there is no prescribed order to the knowledge processes in LbD, Zapata (2022) recommended following the listed order above, beginning with *experiencing* to anchor lessons in student belonging. Examples of one interpretation of the applying knowledge processes into learning experiences for a language classroom are shared below using the premise of designing a campaign around the environmental issue of single-use plastics.

- **Experiencing the known**

- Students brainstorm personal experiences with single-use plastics, plastic water bottles, shampoo bottles, disposable cups, etc. They consider the pros and cons of plastics in their experiences.

- **Experiencing the new**

- Students read and reflect on a pro-plastics campaign from the 1990s in the U.S. as well as read and reflect on an anti-plastic campaign to stop ocean pollution. The point of these readings is to understand the main ideas and overall messages delivered.

- **Conceptualizing by naming**

- Students consider how the messages of both campaigns are delivered, their features present in the combination of text and images.

- **Conceptualizing with theory**

- Students note the similarities and differences between the campaigns, consider the concepts in the structure of the campaigns (e.g. slogans, arguments, use of statistics, etc.)

- **Analyzing functionally**

- Students focus on language (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) to consider the kind of meanings expressed by the text in these campaigns, how they are expressed, and the language that is needed to achieve this function.

- **Analyzing critically**

- Students explore the context of these campaigns: who created them, who funded them, when they were created, why they were created, if they are effective and why. They consider, what makes an effective campaign for this environmental issue?

- **Applying appropriately**

- In small groups, students create an updated print ad campaign to spread awareness of the impact of single-use plastics for the target audience of their local school context. Include a slogan and an image to amplify a desired emotional impact and promote action.

- **Applying creatively**

- In small groups, students convert the print ad into a short commercial to be shared with the local school community that addresses the impact of single-use plastics and is targeted towards the intended student audience to enact change in behaviors.

I collaborated with my colleagues on creating instructional materials for student teachers which were placed into online course shells across courses in my home (U.S.) and host institution in Spain. These materials included definitions, applications, examples, and multimodal reader-viewer activities (Torres & Toscano-Fuentes, 2025). A challenge with the goal of creating and implementing lessons in an online synchronous environment within my Fulbright project is that I knew my student teachers would be limited in time with their English language students. With this in mind, I invited them to consider the knowledge processes as options in their teacher toolkit rather than completing all of them as a required checklist.

After being presented with the introduction to multiliteracies and LbD content, I found that student teachers gravitated towards emphasizing multimodality as they collaboratively designed their lesson content during the virtual exchange. They applied interactive games through, for example, [Genially](#) to gamify their lessons. They considered how their language students would engage with each other to maintain interaction with the Zoom chat, microphones, polls, or shared Google Docs. I understood why, since the live online teaching space required creative applications of multimodal tools to increase student interactivity. Indeed, the emphasis on multimodality in multiliteracies aligns with principles within Universal Design for Learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). Additionally, in the lessons that student teachers designed during the virtual exchange, there was evidence of opportunities for language students to share their different lifeworld experiences.

Textual analysis was a concept that I noticed student teachers found more challenging to apply in live online settings. They presented texts in their lessons, but I noticed opportunities for in-depth analysis of the texts were not as common as interactive games related to comprehending the text. While there were other circumstances at play in live online lessons such as time constraints, this observation about the use of texts aligned with previous research indicating that teachers learning to work with multiliteracies can have difficulty understanding how to teach vocabulary and grammar through texts (Paesani, 2025). Understanding how to ground a lesson in authentic texts was something that took me some time too, and I recommend Paesani and Menke's (2023) book as well as its accompanying website [CARLA](#) as a helpful step-by-step guide with useful templates and examples on how to go about this process. While multiliteracies is adaptable, having examples to work from can be

helpful as a starting point when putting the pedagogy into practice.

I found the layer of virtual exchange helpful within my exploration of multiliteracies training because it allowed for a focused opportunity to engage in intercultural communication with international groups. Multiliteracies pedagogy has been used as a vehicle for intercultural language learning development with language teacher education (García-Barroso & Torres-Vélez, 2023). It is important for English language educators to develop and teach intercultural skills since language teaching naturally involves discussing the relationship between language and culture, often with students from different cultural backgrounds. One of the major purposes of virtual exchange is to grow participants' skills in intercultural communication (Helm, 2024). Applications of multiliteracies within virtual exchange for teacher training provide unique opportunities to examine growth in intercultural awareness during artefact co-creation.

Broadening Perspectives

Learning multiliteracies greatly impacted my perspective as a teacher trainer and researcher. One impact is that I have more deeply considered the themes of units I cover in my class and the texts we use to explore them. I understand that navigating sometimes tense emotions while learning how to express agreement and disagreement due to life-world differences in a classroom can be necessary for a more meaningful learning experience compared to lighter and more superficial themes often found in textbooks. Simply put, I have come to reframe how I approach lesson design. I ask myself questions about what multiliteracies is (and is *NOT*) as I consider the design of lessons for English language students which will be put into practice in synchronous online environments that I supervise while coordinating TESOL student teacher service-learning hours. I also consider multiliteracies as I lead teacher education courses.

A common thread in multiliteracies and its application to virtual exchange is transformative learning. Transformative learning “involves how to think critically about assumptions supporting one’s perspectives and to develop critical reflective judgement in discourse regarding one’s beliefs, values, feelings, and self-concepts” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 29). From its beginning, the NLG (1996) shared that a goal within multiliteracies has been to encourage personal transformation through the act of designing. Confronting emotions such as intercultural tension during groupwork and decision-making is an aspect of transformative learning in virtual exchange. Also, regardless of the presence of online interactions, the opportunity to set the stage for these experiences can be found in multiliteracies pedagogy.

If I aim to promote classroom scenarios that guide English language students and student teachers through transformative learning, I need to invite them to critically analyze

texts and apply language creatively. If I want to train teachers in multiliteracies pedagogy, I will need to authentically apply its principles to the coursework I design for them at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

When working in intercultural collaborations, or preparing students to do so, I also found the term lifeworlds particularly useful. Discussed in multiliteracies since the NLG (1996) paper, lifeworlds refers to an individual’s material, embodied, and symbolic differences. Material differences include socioeconomic status and access to resources. Embodied differences include age, biological sex and differences of ability. Symbolic differences include socialized gender, ethnicity, and language. The combination of the material, embodied, and symbolic differences is a personal lens through which multimodal/multiform communication is experienced. Multiliteracies does not deemphasize differences that individuals bring to a collaborative space. Rather, understanding that lifeworld differences impact how anyone approaches a text helps to frame differences of opinion and experience when approaching conversations about texts, pedagogy, and collaboration. Something as simple as saying, “Hey, this is a lifeworld difference” during a disagreement in a collaboration reminds the others in a conversation to stop, reflect, and approach the conversation with curiosity of learning rather than judgement. Conversation around lifeworlds also encourages the type of critical self-reflection which is associated with transformative learning.

Takeaways from the Multiliteracies Experience

As an educator, I know that I will always continue learning, and this is something I enjoy about the profession. I approached this reflective piece from the perspective of someone who is still in the early years of working with multiliteracies. I am grateful for the opportunity I was provided to take an initial dive into this area of study, and I feel the impact that it has had on my mindset as a teacher educator and learning designer (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). Going back to the beginning of this experience, the concepts in multiliteracies are not necessarily new. Indeed, the NLG recognized that multiliteracies represented, “a coming together of ideas developed before and since” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 2). It’s the coming together of these ideas in multiliteracies which provides a framework to approach teaching from a flexible, authentic, and student-centered way, encouraging transformative learning in designing and re-designing texts. With Learning by Design, there are pedagogical tools in knowledge processes to work with students in ways that will invite them to critically think and become critical consumers/creators of texts in various modalities. Knowing that the traditional definition of literacy – reading and writing in a print version of a standardized national language - is no longer sufficient, multiliteracies can help

students to understand that literacy is multifaceted and includes – among other things - technology literacy.

I found multiliteracies as a useful tool for self-reflection in my identity as an educator. A list of what is NOT multiliteracies helped me to critically evaluate materials, texts, and lessons I encountered in a systematic way. I also used the term lifeworlds to frame conversations in collaboration, especially when approaching creative differences and negotiating towards mutually beneficial outcomes. I found that to teach multiliteracies authentically requires constant self-reflection about my own lifeworld and how this impacts my approaches to teaching while remaining flexible to understanding how others' lifeworlds impact their own pedagogical decisions.

There are several reasons to explore multiliteracies and consider its application. First, the broad scope provides a flexible pedagogy to work from. Additionally, using the knowledge processes with authentic texts is a way to cus-

tomize teaching to suit students' needs and curiosities. There are so many opportunities for creativity within multiliteracies pedagogy, particularly in a classroom which embraces lifeworld differences and multimodal/multiform expression in design. Finally, multiliteracies encourages personal growth, in both students and educators, through reflective engagement which supports transformational learning (Lee, 2025; Zapata, 2022).

I would recommend anyone interested in exploring multiliteracies to start one step at a time. Design one lesson unit with one text you think is great for your students like a poem, a print ad, or a commercial. Work through the knowledge processes with your students. Reflect on and evaluate how it went. Get student feedback. Refine and improve the lessons for next time. I hope that reading about this experience has provided some encouragement to explore multiliteracies in your own educational context.

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