Negotiating Identity through Multimodal Meaning Making: Investigation of Investment, Imagination and Choice in a Virtual Saudi EFL Context

Noura Ali Alghamdi
English Language Institute
University of Jeddah
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Email: naalghmadi@uj.edu.sa

Received: 10/23/2022 Accepted: 01/16/2023 Published: 01/20/2023

Abstract
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions worldwide were forced to rely on online platforms, whereby teaching was remotely undertaken. Although these platforms were gradually replaced by or supported with traditional, face-to-face methods as the pandemic came under control, this reliance on online platforms had a deep impact on different aspects of education in general and language education in specific. Examination of learners’ engagement with literacy and the impact of learners’ experiences on their identity construction represent some of the growing research interests in language education. The present study adopts a qualitative case-study approach, using interview, artefact collection, student-authored reflections and observational fieldnotes. The study aims to explore the literacy practices and identity construction and negotiation that underlies how a first-year female undergraduate engages with individual and group presentations in a mixed-level, English as a foreign language (EFL) course at a Saudi university. The study pays special attention to how the learner constructs and negotiates her identity in relation to multimodal meaning making which helps her to move beyond the limitations imposed by weak linguistic skills to negotiate more powerful identity positions associated with her investment in the event and the imagined community she aspires to join. The findings highlight the need to reconsider how learners’ multimodal meaning making in language classes should be approached and assessed and how it can empower language learners and encourage them to adopt more powerful identity positions to sustain their language learning trajectories.

Key Words: English as a foreign language, identity construction, literacy practices, multimodal meaning making, online classes, oral presentations, qualitative case study, Saudi university

Introduction

Despite being a health crisis first and foremost, the impact of COVID 19 on all aspects of our lives cannot be denied. This is especially evident in education with the increasing reliance on online platforms for teaching and learning. Millions of schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions have been globally forced to close and rely on online teaching platforms at the early days of the pandemic and many educational institutions continue to use online platforms to substitute or support traditional, face-to-face teaching platforms. In Saudi Arabia, the situation was not different. Various means of synchronous and asynchronous distance-learning methods were used to combat the negative impact of the pandemic on education. In relation to Saudi universities, in specific, Blackboard® was used as the primary learning management system at the early days of the pandemic and continues to be used to teach many courses either solely by itself or in combination with on-campus classes. This increasing reliance on using online platforms for teaching in tertiary education has been a source of interest for scholarly research in education.

Prior to the pandemic, language research has looked at technology as a tool that supports learners’ access to language education (Sheera, 2020). Technology was often described as the means through which language instruction can be enhanced in relation to delivery and assessment (Gordon, 2014). Because of the pandemic, however, investigation of the use of technology as a necessary and emergent solution for the absence or limited access to traditional modes of learning examined a wide range of issues. These include common challenges and obstacles (e.g., Aljuaid, 2021), teachers’ and learners’ perspectives (e.g, Almekhlafy, 2020; Bin Mahboob, 2022; Sheera, Yadav, Fadl Allah & Abdin., 2022) and benefits of e-learning (e.g., Albatti, 2022). Despite the importance of these issues, there is, however, a clear gap in the literature regarding in-depth exploration of learners’ experiences while engaging with online learning during the pandemic. Learners’ voices and identity construction and negotiation have been particularly missing from scholarly research within the Saudi context. This study addresses this gap by investigating how a first-year female undergraduate draws on specific literacy practices and manages to construct and negotiate her identity while engaging with oral presentations in an online EFL course at a Saudi university.

Background

Within tertiary education at Saudi universities, compulsory courses teaching English to first-year students are highly prioritized. First, they are essential for students’ grades which impact their future specialization after finishing their first year. In addition, attention to these EFL courses reflects the increasing number of departments which rely on English as the main medium of education, especially for science and technology tracks, such as medicine, engineering and computer sciences. As these EFL courses are usually given to classes with mixed levels of language proficiency, using English to address academic tasks can represent considerable challenges for many learners.

This case study focuses on one of these learners and seeks to answer two research questions:

1. Which literacy practices does the participant in this study draw on while participating in this literacy event?
2. What are the identity positions that this participant claims and negotiates in this literacy event?
Theoretical Framework

Identity Construction among Language Learners

This study builds on a social understanding of literacy in which engagement with reading and writing can only be understood and appreciated as a situated and contextualized practice (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Street, 1993). Literacy can be understood through looking at literacy events and literacy practices. Literacy events refer to “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretative processes” (Heath, 1983, p. 50). Literacy practices refer to “the general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives” (Barton & Hamilton, 2005, p. 7). Examination of literacy practices is significant to understand learners’ identity positions. Barton and Hamilton (1998) note that asserting and constructing identity represent some of the purposes of engaging with specific literacy practices over others. Looking at identity as “the filter through which we present ourselves to the world” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 119), examination of how learners engage with literacy can inform our understanding of their identity construction. In this case study, the oral presentations represent the literacy event under investigation. This literacy event is observed and investigated to bring to light the literacy practices that the participant draws on and to examine the identity positions the participant claims and negotiates as she works on each of these presentations.

The study adopts a post-structuralist approach to identity which looks at language learning as a socially situated practice. It refers to “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p. 4). Identity, therefore, is not a fixed thing, but rather changing. Two analytic concepts are essential to examine identity in this approach: investment and imagined communities. The construct of investment provides “a way to understand learners’ variable desires to engage in social interaction and community practices.” (Norton, 2013, p. 6). The concept of imagined communities refers to “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (Norton, 2013, p. 8). These concepts offer significant insights into understanding language learners’ engagement with literacy and their identity construction as their learning trajectories are significantly shaped by the extent to which learners invest in their classroom’s literacy practices and the imagined communities which they aspire to join.

Identity and Meaning Making

English language learners’ identity construction is directly connected to the means through which they make and communicate meaning. Rather than focusing on language only, this study examines the modes and semiotic resources on which the learner relies to make her presentations and establishes herself as a competent speaker. A mode is “a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 171). Multimodality refers to “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20). It offers a significant angle through which learners’ identity construction and negotiation can be examined and understood. Examination of language learning takes account of how learners use language and other modes to construct and arrange meaning in a way that highlights their active agency as designers and sign makers (Jewitt, 2008). According to Jewitt (2009), multimodal approaches to meaning making emphasize the role that people play in orchestrating meanings through the specific choices they take. These choices are mediated by
factors, such as meaning makers’ interests, contextual constraints, modal affordances and aptness of resources (Bezemer & Kress, 2015). Understanding these aspects paves the way for a deeper understanding of learners’ agency which is essential to examine identity because it allows us to understand how language learners “reframe their relationship with others and claim alternative, more powerful identities from which to speak, read or write, thereby enhancing language acquisition.” (Norton, 2013, p. 2).

Literature Review

Following the start of COVID 19 pandemic, many studies surfaced to examine online learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia which employ different quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies. Many studies focus on examining learners’ perspectives towards learning during the pandemic. For example, Al-Jarf (2020) uses a survey with open-ended questions to investigate students’ agency in distance learning during the pandemic and examine factors which negatively impact teachers and students’ satisfaction with online teaching and learning. Al-Nofaie (2020) relies on students’ written logs to explore their views of online learning and compare the synchronous and asynchronous aspects of online learning via Blackboard. Almekhlafi (2020) builds on survey data to examine learners’ perceptions towards the use of Blackboard for online teaching during the pandemic.

Other studies worked to provide a deeper understanding of learners’ experiences with online learning. Akhter (2020), for instance, uses an online survey, semi-structured interviews and learner-authored reflections to explore the problems and challenges that EFL learners face in online classes in relation to listening skills. Dahmash (2020) draws on focus groups and interviews to explore the benefits and challenges surrounding learners’ experiences with blended learning in English courses during the pandemic. Alghamdi (2021) relies on qualitative methods to explore learners’ identity construction and negotiation and the challenges that shape their engagement with oral presentations before and during the early days of the pandemic. Mohammed and Mudsh (2021) use a quantitative questionnaire to look at the effects of the pandemic on EFL learners’ anxiety while learning online. Albogami (2022) uses semi-structured interviews to examine the impact of online teaching and learning on improving EFL learners’ language skills.

Teachers’ experiences were also highlighted in many of these studies. Rahman (2020) adopts quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the challenges that teachers face while teaching English as a foreign language online during the pandemic. Alkhannani (2021) looks at the possibilities created by online teaching and learning and the challenges that teachers and learners faced in EFL settings. Alvi, Bilal, & Alvi (2021) adopt quantitative and qualitative methods to examine teachers and students’ views regarding the challenges that surround teaching and learning English. Sheera et al., (2022) use semi-structured interviews to explore teachers and students’ perceptions of online learning during the pandemic with a special focus on writing.

Despite the richness of data obtained within these studies and their invaluable input, there is a considerable gap regarding in-depth, qualitatively driven exploration of learners’ experiences and voices while learning online amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially in relation to issues, such as how learners engage with literacy and how their identities are constructed and negotiated as they navigate through their learning journeys. This study addresses this gap by adopting a qualitative, case-study approach to explore the learning experiences of a first-year female undergraduate in an EFL course at a Saudi university. The study specifically focuses on
the participant’s literacy practices and the identity positions that she constructs and negotiates to claim more powerful identity positions as she engages with oral presentations.

Methods

Data Collection Techniques

Research on identity and language learning is often associated with the use of qualitative research paradigm and with a strong methodological focus on narratives (Norton, 2013). For this study, a qualitative, case-study approach was adopted to answer the research questions. Data collection methods included informal interviews, observational fieldnotes, student-authored reflections, research journal and artefact collection. These methods are appropriate to pave the way for a better understanding of the complexity of the learner’s personal experience, motivations, aspirations and challenges as she engages with language learning. An EFL class was observed for one academic semester which lasted around four months. Learners in the class were given information and consent sheets regarding this study. They were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews and write detailed reflections about their participation in oral presentations in this course. This case study focuses on one of the learners, i.e. Nada (pseudonym) who volunteered to participate in a one-hour, semi-structured interview and agreed to share her presentation slideshows and written reflections to conduct this study.

Obtained data were analysed drawing on qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2016) and thematic analysis (Mackieison, Shlonsky & Connolly, 2019). For thematic analysis, I rely on the two stages described by Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O’Connor, and Barnard (2014) which consist of data management and data interpretation. These help to organize the obtained data and delve into their complexities in order to “understand the patterns, the recurrences, they whys” which characterize the richness of learners’ experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 67).

In this EFL class, learners were required to make three individual presentations about specific topics assigned by the teacher. Learners were also required to form groups and each group was responsible for making a group presentation conducted near the end of the semester. For group presentations, students chose topics that related to themes covered throughout the semester in their class. Individual and group presentations were all conducted online through Blackboard. For Nada, the topics of her presentations are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Nada’s Presentations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Presentation</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Mode of Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Popular Sports in Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>A Special Event in My Life</td>
<td>online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>My Dream Job</td>
<td>online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>The Cave Children in Thailand</td>
<td>online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Participant

Nada is a first-year undergraduate in the science track. Although, at the time of conducting this study, Nada repeatedly described her command of English as “very bad”. She often highlighted how she enjoys English language classes at the university and the different activities
they offer. Oral presentations were repeatedly highlighted by Nada because she had always enjoyed public-speaking activities in school and she considered presenting in front of her classmates a way to stand out and show her skills and knowledge. This excitement towards public speaking activities in school extended to her EFL course in the university when she learned about the required oral presentations. In general, she described these presentations as beneficial in developing basic skills, such as giving feedback, collaboration, self-evaluation and self-control.

**First Individual Presentation**

For their first presentations, learners were asked to present during their online classes and post their visual displays in a Padlet assigned to share their work with each other and embedded in Blackboard. Despite learners’ general focus on attaining good grades, Nada appeared to be more preoccupied with the impact that her first presentation would have on her teacher and classmates. To address that issue, Nada focused on two aspects: topic choice and slideshow design (Table 2).

**Table 2. First Presentation (Extract 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Individual Presentation</th>
<th>Arabic Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For their first presentations, learners were asked to present during their online classes and post their visual displays in a Padlet assigned to share their work with each other and embedded in Blackboard. Despite learners’ general focus on attaining good grades, Nada appeared to be more preoccupied with the impact that her first presentation would have on her teacher and classmates. To address that issue, Nada focused on two aspects: topic choice and slideshow design (Table 2).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>اختارت أشياء قديمة حاجة ما أحد حيفكر فيها. هو صعب كان بس تعتبرى هادا تجربة ؛ لازم إذا ما جربتي ما يكون شي مميز. في البداية حبيت أبو اخترت حاجة قديمة فبعدين شفت هادي الثلاث صور و دمجتها مع بعض حسيت إنها بالذات (بالألوان ركزت على الألوان) بحيث أبو الشخص لما يشوف ينجذب للموضوع و دمجتهم على بعض و حسيت أبو هادا أحسن لأني سويت ثلاث قبل و رشحت و قيمت و لاحظت أبو هادا حيفكر أحسن و ألفت يلفتوا له أكثر</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She decided to choose a topic that she considered to be ‘out of the box’ in comparison to her classmates. She used the class’s WhatsApp group chat to find out what her classmates were going to talk about before choosing her topic. As she noticed that her classmates’ choices were directed towards popular sports, such as football, tennis, boxing or swimming, Nada decided to talk about two old and traditional sports; archery with horse and camel riding. While this choice allowed her to avoid presenting any repeated information, it also helped to set her aside from other presenters. In addition to choosing a different topic from others, Nada worked to create a visual display that was different from what other learners employed in their presentations. Unlike the majority of her classmates who relied heavily on photographic representations of sports, Nada created a poster in which she merged three oil-paintings of her chosen sports. She believed these paintings reflected the old-fashioned and traditional nature of these sports which would help her to attract the viewers not only to look at the poster, but also to listen to her talk (Figure 1).
In relation to language, the first task was significant for Nada because it provided her with an opportunity to consider improvement in language skills as a possibility. English appeared before as an obstacle, not only in her education, but also in her ability to interact successfully with her classmates. This was a common issue among many learners in this context because of the mixed-level nature of the class. While there were advanced learners who did not seem to struggle with academic task, such as oral presentations, many learners struggled to manage their participation in the course. Working on her presentation and observing her classmates’ admiration of her work at this early stage encouraged Nada to anticipate a future in which her language skills improve and imagine the potential feedback she would get when that happens (Table 3).

Table 3. First Presentation (Extract 2)
I really benefited, first skill was the language. When I was in high school English for me was an obstacle that I just needed to go through, but now my view of English changed. It is now literally one of my goals to be excellent in English. You know after the first presentation, I checked my Whats App messages and saw the girls’ reactions; they were asking: who is this? They made me excited. If this is how they see me when I am not that good, how about tomorrow when I become better?

This was especially significant in this context at this early stage as none of the students knew each other and there were limited opportunities for students to get to know each other personally because of the pandemic. Their only way to get to know each other appeared to be through their work and the impact it evoked.
Second Individual Presentation

In comparison to the efforts exerted in the first presentation, the second presentation did not receive equal attention from Nada as she was overloaded with her midterm exams and tasks. She made her presentation about a trip she took with her family to describe a special event in her life and uploaded her talk as an audio file without any visual display. Working to fulfill the task at hand, this second presentation did not seem to represent for Nada any special memory as the first one. It was barely highlighted by Nada in her interview and written reflections. Instead, her focus was more directed towards the other two individual presentations and the group presentation and this was manifested through the efforts she exerted to design the visual display in each presentation.

Third Individual Presentation

Despite the accumulating academic responsibilities near the end of the term, Nada’s desire to come up with a distinguished and an unforgettable presentation resurfaced in her third and final individual presentation. To talk about her dream job, Nada used a digital story to make her presentation. Her choice of creating a digital story was not, however, without obstacles. In addition to the exams and tasks she had in other subjects, Nada had never really created a digital story before. She was fascinated by YouTube and Instagram accounts which creatively rely on digital stories and as a result, she decided to learn how to create a digital story in which she could use an animated character to represent her and accommodate for her inability to present her talk in person. She searched YouTube for inspiration and found tutorials of Plotagon which is a storytelling app that allows its users to create stories with animated characters. Although Nada knew how laborious learning to use this app from scratch could be within the one-week timeframe dedicated to finish this task, it was important for her to create something different from every other student in her class. In addition to her desire to stand out among her classmates, Nada was moved by the teacher’s frequent recollections of distinguished students she had taught in previous terms. These recollections were used to give advice to learners regarding the making of their presentations. Nada wished that one day she would also be seen as an inspiration and an example of success to other classes in the future.

As a first-time user of Plotagon, Nada worked to understand the steps involved in designing and creating a digital story. She was particularly fascinated by how it allowed her to create an animated character to speak on her behalf. (Table 4).

Table 4. Third Presentation (Extract 1)

Once I thought of the idea, I designed and created my story on the same day and tested it and it came out nice. I did not know before how to create things like that in a short time on the same day. I used an app called Plotagon (.). It took me the whole day. The app was easy, but what took a lot of my time was creating reactions. In this topic, there had to be specific reactions. This is what consumed a lot of my time.

بمجرد إنو جاتني الفكرة في نفس اليوم صممت وسويت المنتج كدا و قيمة زي كدا و طلع حلو ، ما كنت أعرف أسوي أشياء زي كدا في نفس اللحظة (...). في نفس اليوم ، استخدمت برنامج Plotagon أخذ يوم كامل ، البرنامج سهل بنضع وقتى الرياكشنات. في موضوع لازم رفع فعل معينة هادا اللي مضيع وقتى.
As a result, Nada devoted her attention to creating realistic, facial expressions that would match her own performance if she was going to present it in person in class (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

*Figure 2. Selected screenshots of visual display in third individual presentation*

Although she was not required to exert such efforts in her speaking task, Nada’s work on her visual display paved the way for her to achieve her goal, i.e. creating an unforgettable presentation, especially that it was her last individual presentation and the term was coming to an end (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Third Presentation (Extract 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt you would take a better impression of me. You must have noticed how my English was not good, but I did not want to go unnoticed. I wanted to leave a touch. I love creating my own touch before I leave any place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>أحس حتاخذي انطباع عنى أحلى ، أكيد لاحظتي إلو لغتي الإنجليزية مو حلوة فما أبغى أمر مرور الكرام ، أبغى كدا حاجة بصمة ، أحب أخط بصمات قبل ما أطلع من أي مكان</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exerting these efforts served two purposes for Nada. First, they enabled her to compensate for what she considered to be poor language skills in relation to other more advanced learners in her classroom. Furthermore, they also reflected her aspirations to create her own unique and unforgettable personal touch that would be remembered afterwards in the future.

**Group Presentation**

The group presentation represented a different experience for Nada. She was the leader of her group which consisted of six students. They discussed the rescue of the cave boys in Thailand in 2018. To make their presentation, Nada and her group relied on different ways to facilitate their work. They used the time assigned during the online lectures to work on the final presentation. They also used WhatsApp and Zoom to communicate with each other, exchange feedback, coordinate their work and practice their performance. Nada relied on a different approach to work on this group presentation. In her individual presentations, Nada worked to shape her teacher...
and classmates viewed her through setting herself aside from other learners and moving beyond her weaknesses in English. In her group presentation, however, she aimed to change how she viewed herself as a team member and a group leader through addressing her past, negative memories of group work in school (Table 6).

Table 6. *Group Presentation (Extract 1)*

I focused on my mistakes in the past. For example, if one of my group comes to talk only to me, I would tell her no. Go back to the whole group. You know! At the beginning I was afraid that there would be some negligence. I was really scared of this. That’s why the first thing I did was I distributed the tasks. No, I did not distribute the tasks. I sent the tasks that needed to be done. For example, Layla was responsible for writing. Nuha was responsible for sending the whole presentation. Samaher was responsible for editing and correcting mistakes. Everyone would send her script to Samaher and she would edit. Rahaf was responsible for (. ) you know how? We distributed the responsibilities. I sent the responsibilities, and every member chose what was suitable for her.

Working on this group presentation represented an invaluable opportunity for Nada to move past her previous experiences. She worked to create a harmonious rhythm that avoided domination of decision making and focused on accepting and prioritizing members’ decisions in different aspects, such as distributing tasks, revising, editing and designing their slideshow. Thus, her experience with group work reflected a significant shift in her priorities from focusing on how others perceived her to how she perceived herself as a group leader and a team member.

Nada’s positive view of how she and her group worked on their presentation was supported by the positive feedback they received from their teacher and classmates. Nevertheless, there were certain aspects of Nada’s personal experience that she was not totally satisfied with. The efforts that she exerted to facilitate cooperation and smooth workflow among her group were successful, but they created different challenges. There were instances in which she did not always approve of her classmates’ decisions. For example, in comparison to the care and attention she dedicated to designing the visual display of her individual presentations, she was more focused on coordinating her choices with others even if that lead to accepting semiotic choices of which she did not really approve. This appeared in the semiotic choices that appeared in the group’s slideshow in terms of the size and amount of writing and also the colours used (Figure 3).
Reflecting on her group’s slideshow design, she commented that … (Table 7)

Table 7. Group Presentation (Extract 2)

| I could change the colours, I like light colours, and the pictures I would bring pictures that are more effective and also the words I would focus on the words. I would put a sentence that summarizes the whole thing. I want less writing so they would read and get excited about what we are going to say. I think writing should be minimized. A lot of writing is very boring. In high school when students projected slides full of writing, I used to feel bored as soon as I saw that. I wouldn’t get excited about their talk unlike where there is little writing. For me if I write on the slideshow, I would make the words less and choose black better than blue and red, I feel words should be medium size. |

Furthermore, Nada felt that her focus on facilitating a smooth workflow with the members of her group came at the expense of the attention she dedicated to practicing her own performance (Table 8).

Table 8. Group Presentation (Extract 3)

| In the final project the slideshow, I was so focused on group work that I neglected the individual work a bit, that I sit by myself and practice and study my part. So when we were presenting, I felt that it was really important; there was tension in my voice, I did not |
want that. When I talk, I love it when my voice is loud and it shows confidence. Even when I am not perfect, there has to be confidence. This affected me a bit after the presentation: why didn’t I work a bit more on presentation?

Albeit the positive feedback from the teacher and other classmates, Nada’s reflections of her experience were burdened by her awareness of the imbalance between how she skilfully and cooperatively managed her work with other group members and how she inadequately practiced her part in the presentation and prepared for her performance.

Discussion
This case study attempted to answer two questions: what are the literacy practices that the participant draws on while engaging with oral presentations in an EFL course and what identity positions does this participant claim and negotiate? Looking at the literacy practices she drew on to participate in this event, the analysis showed how the participant’s approach towards each of her presentations reflected her changing priorities over time. In her individual presentations, she worked to stand out among her classmates in this specific event and to create an unforgettable impression to be remembered and reflected upon by the teacher in future classes. In her group presentation, the participant’s attention was directed towards moving beyond past, negative experiences in group projects in school to establish herself as a committed and cooperative team member and group leader.

The analysis highlights the changing nature of identity construction in this case study as the participant moved beyond the marginalized identity position of a weak language learner that initially shaped her view of herself at the beginning to draw on literacy practices that paved the way to embrace more powerful identity positions. Putting in mind that this is a mixed-level English language class, there is a considerable risk that social power and powerful identity positions could be mainly ascribed to learners with advanced linguistic abilities (Thornborrow, 1999). These learners are likely to easily navigate through academic tasks and practices which may corner other learners within marginalized identities. In this case study, however, the analysis sheds light on how one language learner can invest in specific literacy practices to move from identity positions ascribed by their language proficiency level to embrace more powerful positions created by the choices they make and embrace.

Multimodal literacy practices surfaced as an essential component for identity negotiation in this study. Engaging in these practices highlights the changing and dynamic nature of identity which creates invaluable opportunities for self-transformation among learners and guides them to establish their sense of agency (Forbes, Evans, Fisher, Gayton, Liu & Rutgers, 2021). According to Ahn (2019, p. 147), examination of learners’ multimodal designs provides a rich source of data to understand “an individual’s formation and potential transformation of identity”. While scholarly research in applied linguistics and language learning and teaching acknowledges that it is “through language that we think, define ourselves, and represent ourselves to others” (Forbes et al., 2021, p. 434), using various semiotic choices to make meaning represents a “routine dimension of language in use” (Prior, 2009, p. 27). The aptness and affordances of semiotic choices should be used by language educators to create guided opportunities for learners to explore their creative potential and navigate through multimodal meaning making practices in a way that supports their
needs and interests. Such opportunities “can invoke literacy engagement and make students’ identities visible in and outside class” (Veum, Siljan & Maagerø, 2021, p. 1006). Furthermore, learners’ multimodal texts do not only reflect how they see themselves, but also how they are seen by others (Kajee, 2011). This appears in the participant’s investment in specific semiotic choices to support her path to join future, imagined communities. Because of that, it is important to pay attention to and raise learners’ awareness of the role that multimodal meaning making can play to enhance their learning trajectory.

This case study also sheds light on how learners’ identities are shaped by their current and past experiences (Vasudevan, Schultz & Bateman, 2010). This appears in the participant’s approach to semiotic choices throughout this literacy event and her belief in their impact on her classmates and teacher. For her individual presentations, her investment in efforts to create multimodal ensembles that would bring to light her competence as a speaker, presenter and designer beyond the weaknesses of her language skills proved effective in the feedback received from her classmates and teacher. This is also echoed in her hope that her multimodal designs can facilitate her access to join a community of distinguished presenters who will be recalled and reflected upon by the teacher in future classes.

The participant’s approach to semiotic choices in the final group presentation, on the other hand, was different as she directed her focus towards coming to terms with her past experiences in school. Rather than searching for specific semiotic choices appropriate for her design plans, the participant preferred to get along with her classmates’ multimodal choices, regardless of her view of these choices. Her engagement with multimodal meaning making echoes how “sign-makers can meet the complex, often contradictory demands of their own interest, the needs of the matter to be communicated, and the characteristics of the audience” (Bezemer and Kress, 2008, p. 172). Because “authorial power in presentations is not unlimited” (Zhao, Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2014, p. 357), factors, such as meaning makers’ interests, affordances of resources, past experiences and situated, meaning making expectations shape semiotic choices in learners’ multimodal texts.

For language teachers and other stakeholders, these are important issues to consider in language education. For instance, the participant’s compliance with her colleagues’ semiotic choices in her group presentation calls for the need to reconsider how assessment of multimodal texts produced by learners in group tasks should be carried out. Despite the obvious advantages of using group work in language classes in developing learners’ skills, educators must pay attention while assessing the contribution of each learner in group projects. As a prospective process (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), meaning making is made in texts in relation to meaning makers’ “particular interest and their own hopes and imaginings regarding their future lives” (Simpson & Archer, 2017, p. 666). Scholarly research points out that the agency of meaning makers is indicated through the semiotic choices they embrace in their multimodal ensembles. This is not only confined to the choices they willingly include, but also the choices they may reluctantly embrace.

Another important point lies in the need to empower language learners in a way that encourages them to actively participate in different activities. Cummins and Early (2011) consider encouraging learners to express their identity and agency as one way to empower them in language classrooms. Efforts should be exerted to acknowledge the different modes with which learners can engage in addition to language because this will acknowledge language learners as active meaning makers in language classes beyond the possible limitations of their language proficiency levels (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Acknowledgement of these modes is important to raise learners’ awareness.
of the opportunities available to them for making meaning and optimize learners’ participation in their learning journeys. Language educators should work to provide real opportunities and adequate time, and they should also strive to create a safe environment in which learners’ voices are acknowledged, appreciated and guided.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Due to limitations of time and space, there are several limitations in this study that are important to point out. This case study focused on one participant only. It is not uncommon within qualitative case studies to focus on one participant only, especially in relation to identity research which generally tends to be small in scale. Yet, further research on literacy and identity can benefit from reasonably enlarging the number of participants in a way that maintains researchers’ ability to address the depth of qualitative data. In addition, this study focused on the social practices and semiotic choices that shaped the learner’s engagement in this event and her identity construction. Further research can move beyond investigation of practices to include detailed, textual analysis of the semiotic choices employed in texts produced by learners. Furthermore, this study examined the social practices and meaning-making choices in visual displays in each presentation. Speech, however, was not equally examined despite being an inseparable component of oral presentations and the participant’s performance which can provide rich data in future research. Finally, future research should also look at other skills to examine literacy and identity, such as writing because of its importance in academic contexts.

**Conclusion**

This case study investigated two issues: the literacy practices that a first-year, female undergraduate draws upon to engage with oral presentations in an online EFL course at a Saudi university and the learner’s identity construction and negotiation in this literacy event. The study explored how the learner’s approach towards each of her presentations differed in relation to her past and current experiences and her future aspirations. The learners’ choices and decisions provide a glimpse into the learner’s identity as she moved beyond a marginalized identity imposed by her limited linguistic skills to claim a more powerful identity position that was enabled by her multimodal designs. These issues have significant implications for language educators who should strive to move beyond a rigid focus on linguistic skills to include other valuable skills, including multimodal meaning making. As language educators, it is our responsibility to empower language learners to explore the potential power of multimodal designs to support their meaning-making decisions and facilitate their identity transformation as language users. The study additionally calls for the need to examine the tools that learners use to represent and communicate knowledge and broaden assessment practices to raise learners’ awareness of meaning making and guide them to explore their potential and develop their identities.

**About the Authors:**

Dr. Noura Ali Alghamdi is an assistant professor at the English Language Institute, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. My research interests include qualitative research methodology, literacy studies, multimodality, identity and computer assisted language learning. ORCid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9294-1443
References


Albobogi, M.M. (2022). Do Online Classes help EFL Learners Improve their English Language skills? A Qualitative Study at a Saudi University. Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) 2nd Special Issue on Covid 19 Challenges (2) 281-289. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/covid2.18

Albobogi, M.M. (2022). Do online classes help EFL learners improve their English language skills? A qualitative study at a Saudi university. Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) 2nd Special Issue on Covid 19 Challenges (2), 281-289. doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/covid2.18


