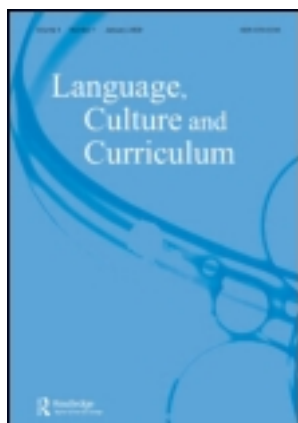


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### Multimodal representations of identity in the English-as-an-additional-language classroom in South Africa

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## Multimodal representations of identity in the English-as-an-additional-language classroom in South Africa

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This paper explores the multimodal engagement of English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) students in a classroom in Johannesburg. Within a social semiotic framework, and using constructions of design and identity to understand the students' multimodal engagement, the paper argues that multimodal representations offer EAL students from under-resourced contexts opportunities for creativity and agency to redesign meaning. It demonstrates how they use the opportunities provided to reconstruct their identities as black South Africans and to communicate a sense of their own social world. The analysis focuses on two texts produced by the students – a digital narrative text and a poetry performance – to illustrate their multimodal engagement with literacy. The paper concludes with an examination of the broader implications for teaching and learning EAL.

**Keywords:** multimodality; English as an additional language; South Africa; identity; social semiotics; teaching implications

### Introduction

Human beings communicate through diverse modes and genres, and pedagogic environments by their very nature and design are semiotic environments. Teachers and learners design, produce and receive signs across a host of genres, making the classroom a multimodal space for semiosis or meaning-making. Yet meaning-making is often viewed narrowly in educational contexts, a state of affairs which has been frequently criticised. Literacy teachers and researchers increasingly argue, therefore, for Giroux's (1994, in Stein & Newfield, 2006) notion of border crossings, or the intersection of formal institutional learning and learning in everyday settings. In this paper, I explore how students in the English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) classroom negotiate meaning through multiple modes and materialities, using digital texts and performance as mediating tools. I argue that a pedagogy of multiliteracies and multimodality enables students to cross borders and broaden their scope for meaning-making. I investigate what happens when EAL students engage with multiple modes in the classroom, and then consider what implications this engagement might have for the teaching and learning of EAL more generally. I begin with a brief review of research on multiliteracies, multimodality and social semiotics.

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### **New literacies, multiliteracies and multimodalities**

New literacies are associated with the changes that are intrinsic to life and to the requirements to be able to communicate with a world that is changing (New London Group, 1996). In a world that privileges the written word (Kress et al., 2005), only a fragment of meaning-making is accounted for. The term 'multiliteracies' (as proposed by the New London Group, 1996) focuses on multiple semiotic terrains. In essence, it refers to the multiplicity of communication channels and to the salience of linguistic and cultural diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The notion of multiple forms of literacy therefore indicates a shift from an autonomous notion of literacy by challenging the idea of a single universal literacy restricted to rule-governed forms of language (Stein & Newfield, 2006). Given the mission of education that all students, especially the diverse, non-traditional student complement in South Africa, for example, should benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate in public, private, community and economic life (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2006), the multiliteracies perspective encourages students to engage in broader, multiple ways of making meaning.

It is because the notion of multiliteracies is so central to multimodality that the present paper focuses on semiotics. In essence, multimodality in its widest sense embraces a range of semiotic modes, including image, gesture, oral performance, artistic, linguistic, digital, electronic, graphic and artefact related (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Pahl & Roswell, 2006). Kress (2000a, p. 187) argues that 'no text can exist in a single mode' and that most texts use at least two modes of communication: language and image (Kress, 2000b, p. 337). Thus, texts have to be examined through a multimodal lens. In addition, different levels of change and practices have emerged, especially with the introduction of digital and electronic media, or what Lankshear and Knobel (1997) refer to as technological literacies. Reading and writing, for instance, now require new practices, such as using hyperlinks, the inclusion of semiotics in e-mails and chat rooms, and the capacity to interpret the different elements of websites such as icons and menus. Technological literacies have therefore changed what it means to learn, to know and to do things. Learners draw on, or need to learn to access, not only the linguistic mode but all the other semiotic modes as well.

### **Social semiotics**

Semiotics concerns itself with meaning, and sign is the central concept in semiotics, bringing together meaning and form into a single unit. As argued earlier, however, signs are multimodal and each modality shapes meaning (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001). Social semiotics is the study of human social meaning-making practice of all types (Thibault, 1991). As Hodge and Kress (1993) point out, social semiotics includes the study of how people design and interpret meaning, the study of texts, and the study of how semiotic systems are shaped by social interests and ideologies and adapted as society changes. The channels of meaning, or semiotic modes, include various forms of speech, writing, and images, referred to by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) as multimodal resources.

The premise is that meaning is *made* (my italics) and the task of social semiotics is to develop the framework for how this occurs. Meanings are jointly made by participants in some social activity structure such as classrooms by construing semiotic relations among social patterns and practices. However, one of the weak links in our schools is that teachers do not have a sufficiently strong semiotic sense, as often this is neglected in their pre- and in-service development (Cunningham, 1992).

### Contextualising the study

This study took place in an undergraduate EAL classroom at a university in Johannesburg. Of the 34 students in the class, 32 were South African EAL speakers, who spoke a range of home languages including isiZulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Sepedi and Setswana. Two English foreign-language speakers from Portugal also attended the class. Students were tasked in the English course with writing stories that they felt represented their lived experiences, using multimodal texts as mediating tools. They were told that they could use any semiotic mode, or a combination of modes, including image, gesture, oral performance or digital in their stories. Subsequently, they presented their texts to the class. Student choice included a range of modal representations such as digital slides, blogs, visual images and performance poetry. One *PowerPoint* presentation<sup>1</sup> and one performed praise poem are described visually and verbally in this paper, then analysed to illustrate how through their multimodal representations the students constructed their identities and, through a process of designing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006), engaged in meaning-making.

All students were required to present their multimodal texts to the class, and the class took great pleasure in discussing the presentations, even at times participating in them. Thus the stories became shared semiotic moments. It was not uncommon in this class to observe students in traditional dress, and making use of an array of artefacts such as flags, pottery and traditional food. One student lit a fragrant herb called *impepo*<sup>2</sup> during his presentation to create what he felt was a more authentic African atmosphere. A noticeable feature of the presentations was the use of gesture to convey meaning. One of the students, Beauty, came to class on the day of her presentation dressed in a pair of jeans and a blouse. At the beginning of the session, however, she put on a traditional skirt made of colourful fabric and beads over her jeans. She also wore several strings of beads around her head, neck and wrists, and across her shoulders. Her feet were bare for her presentation, and her hair was in a short braided style.

### Beauty's digital presentation: blue skies

Beauty called her story 'So Where To? Down to Soweto?', which is a play on the name of the sprawling township Soweto,<sup>3</sup> in Johannesburg, Gauteng. She said Soweto was 'the most happening place in Joburg' and her 'beloved hometown'. Beauty's 16-slide visual autobiography drew on her life in the sprawling township, and consisted of blue slides with a cloud-filled background. Against this backdrop she presented and narrated her story. Her story opened with the landmark graffiti-decorated cooling towers from a now-defunct power station, that mark one of the entrances to the township. Much of her description positioned Sowelans as displaying a sense of togetherness and community, and is peppered with vocabulary such as 'friendly', 'survivors', 'togetherness', 'happy' and 'full of life'. Her images depicted crumbling shacks alongside beautifully built, well-maintained houses and smiling people, to whom she refers as 'survivors who live fast lives'. Included among the survivors were images of Mandoza, a popular *kwaito*<sup>4</sup> singer (who was often the focus of media attention for his exploits such as driving under the influence of alcohol), as well as happy children. She also referred to the Hector Pieterse Museum as a landmark. 'Hero' Hector Pieterse was a 12-year-old boy who was shot during the Soweto uprising, when thousands of black school children protested the apartheid government's intention to establish Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in their schools. His death became synonymous with anti-apartheid protests in the country.

Beauty also made mention of the busy taxi rank, images of which she included along with an audio track of vehicles hooting and noisy commuters shouting. The taxis are popularly

referred to as Zolas because of their speed (after Zola Budd, former South African Olympic athlete). They are fast and often mechanically unsound and carelessly driven. However, they also offer a mobility that was not previously available to the vast majority of black South Africans during its apartheid years. She concluded by reinforcing the sky metaphor, drawing on the lyrics of an Irving Berlin song: ‘sunshine, no sign of rain, nothing but blue skies’, to optimistically allude to her hope for the future. She asked viewers and listeners to join her by taking a taxi to Soweto. Through her multimodal representation, Beauty positioned herself as hopeful and optimistic, just like the youth she depicted. Her sense of optimism was reflected in her lexical choices, her use of colour and image, as well as her choice of musical lyrics. She welcomed readers/viewers into her world.

Beauty narrated from each slide, and added illustrative detail as she went along. With her opening slide she said she wanted to use the question ‘So where to?’ to indicate that young black South Africans seem to find themselves caught between culture and traditional practices on one hand, and on the other, the promises of a predominantly Western world through which they could pursue their studies and careers. She asked if others experienced this conflict. Below, I include short extracts from moments of class discussion to give a sense of some of the interaction that ensued from the presentations. There was extensive debate around the conflict confronting young people in South Africa. Students agreed that they felt conflicted and in a state of disequilibrium: they were caught between their traditional practices and by the possibilities their education offered to them, neither of which many were prepared to forsake:

Tendani: Ja, it’s true, but it’s also universal ... we must leave something behind to move forward.

Noku: My grandmother says that we cannot forget where we came from ... black diamonds they forget mostly, but they will see the wrong of forgetting culture. Even you are wearing blue jeans with a [hand gesture around the hips to illustrate ‘skirt’] – one over the other – this is how we feel.

Tendani and Noku are two male students. Tendani’s point is that the conflict felt by young people is universal, and not in any way restricted to South African youth, thus reminding us that the future offered to young people is of global concern. His argument was that young South Africans are following the same universal trajectory, and that change inevitably led to some form of loss. Noku’s reference to ‘black diamonds’ is significant. The term is used to refer to affluent, upwardly mobile black South Africans who tend to hold good jobs, dress well and send their children to expensive schools. While their prestigious lifestyles are held in high regard by many young people, Noku’s view is that they do not seem to remember their roots in their pursuit of wealth. While Tendani felt that we have to leave something behind in order to move forward, Noku suggested a blending of the two, that we must remember our roots in our pursuit of material wealth. He uses Beauty’s ensemble of a pair of jeans with a traditional African skirt very effectively as a visual metaphor to illustrate the blending of the old with the new in order to make room for progress.

Beauty’s slide depicting shacks and luxurious houses in the township side by side elicited further discussion around the vast socio-economic discrepancy between the affluent and the poverty-stricken in Soweto. Students felt that government had forsaken the poor in the country, while giving an elite minority of black people unsurpassed opportunities and material wealth. Their dissatisfaction was also attributed to some people making money through criminal activities. They felt this was justified to a certain extent, however, because of unemployment and the lack of government subsidies. The landmark towers were another point of contention. Students felt that their history was important.

The land on which the towers are located was formerly used as a dump, while now it served as a visual reminder of the struggle for freedom in the country, decorated as it was with paintings and graffiti. They felt it was appropriate that one of the paintings on the tower was that of Nelson Mandela, hailed as an icon in the country's liberation struggle.

One student, Mpilo, commented that if young people were to remain aimless, we would be doing an injustice to Mandela's struggle for freedom and the land would revert to a dump. In this way, the Hector Pieterse slide also gave rise to questions about young people's aims and goals. While the students were very young at the time of the 1976 uprising referred to earlier, many of them recalled stories of its historical significance through family, school, community and the media. Some students felt that the past was a different type of political struggle, while others said that present conditions necessitated a more personal struggle for education and advancement, as alluded to by the extracts below from two female students:

Thembi: That was their struggle this is ours. More financial ... about money.

Jule: The past makes the present and future, no different. How can we say this is different, what do we have now that our parents did not – still poverty and sickness, HIV. The rich getting richer...

Thembi's use of 'their' and 'ours' shows how she positioned the struggles of the older and younger generations in binary opposition. She identifies with the current struggle as though the liberation struggle did not involve her, even though she was living the consequences of liberation because of the struggle. It was 'their' struggle. 'Our' struggle is one where young people have to fight for survival through attaining financial and material rewards. Concerns surrounding monetary and material gain are of greater consequence. Jule's words that the past, present and future are essentially intertwined show their mutual dependence. Jule also reminded us that we are in fact in more dire straits today than our parents were because of the onslaught of poverty and disease such as the rampant HIV/AIDS virus. Once again, their argument focussed on the socio-economic issues surrounding the weak and marginalised in society. What is evident is that while Beauty positioned herself as optimistic about change and democracy, many students saw this as one side of the story and felt that South Africa still faced many socio-economic inequities.

Thus many youth, as represented microcosmically by this group of students, feel disillusioned by their government. The overall sense of the outcome of Beauty's presentation is that it stimulated much debate around significant issues and that, in essence, students felt that education was necessary to contribute to the country and to personal growth. One of the issues that they felt created a dilemma was the disinterest many successful young black people show in contributing something back to their own communities. The discussion surrounding Beauty's presentation shows that while so many young South Africans are caught at the cross-roads of indecision, others have different freedoms to strive for. They search for a sense of identity and for ways to establish themselves in the world.

### **William's praise poem: 'being' English**

William opted to write and present a praise poem. Traditionally African praise poems were sung to honour or to show respect to selected people, or to introduce important people. Their qualities are described and praised in the poems, and often their strong characteristics are compared with the characteristics of particular animals. In this case, however, students

were tasked with praising themselves in a way that they felt best told their story through their lived experiences – experiences which had formed their identity.

*Praise poem by William M...*

*I am in my mother's womb  
I am wondering what is going on?  
I can hear two people conflicting  
What are we going to call him  
With a deep voice?  
What are we going to call him  
With a light voice?  
He is my second blood, we need  
To call him William  
William is English  
My grandfather was also English  
William it is then  
We need an Englishman in the house  
I am going to name the following one  
Besides I am also English so was my grandfather.*

William included in his presentation photographs of his family and friends. His poem tells the story of a conversation between his mother and father while he, the unborn child, was still in the womb. They enter debate about what to name their unborn child. It was decided to give him an English name because they needed an 'Englishman' in the family. The English language is often associated with upward mobility among black parents in South Africa. This is evident in the way that even though the language-in-education policy stipulates parental choice in their children's language of instruction, many opt for English for the capital it affords them. While the intention of this paper is not to analyse this poem, I use parts of it to interpret and illustrate how William constructed his identity multimodally, through gesture and performance. For his presentation, he stood up, to some playful heckling from his friends, and sauntered to the front of the class. He gestured to his classmates by using his hand as a sign with the thumb, forefinger and little finger raised, while the middle two fingers were curled downwards towards his palm (Figure 1). He waved the hand slightly

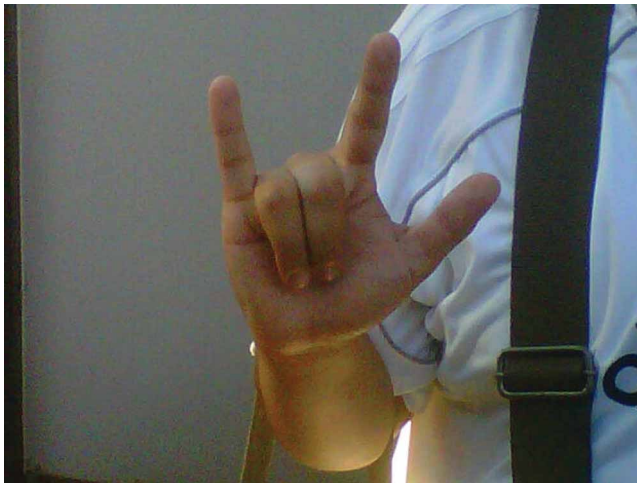


Figure 1. Clever gesture.

from left to right a few times. Brookes (2005, p. 2062) refers to this gesture as the ‘Clever’ gesture. The use of gesture will be discussed in more detail later. William was dressed in the standard gear of students; jeans and T-shirt, and wore a popular brand of takkies (sneakers). His poem was handwritten on a sheet of notebook paper which he held in his hand.

William also used more formal practised gestures during his presentation, giving the impression of a performance rather than a presentation (see also Newfield & Maungedzo, 2006). I will also describe some of his formal gestures. William began his poem by standing with his hands over his mid-section as he recited the first line. He rubbed over his mid-section in a circular motion to make reference to the womb. He illustrated the third line by cupping his hand over his right ear, and at the words ‘second blood’, he covered his heart. During his recitation, a male student drummed on his desk to create a rhythm – I got the impression this was rehearsed before the presentation. When he referred to ‘English’ and ‘Englishman’ he stood tall and upright. At this point, there was some giggling from his classmates. In between moments of specific gestures as just described he assumed the loose-limbed stance and rhythm that emulates popular hip-hop and *kwaito* moves, as also indicated through his opening Clever gesture. During his performance, other students nodded to the rhythm and called out expressions such as ‘yeah’, while at times also using the Clever gesture. William’s performance became very much a group event, similar to that described by Newfield and Maungedzo (2006) in their study of poetry in a Sowetan classroom.

Once again, at the end of his performance, there was some discussion. When asked, William said he was motivated to write this poem to show that his English name was his identity: it represented who he was and how he came to be William. He associated the name with ‘being’ English, as in English-speaking. Traditionally, children in African societies are given meaningful names by their father or grandfather, which could be dependent on circumstances surrounding the child’s birth, or as a reflection of values and attitudes within a particular social context (Suzman, 1994). Names change with urban influence, however, and most black students have two names, one African and one English. His home language was Sesotho, one of the nine official black languages in South Africa. Language is a volatile issue in the country and most students are multilingual, though the language of instruction in most classrooms is English. As Orlek (1993) and Thornborrow (1999) explain, because of the fundamental role of language in establishing identity and in exercising social control, our talk, behaviour and dress all contribute to the expression in linguistic identity and sense of self. William showed how, while still in his mother’s womb, debate ensued about his identity and he, the unborn child, was named. To this extent, his identity was shaped before he was born. Nevertheless, it is also the case that identity ‘is something which we are constantly building and negotiating all our lives through our interactions with others’ (Thornborrow, 1999, p. 136). Our identities are not fixed from birth and do not reach a stage of development where they remain constant. It is interesting that while William was not named after his father (although he was ‘second blood’), it was decided to construct him as English-speaking before he was born, an identity he took up as a young adult.

## Discussion

### *Constructing identities multimodally*

Through the use of digital image and performance as texts, Beauty and William were able to reconstruct and redesign their identities and social worlds, and in so doing, also prompt



other students in class who participated in discussion to rethink and reconstruct their own identities. As Hall (1992) argues, old identities which once stabilised the social world are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. Castells (1996) adds:

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. . . . People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are. (p. 3)

This crisis of identity (Hall, 1992) is seen as part of a wider process of change, which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies, and undermining the frameworks that once gave individuals stable anchorage in the world. Beauty positions herself as a young optimistic female with much hope for a democratic South Africa, and her use of discursive markers shows this: landmark towers, images of affluence, happy people, liberation posters and museums against a backdrop of calm blue skies. In the course of the ensuing discussion, however, her construction of identity is challenged somewhat when related to the vast divide in society with which many people in the townships are confronted. We are therefore challenged through her texts to question if the skies are indeed as calm as they are made out to be. Beauty is ambivalently positioned through her multi-modal text and (re)positioned in the social world through the outcome of the classroom discussion. Her presentation becomes a shared semiotic moment of meaning-making. To an extent, the government is blamed for not living up to its promises, and for giving rise to a false sense of economic stability where the affluent are pitted against the poverty-stricken.

Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, and Warschauer (2003) show that writing in a second language (or in an additional language, as in the case of the students in this study) does not just involve the accumulation of technical linguistic abilities. It is also related to identity: to how one sees oneself and how one is seen by others – as a student, as a writer and as a member of an ethnolinguistic minority. Thus, writing is interwoven with the multiple, unstable, ambivalent identities of the students as young adults, as students, as township dwellers and as linguistically and technologically marginalised people. While this paper does not focus on writing as a skill, these ideas resonate with the creation of multimodal texts as well.

New technologies also produce a vast array of virtual communities (Castells, 1996, p. 22), as well as opportunities for English teaching and learning. Castells (1996) emphasises that we should locate technological change in the social context in which it is taking place, and by which it is being shaped. In the present study, the students whose work is referred to had limited previous encounters with technology. However, in Beauty's case, she was able to use and manipulate technology by using a *PowerPoint* programme to create slides and to record sound. Where she was unable to use personal photographs, she was able to search the Web for images which, albeit second hand, she was able to incorporate into her personal story. Ironically though, the borrowed images became representations of her own lived experiences. While Beauty was not technologically trained, it is through digital technology that she was able to reconstruct and redesign her identity.

William's positioning of himself as English and an Englishman is significant. There is some tension between perceptions of what is valuable and prestigious in terms of language in South Africa. Many black South Africans regard the English language as a route to upward mobility: it offers them jobs, status, security and prestige. Others see it, however, as involving a loss of black identity. William positions himself as being English-speaking (conflated with

Englishman). McKinney (2007) in her work on ‘race’ and English in South African desegregated schools, for instance, explains how learners recognise and characterise different kinds of English used around them, and attach prestige to varieties perceived as white. She also foregrounds the tensions and ambivalence between learners’ valuing of perceived white varieties of English, and their labelling of black learners who no longer speak African languages, either through lack of proficiency or choice, as ‘coconuts’ – black on the outside and white on the inside. Her study reveals ambivalence towards rather than straightforward ‘valorisation’ of English (McKinney, 2007, p. 11). In William’s case he perceives English as providing him with cultural capital. He positions himself through his use of his English name, even though he was already positioned in this way by his parents before he was born. Castells (2004, p. 6) points out that ‘Identity is people’s source of meaning and experience’ and in this context quotes Calhoun (1994) who says: ‘We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made’.

### *Gesture: the clever one*

One of the significant moments that stand out in William’s performance is his use of gesture. His identity, through writing and voice, was shaped by gesture and performance as text, unlike Beauty’s borrowed visual images. Brookes (2005), in her analysis of gestures popularly used among township youth in South Africa, argues that gestures, which are shaped by situational and social factors, are a visual representation of what is said. They provide additional meaning and, together with speech, constitute a unitary system of expression. Gestural use is significant therefore in male youth slang (*Iscanto*<sup>5</sup>). Brookes (2005, p. 2047) explains that speech, gesture and narrative are important ‘for gaining and maintaining access and status among peers’.<sup>6</sup> William drew on gestures popular with township youth. The gestures share nuances with *kwaito* and hip-hop and, through these, he reached out to his audience. In contrast, the other gestures he used, such as the hand over his ear, heart or over his mid-section, appeared rehearsed and contrived. The use of the ‘clever’ gesture indicates that the user is streetwise, and means a range of things from ‘I see you’ to ‘Watch out’ or ‘Be alert’ (Brookes, 2005, p. 2062). William’s use of the gesture was in response to some playful heckling from his male classmates. He wanted to signal that although he was making a class presentation (in his student identity), his core identity was still very much the township clever. The irony is that his poem alludes to the opposite: someone who desires to be called by an English name and sees himself as an Englishman. Thus William’s construction of identity and the content of his poem are ambivalent. The mirroring of the clever gesture by his classmates shows that they too associate themselves with the gesture, even though the exchange consisted of playful banter. The audience became part of the performance through the students mirroring William’s gestures, so that his individual performance also became part of a collective endeavour.

### *Meaning as ‘design’: design to redesigned*

Knowledge and meaning are historically and socially located and produced. They are ‘designed’ artefacts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006) and consist of the following:

- The designed: the available meaning-making resources, and patterns and conventions of meaning in a particular cultural context;

- Designing: the process of shaping emergent meaning which involves representation and recontextualisation;
- The redesigned: the outcome of designing something through which meaning-makers have remade themselves and created a new meaning-making resource.

Through their presentations, the redesigned meaning-making of the students in the present case enabled them to reconstruct, remake and reshape their own social identities as subjective agents of change through acts of language: written, image, gesture, digital and performed. Variability and agency are two significant aspects of design that distinguish it from more traditional approaches to literacy pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006). Where traditional, rule-governed grammar teaching tends to propose a pedagogy of transmission, ignoring agency and subjectivity, the notion of design is the opposite: agency and subjectivity are crucial in shaping social worlds. Thus, redesigning accommodates Giroux's notion of border crossings (in Stein & Newfield, 2006) referred to earlier in this paper.

### **Implications for English teaching and learning**

While the contribution of a transmission approach in the teaching of English has been debated extensively worldwide, a multimodal approach can add to the pedagogical repertoire by engaging students' cultural histories, and harnessing their social identities. As Stein and Newfield (2007, p. 921) argue: 'Modes are produced in and by the body ... Bodies are repositories of knowledge, but these knowledges are not always knowable in and through language: they can be sensed, felt, performed, imagined, imaged or dreamed.'

While the focus of the English teacher in the classroom is literacy and language, this does not only involve the development of a discrete set of skills. A multimodal pedagogy does not aim to distract from these skills, but broadens their definition and conception. As teachers of English we need to acknowledge that different communities value skills other than writing alone, and that our students bring with them a repertoire of social histories which shape them. A multimodal approach gives freer rein to students by providing them with the space to engage and interact through their creativity and agency. As is evident from the findings here, students engaged in discussion and performance stimulated by multimodal representations succeeded in creating shared semiotic moments of meaning-making.

Given the possibilities of multimodal pedagogy, the first thing we need to consider as teachers and researchers is how to rethink our current focus on transmission. In addition, we need to review how we assess achievement and progress if we are to harness what our students bring to the classroom in the form of their own meanings, through the use of image, gesture, dress, technology and so on. As teachers we do not seem to have a sufficiently strong semiotic sense, a capacity which is often inadequately promoted and marginalised in our pre- and in-service training. Pre- and in-service teaching programmes in South Africa would benefit considerably if a greater input from multimodal social semiotic theory and practice were provided. Such a focus will aid us to understand our students and their social histories.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has focussed on the use of multimodal texts by EAL students in a classroom in Johannesburg, South Africa. It set out to explore what happens when such students engage with multiple modes of meaning-making in the classroom, and what implications this

engagement might have for English teaching and learning. The study found that multimodality enabled students whose first language is not English to make meaning while employing alternative signs and symbols. Through digital visual image, performance, gesture, dress and voice, they were able to reconstruct their identities as young black South Africans and, through discussion with other students in class, to communicate a sense of their own social world. Caught on the cusp of change from a traditional background to a future world dominated by English, they seized the opportunity to interrogate who they are and where they come from. Multimodality, through a paradigm of social semiotics, has the potential to transform the teaching and learning of EAL by providing students with new opportunities for agency and voice. The multimodal environment facilitates the emergence of shared moments of learner participation, negotiation and renegotiation of meaning within the classroom as a community of practice.

### Notes

1. This presentation is included as one of the texts analysed in another paper (Kajee, 2010) from a critical stance.
2. *Impepo* is a herb that is used for medicinal purposes by herbalists. When lit, the smoke that is emitted is said to call on the ancestors.
3. Soweto, which is an acronym for south-western township, is known for its protest activities during South Africa's period of apartheid and noted as the home of many political leaders, including Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.
4. *Kwaito* is a genre of music that originated in the townships in South Africa, and is popular among the youth. It is a fusion of American hip-hop, African sounds and *tsotsitaal* (township slang).
5. *Iscamto* is a form of *tsotsitaal* or slang used by township youth.
6. Brookes (2005) notes that young men spend much of their time on township street corners because they have little prospect for an education or employment. Their dress, walk, talk and use of gesture are key to male township identity and status (Brookes, 2005, p. 2047).

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