

Photo essays: multimodal competence in the SHL classroom

Key-words: *Spanish for Heritage Learners; multimodal composing; multiliteracies; photo essays*

Abstract

Multiliteracy approaches to language and cultural learning have become one of the central frameworks for Spanish as Heritage Language (SHL) Education as they provide multiple advantages to heritage learners: development of semiotic and rhetorical abilities (Smith et al., 2017; Zapata & Lacorte, 2018); advancement of critical and cultural awareness (Samaniego & Warner 2016; Martínez & San Martín, 2018) and increase of self-esteem and agency (Parra 2021, Parra et al. 2018).

Contributing to the growing research on SHL learners' multimodal competence, this study analyzes the production of photo-essays focused personal narratives (Heng 2020), to explain their semiotic choices and creative adaptations of this multimodal ensemble.

SHL students enrolled in an intermediate-level college course for Heritage Spanish carried out the four stages of "Learning by Design" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009; Miller et al., 2012) to create photo-essays describing personal experiences. The project allowed them to revise and integrate various semiotic resources and reflect on the options offered by the verbal and visual modes in their production of meaning.

Six photo-essays were analyzed adopting the Systemic Functional Approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) framework to understand how students deployed semiotic resources and created intermodal relations in ideational, interpersonal, and textual levels. The analysis also includes six reflective essays in which learners critically analyzed their own individual projects.

Initial findings show that learners mainly deployed concurrence and complementarity relations between verbal and visual components while they balanced the representation of processes and participants both in the written and visual modes. In addition, they relayed on visual resources to amplify interpersonal meanings when expanding information on the themes of migration, education, work, and interactions on social and private spaces. A thematic analysis of their reflective essays highlights affordances the project provided students as they engaged not only as producers but as analytical interpreters of multimodal discourse.

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