

Exploring Multimodal Meaning-Making in Lecturer Discourse: Language, Gesture, and Space in CEW Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Multimodality has become a central concern in applied linguistics, particularly for understanding how meaning is constructed in classroom interaction. This study examines how lecturers in College English Writing (CEW) classrooms use multimodal communication to construct meaning, drawing on Systemic Functional–Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA). Whereas classroom discourse research has often privileged verbal interaction, this study foregrounds the coordinated use of language, gesture, and spatial positioning as semiotic resources that shape students' engagement and participation. It addresses two questions: (1) How do CEW lecturers deploy language, gesture, and spatial positioning to co-construct meaning during instruction? (2) How does multimodal communication influence student engagement and support the teaching of writing in CEW classrooms? Adopting an ethnographic design, the study captured naturally occurring classroom practices through participant observation and video-recorded lessons involving two lecturers at a Chinese university, with analytical attention to episodes of explicit instruction, feedback, and classroom interaction. Using ELAN, transcripts were systematically annotated to integrate linguistic choices with gesture types and spatial positioning. The findings show that lecturers mobilise gesture and space not as add-ons to speech, but as integral meaning-making resources that strengthen writing instruction: gestures support the explanation and elaboration of writing concepts, while spatial positioning contributes to interpersonal alignment and the organisation of instructional discourse. The study argues that cultivating lecturers' multimodal awareness is essential for creating effective and engaging CEW instruction, and it outlines directions for future research on multimodal classroom discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication, especially in multimedia and social media environments, extends beyond language and draws on a range of multimodal semiotic resources, such as images, videos, bodily actions, and three-dimensional objects, to construct meaning across contexts (Lim, 2018). Multimodal discourse refers to communication that mobilises multiple sensory modalities (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile) and coordinates diverse semiotic modes, including language, image, sound, gesture, and movement (Zhang, 2015). Although meaning-making has always been inherently multimodal, traditional linguistic research has tended to privilege language, often overlooking how other modes contribute to communication.

Since the 1990s, the development of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) has shifted this perspective by foregrounding the interplay between linguistic and non-linguistic resources in meaning-making (Kress, 2015). As contemporary communication becomes increasingly multimodal, researchers have been urged to examine how meanings are constructed not only through language, but also through semiotic resources such as gaze, facial expression, gesture, images, and digital tools. As an analytical framework, multimodality enables scholars to investigate how people construct and communicate meaning through the coordination of multiple modes (Jewitt, 2013). Jewitt et al. (2016) identify three major approaches to multimodal studies: systemic functional linguistics (Bateman, 2014; O'Halloran & Lim, 2014), social semiotics (Kress, 2010), and conversation analysis (Broth & Mondada, 2013; Mondada, 2019). Among these, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), developed by Michael Halliday, provides a particularly robust foundation for MDA because it conceptualises meaning as socially and contextually situated (Halliday, 1978). Building on SFL, multimodal analysis examines how semiotic resources work together to realise metafunctional meanings across diverse contexts, including visual texts, websites, social media, and classroom discourse (Bateman, 2014; O'Halloran & Lim, 2014).

In recent years, the integration of multimodal resources in classroom teaching and learning has attracted growing attention because of its potential to enrich students' learning experiences (Lim, 2021a; Peng, 2019; Qin & Wang, 2021; Salamanti, 2023; Widiatmoko & Endarto, 2018). In parallel, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in China's higher education has undergone substantial development over the past decades (Cai, 2025; Yang & Xu, 2023). Against this backdrop, effective classroom communication increasingly depends on the coordinated use of semiotic resources—verbal and non-verbal, digital and non-digital, material and non-material—to support meaning-making and learning (Dagenais et al., 2017; Erfanian Mohammadi et al., 2019). This has brought the notion of multimodal competence to the foreground. In the context of EFL teaching, multimodal competence refers to teachers' ability to strategically orchestrate multiple communicative modes alongside spoken language to achieve instructional goals (Morell, 2018; Qin & Wang, 2021). This issue is particularly salient in College English Writing (CEW), a course intended to develop students' writing ability, critical thinking, and capacity to express complex ideas in English. To make writing instruction more accessible and engaging, CEW instructors are increasingly moving beyond spoken and written language by integrating additional modes into classroom teaching (Qin & Wang, 2021).

Among the semiotic resources available in classroom interaction, teachers' gestures and spatial positioning warrant particular attention because they are central to embodied meaning-making. As Lim (2021a) notes, teachers are encouraged to reflect critically on how they use these modes in instruction and to develop greater skill in deploying space and gesture to communicate pedagogical intentions—such as presenting knowledge, building connections with students, and organising classroom activity. Gestures

have long been recognised as an integral component of communication (Lim, 2019, 2021b). They provide immediate and dynamic visual cues that can clarify abstract concepts, reinforce spoken language, and, in some cases, substitute for verbal explanation. Similarly, spatial positioning—including teachers' movement across the classroom and their proximity to students—carries both deliberate and incidental meanings. It can direct students' attention, regulate interaction, and shape the overall classroom atmosphere (Lim et al., 2012; Lim, 2021a).

Thus, an in-depth analysis of these embodied resources offers valuable insights into how lecturers construct meaning, shape classroom discourse, and support student learning through multimodal strategies.

Research objectives

- i. To investigate how lecturers utilise multimodal semiotic resources—including language, gesture, and spatial positioning—to construct meaning in CEW classrooms.
- ii. To explore the role of multimodal communication in shaping student engagement and enhancing the effectiveness of writing instruction.

Research questions

- i. How do CEW lecturers deploy language, gesture, and spatial positioning to co-construct meaning during instruction?
- ii. How does multimodal communication influence student engagement and support the teaching of writing in CEW classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In contemporary language education, meaning-making extends beyond verbal communication to include a range of multimodal resources, such as gesture, spatial positioning, and visual cues. This shift has generated increasing interest in how lecturers orchestrate multiple semiotic modes to scaffold learning and engage students. To examine these processes, the present study adopts Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA), a socially grounded framework for investigating how different modes work together to construct meaning in classroom interaction. The following literature review examines four interrelated areas: the College English Writing (CEW) classroom within China's EFL context, theoretical foundations of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), the principles and applications of SF-MDA, and empirical studies on multimodal meaning-making in language classrooms. Together, these strands of literature provide a conceptual basis for the present study and highlight existing gaps in research on lecturer multimodal discourse in writing instruction.

College English Writing Classrooms

English language education in China is primarily situated within the paradigm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Over the past few decades, EFL teaching and learning in China's higher education have evolved substantially, shaped by national policies, economic demands, and shifting educational priorities (Dai & Liu, 2024; Yang & Xu, 2023). Within this context, College English Writing (CEW) occupies an

important position, as it is explicitly intended to develop students' writing proficiency, critical thinking, and ability to express complex ideas in English. In the present study, the CEW course is offered to non-English majors at a university in Shaanxi Province, China. It introduces foundational concepts and strategies for multiple writing genres, guiding students to understand genre-specific features and to apply appropriate techniques across narrative, argumentative, expository, descriptive, practical, and academic abstract writing (Jin & Yang, 2018). Through structured classroom instruction and guided practice, students are expected to complete writing tasks that are substantive in content, clear in central ideas, appropriate in diction, and coherent in organisation. Beyond linguistic development, the course also aims to foster critical thinking and cultural awareness by engaging students with diverse topics through integrated reading and writing activities. For students who plan to study abroad, CEW further functions as essential preparation, given that English writing proficiency is often a requirement for admission to universities in English-speaking countries.

In EFL teaching, it is important for both teachers and learners to draw on a coherent repertoire of semiotic resources—verbal and non-verbal, digital and non-digital, material and non-material—to support meaning-making and learning (Erfanian Mohammadi et al., 2019; Peng, 2019). In this sense, EFL instruction in Chinese universities is inherently multimodal: spoken language is continuously coordinated with other communicative modes to facilitate understanding and participation. Consequently, EFL teachers' multimodal competence—their ability to strategically integrate multiple modes alongside spoken language to achieve instructional purposes—plays a crucial role in supporting effective learning (Peng, 2019; Qin & Wang, 2021). In CEW classrooms, lecturers typically use a range of multimodal resources, including spoken explanations, written texts, visual aids, digital tools, and interactive activities, to scaffold students' understanding of writing principles and genre conventions.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Functional theories of language have faced significant challenges due to the growing prominence of visual modes of communication. They can no longer overlook other semiotic systems or the reality that humans use various semiotic resources when interacting. To fully understand human communication, it is essential to consider non-linguistic semiotic systems in both discourse analysis and the theoretical frameworks that support such analyses. MDA is a rapidly developing approach to studying discourse, emphasising that “meanings are created in texts and interactions in a complex interplay of semiosis across multiple modes which include but are not limited to written and spoken language” (Bhatia et al., 2008). Following Halliday's (1978) metafunctional view of language as a social semiotic system, many researchers have extended the linguistic framework to study meaning-making in other multimodal semiotic resources.

Semiotic resources offer the tools to create meanings by selecting from various modes at a given moment. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), modes, the channel of representation or communication, refer to a set of socially and culturally shaped semiotic resources for making meaning. Jewitt (2013) states that to determine if a set of resources can be considered a mode, it is assessed based on its ability to fulfill all three of Halliday's (1978) meaning functions, that is, ideational meaning (representing experiences), interpersonal meaning (establishing relationships), and textual meaning (organising messages). This functional approach provides a systemic way to identify and categorise modes.

Some in-depth studies focusing on specific modes have contributed to the initial exploration of these semiotic resources. These studies have helped in describing their material affordances, organising principles, and cultural references (Jewitt, 2008). Examples of accepted modes include speech (Kress et al, 2005), image, colour, and layout (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), sound and music (van Leeuwen, 1999), gesture (Hood, 2011; Lim, 2011, 2021b; Martinec, 2001), posture (Martinec, 2000), gaze (Amundrud, 2018; Harrigan, 2013), facial expression (Martinec, 2001), furniture (Björkvall & Karlsson, 2011), screens and digital technologies (Jewitt, 2012; Lim & Toh, 2022). Since modes have different affordances, people always use various modes simultaneously to ‘orchestrate complex multimodal ensembles’ (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010). The selection of a mode and its corresponding semiotic resources has epistemological consequences, as it can shape the way concepts are designed. Consequently, this can impact the potential for interaction in the classroom.

Over the past two decades, research on multimodality has grown significantly, as it sheds light on how speakers and writers convey their intended meanings and purposes (Alyousef, 2020). Multimodality examines the integration of various semiotic resources, or modes, within texts and communicative events, including static and dynamic images, speech, writing, layout, gestures, and positioning (Adami, 2016). Lim (2021a) states, “Multimodality specifically focuses on exploring the interactions and interplay across the semiotic resources in the constellation of meanings made”. Multimodality designates a phenomenon that discourse is almost always multimodal, indicating that a range of semiotic modes are integrated in a given instance of discourse (van Leeuwen, 2015). This challenges the traditional framework of categorising communication as either ‘verbal’ or ‘non-verbal’, which usually gives preference to language as the central or primary mode of communication (Lim & Tan, 2018). Jewitt (2013) defines multimodality as an interdisciplinary approach drawn from social semiotics that goes beyond language and recognises communication and representation in various forms. It emphasises the systematic examination of how different modes of communication contribute to meaning-making, considering the social interpretation of these diverse forms of expression. Jewitt (2013) also stresses three interconnected theoretical assumptions that form the foundation of multimodality. The first assumption is that “multimodality steps away from the notion that language always plays the central role in interaction, without denying that it often does” (Norris, 2004). The second asserts that all modes have been molded by their cultural, historical, and social utilisation to fulfill specific social functions as demanded by different communities. The third is that people orchestrate meaning through their choices of modes. Given the theoretical understandings developed in recent research in multimodality, it is worthwhile to explore how they can be extended to inform the teaching and learning of students in classrooms (Lim & Tan, 2018).

Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis

According to O’Halloran (2008), Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) is an approach to analyzing discourse in the social semiotic tradition. SF-informed MDA focuses on the theory and practice of examining meaning derived from the use of various semiotic resources in discourses such as spoken and written language, visual imagery, gesture, architecture, sculpture, and other physical modes (O’Halloran, 2008). The interest in applying SFL theory for MDA has grown steadily, influenced by works like O’Toole’s (1994) *Language of Displayed Art* and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Later, many other scholars contributed to this area, including Unsworth (2001), Baldry and Thibault (2006), Bateman (2008), Kress et al. (2005), Lemke (2002), Martin (2002), Martinec (2005), O’Halloran (2004), Ventola et al. (2004), Lim (2011).

According to Lim (2021a), the SF-MDA perspective highlights the notion of choice and meaning potential in system networks. The metafunctional framework is especially useful in multimodal studies as it provides a common foundation for integrating and comparing different semiotic resources. The SF-MDA approach adopts a genre-based orientation toward multimodality and is organised around metafunctional meanings, that is, ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning (Lim, 2018). The SF-informed studies of various semiotic resources include paintings, film, music, visual images, books, websites, newspapers and magazines, space and special organisation, gesture and body language, typography and colour, digital platforms and interactive technologies (Bateman, 2008; Hood, 2011; Lim et al., 2012; Macken-Horarik, 2004; Martin, 2008). In conclusion, the paradigmatic approach of SF theory to language has established a theoretical foundation for systematically and comprehensively examining semiotic systems beyond language.

The MDA informed by SF theory has been taken up to explore practices in the classrooms across a range of subjects. Earlier studies have investigated how teachers coordinate various modes of communication, such as facial expression, gaze, posture, action with books and boards, and talk, within the classroom (Jewitt, 2013), and the meaning construction has been the focus of much research. O'Halloran (1996) highlighted the semiotic nature of mathematics and its discourse, involving natural language, mathematical symbolism, and visual display in the form of diagrams and graphs. He suggested that the systemic functional model provides a framework to analyze such semiotic systems constructing reality and emphasised the need to examine the joint construction of meaning between codes, leading to the phenomenon of semiotic metaphor. Kress et al. (2001) conducted an earlier study investigating how science teachers convey subject matter and influence their students' comprehension through interactive classroom teaching and learning processes. They claim that a linguistic description alone cannot fully capture these processes, and each mode contributes to the overall meaning of the multimodal ensemble in quite specific ways. Therefore, communication in science classrooms should include the utilisation and mapping of all available visual representational and communicative resources used by teachers and students. The realisation of each mode and its meaning construction is also studied in language teaching and learning classrooms. Kress et al. (2005) also examined the meaning making of English classrooms in urban secondary schools in Inner London through the observation of three English teachers' lessons. They stress that the meaning of English language learning is not solely dependent on verbal communication or written expression. Instead, it can be equally influenced by non-verbal modes, which play a substantial role in shaping the meaning of English in the learning environment. They claim that "*in any lesson, several modes are in use at the same time: the layout of the classroom remains-more or less-fixed, as does the display on the walls; teachers take up certain, always meaningful, positions in the space of the classroom, textual objects are present and usually, but not always, all this is enveloped in the talk*" (Kress et al., 2005).

Empirical Studies on the Impact of Multimodal Resources on Student Learning

The integration of multimodal resources in classrooms has gained significant attention for its potential to enhance student learning and engagement. Gillies and Baffour (2017) explored how teacher-introduced multimodal representations and discourse influenced students' task engagement. It found that very effective teachers utilised longer durations of embodied and visual representations, which were crucial in enhancing student understanding and engagement with scientific concepts. Significant differences in the types and durations of multimodal language used by teachers underscore their impact on student learning

and engagement, highlighting the importance of multimodal teaching in science education. In language classrooms, Salamanti et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of multimodal and collaborative learning methods in enhancing English language competence among ESL and EFL learners. Using a pre-test and post-test design, the study measured language skills and student engagement through standardised tests (Oxford Quick Placement Test). The results showed that students taught with multimodal methods had significantly improved performance, engagement, and motivation. Taljaard (2016) highlighted the advantages of employing multimodal resources in education, noting that they enhance student engagement and learning outcomes by enabling students to learn in their preferred styles. In terms of student engagement, the impact of multimodal approaches on student engagement and motivation across different educational contexts underscores their potential to enhance learning experiences and foster active participation in learning processes (Claman, 2015). In terms of learning outcomes, Kim (2015) demonstrated that using a Social Network Service-based writing platform in L2 university students enhances writing performance, motivation, and peer collaboration.

However, Vungthong et al. (2017) pointed out several limitations despite the benefits of multimodal resources in education, emphasising the crucial role of teachers in supporting students' understanding and integration of abstract concepts across cultures. To sum up, understanding the current state of research in this area is crucial for informing effective teaching practices and providing a deeper comprehension of how meanings are constructed within educational settings. Emerging trends identified in the literature include multimodal literacy cultivation, multimodal learning resources, and multimodal pedagogical discourse. Despite the wealth of research on this topic, there remains a need for further investigation into lecturers' use of body display in CEW classrooms applying SF-MDA.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore how CEW lecturers utilise semiotic resources during classroom instruction. As Fraenkel et al. (2023) note, qualitative research enables a more holistic understanding of classroom practices, allowing researchers to move beyond measuring how well something is done to examining what actually happens in a given educational context. Aligned with this perspective, the study employs an ethnographic approach, which focuses on documenting the everyday experiences of participants through observation and interviews. Specifically, the researcher conducts participant observations and semi-structured interviews with the two lecturers to investigate how they deploy both linguistic and non-linguistic resources to construct metafunctional meanings in their teaching. All participation was voluntary. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, including permission for video recording.

Participants

The study involves two CEW lecturers from a university in Shaanxi Province, China, as well as about 70 students (35 in each class) who are enrolled in the class. These two lecturers were chosen because they were both university or provincial teaching contest winners. The demographic information of the two lectures is shown in Table 1. Thus, assessing how these lecturers incorporate multimodal resources into their instructional methods can offer valuable insights into effective multimodal discourse. All the

students engaged in the class are sophomores aged 18 to 20. They have already completed one year of College English Integrated Course learning and have already undergone the initial adjustment to the transition from high school to college, which can positively impact their engagement and participation in CEW classes. The demographic information of the students is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Demographic information of two lecturers

Information	Lecturer A	Lecturer B
Gender	Female	Female
Age	35	33
Education	Master	Master
Language	Fluent English	Fluent English
Years of teaching CEW	6	4

Table 2. Demographic information of the students

Information	Class 1	Class 2
Age	18-20	18-20
Grade	Sophomore	Sophomore
Major	Transportation	E-commerce
Years of English Learning	8-10 years	8-10 years

Data Collection

Participant Observation

In participant observation studies, researchers participate in the situation or setting they are observing (Fraenkel et al., 2023). The researcher personally conducts the observation for each CEW class in this study. However, it is important to acknowledge the potential presence of the Observer's Paradox, wherein the awareness of being observed might influence the participants' behaviors. To mitigate this effect, the researcher uses the long-term observation method from the beginning of the course, thus helping the participants gradually get used to the observer's presence. Data collection concentrates on the "Expository Writing" lesson delivered by the two CEW lectures, typically scheduled mid-semester, by which point students and lecturers are accustomed to the researcher's presence.

Video Recordings

Recording people's behavior on video allows the researcher to revisit and examine individual or group actions multiple times, enabling more convenient and accurate coding at a later stage (Fraenkel et al., 2023). Jewitt (2012) emphasised that video, as a shareable digital record capturing all modes sequentially, provides a fine-grained multimodal account of events, including gaze, facial expression, posture, and gesture. At this university, each classroom is equipped with four 360-degree cameras capable of recording full panoramic views. For this study, the cameras are configured to focus specifically on the lecturers, which not only ensures clear tracking of their multimodal behaviors but also minimises disruptions during data collection.

Semi-structured Interviews with Lecturers

Following each class recording, semi-structured interviews are conducted with the lecturers. Interviews serve as a valuable tool for researchers to verify and enrich the impressions formed during observation (Fraenkel et al., 2023). Positioned between fully structured and entirely open-ended formats, semi-structured interviews rely on open-ended questions that encourage participants to elaborate on their

thoughts and perspectives (Karatsareas, 2022). This approach provides deeper insight into the lectures' use of gesture and space to shape student engagement in CEW classrooms.

Analytical Procedures

Technology opens the path to explore semiosis because static and dynamic visual images can be easily manipulated (O'Halloran, 2008). The ELAN (EUDICO Linguistic Annotator) software, an adaptable tool for analyzing media data, was developed at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, Netherlands (Tacchetti, 2018). Drawing on the coding scheme identified by Zhang (2009), a coding annotation scheme for semiotic modes in CEW classrooms is developed in this part, as shown in Table 3, to annotate the video recordings. Then, the distribution of modes obtained from the ELAN annotator tool in CEW classrooms and the relation of realised modes are analyzed within O'Halloran & Lim's (2014) Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis Framework.

Table 3. Coding scheme of modes

	Modes	Code
Language	Declarative Mood	[DM]
	Interrogative Mood	[INM]
	Imperative Mood	[IMM]
	Exclamative Mood	[EM]
Gesture	Performative Gesture	[PG]
	Communicative Gesture	Language Independent Gesture [CGI]
		Language Correspondent Gesture [CGC]
		Language Dependent Gesture [CGD]
Positioning	Authoritative Space	[P-AS]
	Supervisory Space	[P-SS]
	Interpersonal Space	[P-IS]
	Personal Space	[P-PS]

The categories of meanings for Communicative Gestures and Performative Gestures are explained in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Meanings of gesture type

Gestures	Categories	Meanings
Communicative Gestures	Language Correspondent Gestures	Gestures which co-occur with speech, but their meanings can be accessed and interpreted without relying on the accompanying language
	Language Independent Gestures	Gestures that occur in the absence of language and make meaning on their own
	Language Dependent Gestures	Gestures which co-occur with language and require the accompanying language to fully access and interpret their meanings
Performative Gestures		Not to communicate

Lim et al. (2012) propose four types of space related to the teacher's position: Authoritative Space, Supervisory Space, Interactional Space, and Personal Space. The explanations of these types of spaces are listed in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Meanings of space type

Types of Space	Description	Meanings
Authoritative Space	The space in front of the teacher's desk and in the front center of the classroom	Formality, structure, and power
Supervisory Space	The space in which the teacher moves between the rows of the students' desks or moves amongst the clusters of students' desks primarily for supervision	Control and monitoring

Interactional Space	The space in which the teacher stands next to a student or a group of students	Solidarity and relatability
Personal Space	The space behind the teacher's desk where the teacher organises his/her materials and prepares for the next stage of the lesson	Authority

FINDINGS

In terms of language choices, the two lecturers exhibited distinct preferences in mood types that aligned closely with their pedagogical aims in teaching expository writing. During the 80-minute lessons, Lecturer A used a total of 134 imperative clauses (e.g., “Look at the screen,” “Underline the keywords,” “Let’s move on”), accounting for 48% of her overall clause types. Rather than simply reflecting a “teacher-led” style, this imperative-dominant register functioned as procedural scaffolding: it externalised the steps of expository writing (e.g., identifying key points, sequencing ideas, and building coherent paragraphs) and guided students through the task in a tightly organised manner. In learning terms, these clear commands likely reduced uncertainty and cognitive load, helping students focus attention on what to do next and enabling more efficient uptake of genre procedures—an effect Lecturer A also emphasised in the interview (“Using clear commands helps students focus on the writing process step by step”). From an SFL perspective, this mood pattern realises strong interpersonal control and task management, which can support outcomes such as accurate execution of writing steps, clearer paragraph organisation, and smoother task completion.

In contrast, Lecturer B favored interrogative clauses, using 109 questions (e.g., “What does this expression imply?” “Can anyone suggest a better title?”), making up 42% of her clause types. In the CEW context, these questions functioned as cognitive scaffolds that prompted students to make genre-relevant decisions rather than simply follow procedures. For example, implication questions guided students to unpack meaning and strengthen explanation, while questions about titles pushed them to bring the topic, controlling idea, and audience expectations. By requiring students to propose, justify, and compare alternatives, the interrogative pattern created opportunities for metalinguistic reflection and public reasoning about writing choices. As a result, this dialogic questioning was likely associated with learning outcomes in CEW, including clearer articulation of ideas, improved coherence through better organisational choices, and more purposeful revision based on peer and teacher feedback.

Interviews with both lecturers confirmed this: Lecturer A noted, “Using clear commands helps students focus on the writing process step by step,” whereas Lecturer B explained, “Questions help students to think critically and articulate their understanding of the expository text.” According to SFL, such mood choices shape interpersonal meanings; Lecturer A’s imperatives enacted authority and task management, while Lecturer B’s interrogatives promoted negotiation of meaning and interactive learning.

In terms of gestures, both lecturers made strategic use of multimodal resources, yet their gesture types and frequencies differed markedly, reflecting their teaching styles in expository writing instruction. Lecturer A performed a total of 87 gestures, as shown in Picture 1, with approximately 66.7% (58 gestures) being language-dependent gestures, such as pointing to specific sections of slides or mimicking writing motions, that required verbal accompaniment to convey meaning effectively. Functionally, this gesture supported a directive, form-focused teaching: by synchronising talk with deictic pointing and writing-related enactments, Lecturer A visually highlighted genre features and structural elements (e.g.,

topic focus, key points, paragraph moves), helping students locate what mattered and follow how to implement it. Such gestures likely contributed to learning outcomes such as more accurate uptake of text structure and clearer execution of step-by-step writing procedures by providing an additional visual “anchor” for abstract organisational concepts. Additionally, she used 21 language-correspondent gestures, which paralleled her spoken language to clarify meaning, and 8 language-independent gestures (e.g., raised palms to emphasise a point). Lecturer A explained in interviews that these gestures “help students connect abstract writing concepts with concrete visual cues”.



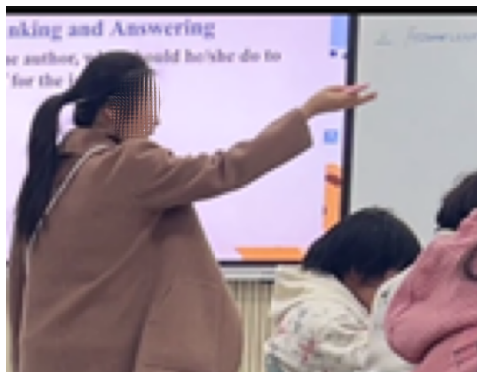
Picture 1. Lecturer A's frequent use of language-dependent gestures

Conversely, Lecturer B used 102 gestures in total, as shown in Picture 2, with a notably larger proportion—42.2% (43 gestures)—being language-independent, such as thumbs-up to encourage students, clapping to show approval, or illustrative movements to represent ideas visually. Her 38 language-correspondent and 21 language-dependent gestures complemented this variety. This diversity—and the relative autonomy of many gestures from concurrent speech—reflected in Lecturer B's dialogic orientation: non-verbal moves were frequently used to affirm response and sustain participation without interrupting the flow of discussion. Such affective and illustrative gestures likely supported learning outcomes related to engagement and risk-taking in expressing ideas, creating conditions in which students were more willing to propose and elaborate explanations during writing-related interaction.

In terms of spatial usage, the two lecturers showed contrasting patterns that revealed their differing teaching orientations and interactional strategies.

As shown in Picture 3, Lecturer A predominantly occupied the authoritative space—at the front center of the classroom—spending 71.3% of the lesson time (about 57 minutes) there, which reinforced her formal role as the central information provider in the expository writing process. She moved into supervisory space (among student desks for monitoring) only 10.5% of the time and rarely entered interactional space beside students, maintaining a clear teacher-student distance. Her use of personal space behind the desk accounted for 18.2% of class time, mostly during transitions between writing activities. This stable front-of-class positioning supported a directive pedagogical stance: it enabled

centralised control over pacing and attention and sustained whole-class focus on key procedural steps in the writing task. Lecturer A reflected in the interview that staying in front helped “maintain order and keep students focused on the writing tasks.”



Picture 2. Lecturer B's frequent use of language-independent gestures



Picture 3. Lecturer A's frequent use of spatial positioning

By contrast, as shown in Picture 4, Lecturer B occupied authoritative space for just 39.5% of the time and frequently moved through supervisory space (34.8%) to closely monitor students' writing progress and offer scaffolding. She also spent 20.2% of class time in interactional space beside students during discussions or feedback, facilitating more personal and immediate interaction. Her use of personal space was minimal (about 5.5%). This mobility shifted the instructional center from the front of the classroom to students' desks, creating more opportunities for formative feedback, on-the-spot clarification, and engagement during expository writing tasks. Lecturer B reflected in the interview that moving around the classroom helped her “see students' difficulties in time and give immediate support”.



Picture 4. Lecturer B's most frequent use of spatial positioning

DISCUSSION

The analysis of language, gesture, and spatial positioning shows how multimodal semiotic resources work in concert to shape distinct pedagogical approaches to teaching expository writing. Lecturer A's predominant use of imperative clauses reflects a more directive and highly structured teaching style, which aligns with the demands of expository writing for clarity, logical sequencing, and focus. Through these imperatives, she enacts strong interpersonal control and guides students through the complex processes of organising ideas and constructing paragraphs. Her preference for language-dependent gestures complements this approach by visually reinforcing key instructional points, making the content explicit and readily accessible. In addition, her sustained presence in authoritative space reinforces her role as the central organiser of classroom activity, supporting classroom management and facilitating focused knowledge transmission.

By contrast, Lecturer B's frequent use of interrogative clauses signals a more dialogic, student-centered pedagogy that encourages inquiry, critical thinking, and the co-construction of meaning—capacities closely tied to higher-order writing in expository genres. Her prominent use of language-independent gestures, such as thumbs-up and applause, contributes to a more supportive classroom climate in which non-verbal resources strengthen motivation and interpersonal connection. Moreover, her movement across authoritative, supervisory, and interactional spaces enables closer teacher–student rapport and provides real-time scaffolding. This spatial mobility can be particularly effective in helping students articulate, evaluate, and refine ideas during writing activities. Overall, her approach resonates with constructivist principles that view learning as interactive and situated.

Interview data further support the observation that both lecturers deploy language, gesture, and space strategically to achieve instructional goals. Lecturer A's emphasis on control and clarity—realised through directive language, reinforcing gestures, and stable positioning—supports a step-by-step, skill-building approach to expository writing. In contrast, Lecturer B's focus on interaction and engagement—enacted through questioning, affective gestures, and spatial mobility—cultivates a more exploratory and participatory learning environment. Taken together, these findings suggest that effective expository

writing instruction can be achieved through different yet complementary multimodal strategies, shaped by lecturers' interpersonal stances and teaching orientation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how two lecturers teaching expository writing in a Chinese university CEW classroom employ multimodal resources—language choices, gesture, and spatial positioning—to enact distinct teaching and learning orientations and classroom dynamics. Lecturer A's directive approach (frequent imperatives, language-dependent gestures, and sustained use of authoritative space) emphasised clarity, control, and structured guidance aligned with the organisational demands of expository writing. Lecturer B's dialogic approach (frequent interrogatives, a wider range of language-independent gestures, and movement across supervisory and interactional spaces) cultivated a more participatory learning environment that supported inquiry and engagement.

The findings highlight that multimodal resources are integral to how writing pedagogy is enacted, shaping both instructional content and interpersonal relations in classroom interaction. Although the study is context-rich, the strategies identified here may be transferable to wider EFL and EMI writing classrooms where instructors similarly need to make abstract writing concepts visible and actionable. In such settings, teachers may adapt these insights by developing consistent gesture–language routines for genre organisation, using purposeful spatial positioning during explanation and feedback, and flexibly balancing directive and dialogic moves to match learners' needs. Future research could further investigate students' perceptions of these strategies and their relationship to engagement and writing performance, as well as how emerging digital tools (e.g., interactive whiteboards, educational apps, AI-supported platforms) mediate multimodal meaning-making in writing instruction.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, D.W.; Methodology, D.W. and M.A.; Investigation, D.W.; Data Curation, D.W.; Formal Analysis, D.W.; Writing—Original Draft, D.W.; Writing—Review & Editing, M.A. and P.C.S.; Supervision, M.A.; Validation, P.C.S.; Project Administration, M.A.

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Data availability statement

All data analyzed during this study are included in this published article and/or its supplementary materials.

Conflicts of interest

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