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A Study on the Impact of Multimodality on ESL Students' Learning Motivation in Primary School

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Abstract: This paper investigates the impact of multimodal teaching on primary school students' motivation to learn English, emphasizing both theoretical and practical perspectives. With the rapid advancement of digital technology, traditional teacher-centered approaches are increasingly insufficient for addressing the cognitive and motivational needs of young learners. Multimodal teaching, which integrates text, images, audio, video, and interactive exercises or games, provides a richer and more immersive learning experience, allowing students to engage with content through multiple channels. A comprehensive review of prior research suggests that multimodal approaches can enhance students' motivation, creativity, comprehension, and active participation, while also fostering higher-order thinking skills such as critical analysis and problem-solving. In a classroom setting, a multimodal project involving PowerPoint and video presentations on family vacations was implemented to examine its practical effects. The project allowed students to combine personal narratives, visual materials, and audio recordings, promoting both linguistic accuracy and self-expression. Results indicated improvements in students' confidence, engagement, and accuracy in using the target language. However, challenges related to technological access, unequal opportunities, and fairness in assessment also became apparent, highlighting the need for careful instructional design. Overall, this study demonstrates that, when supported by adequate school resources and comprehensive teacher training, multimodal teaching can significantly enhance young EFL learners' motivation, creativity, and active involvement in the learning process. The findings provide practical insights for educators seeking to design inclusive, interactive, and effective English learning experiences that connect classroom activities with students' real-life contexts.

Keywords: EFL teachers; multimodality; learning motivation; primary school teaching

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Rise of Multimodal Learning in Language Education

In recent years, the rise of digital media and technology has profoundly reshaped language education. Traditional teaching methods, which focus primarily on printed texts and teacher-centered instruction, often fail to meet the evolving cognitive and motivational needs of young learners. The rapid development of multimedia resources, such as videos, podcasts, interactive slides, and digital storytelling tools, provides opportunities for richer, more engaging, and contextually meaningful learning experiences [1]. These tools enable students to access language input through multiple channels, catering to diverse learning styles and preferences.

This shift in educational practice has encouraged a move toward multimodal learning, which integrates text, images, audio, video, and interactive activities into a cohesive instructional approach. Multimodal teaching is not merely about incorporating technology but about designing learning experiences that allow students to process, interpret, and produce knowledge in various forms. By engaging multiple senses, learners can

deepen comprehension, reinforce memory, and develop a more intuitive understanding of language structures.

The implementation of multimodal approaches has been documented in several international contexts, including Canada, the USA, and China [2-4]. These studies demonstrate that multimodality can enhance learner engagement, motivation, and academic performance, suggesting its potential as a transformative approach in contemporary language education.

1.2. Enhancing Motivation and Cognitive Engagement

Motivation is a critical factor in language learning, especially for young learners. Multimodal teaching leverages students' natural curiosity and interest in diverse media formats to maintain their attention and encourage active participation. Activities such as digital storytelling, role-playing, and multimedia projects allow learners to apply linguistic knowledge creatively, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning [5]. By connecting classroom content with students' personal experiences, multimodal instruction also strengthens intrinsic motivation, as learners perceive language as a practical tool for communication rather than a set of abstract rules.

Beyond motivation, multimodal teaching promotes cognitive engagement by supporting higher-order thinking skills. Students are required to interpret information from multiple sources, integrate diverse ideas, and communicate their understanding through various modalities. Such practices cultivate critical analysis, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, equipping learners with skills that extend beyond language proficiency [6,7]. Research has shown that students exposed to multimodal activities demonstrate not only greater engagement but also deeper comprehension and retention of content, indicating the pedagogical value of these approaches.

1.3. Practical Implications for Classroom Design

The integration of multimodal teaching in EFL classrooms offers practical implications for lesson planning and instructional design. Teachers can structure activities to incorporate visual, auditory, and interactive elements, creating an inclusive environment that accommodates different learning preferences. For instance, combining text-based explanations with videos, audio narrations, and interactive exercises allows students to revisit and reinforce learning through multiple channels.

Moreover, multimodal activities can bridge the gap between formal instruction and real-life language use. By encouraging learners to produce multimedia content, such as videos or presentations, students connect classroom learning to authentic communicative contexts. This approach not only strengthens language skills but also promotes self-confidence, collaboration, and social interaction among peers. Understanding how different modes influence interest, participation, and skill development enables educators to design lessons that enhance intrinsic motivation, improve language proficiency, and ultimately foster more effective and engaging learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Impact of Multimodal Teaching on Motivation and Learning

Scholarly literature consistently demonstrates that multimodal teaching positively influences students' motivation and engagement in language learning. By integrating multiple modes-such as text, images, audio, video, and interactive exercises-students experience a richer learning environment that caters to different learning preferences [8]. This multimodal engagement not only sustains attention but also encourages active participation, leading to improved language skills, comprehension, and retention of content.

In higher English education, digital multimodal creation has been shown to foster creativity and critical thinking [9,10]. These approaches allow learners to explore language

in flexible ways, combining various media to present ideas and reflect on learning outcomes. Moreover, multimodal teaching has been found to enhance English learning for specific purposes, enabling students to navigate real-world communication tasks more effectively [11]. The use of diverse resources helps learners internalize knowledge while enjoying the learning process, highlighting the motivational and cognitive benefits of multimodality.

2.2. Classroom Applications and Learner Engagement

Research has increasingly focused on how and why multimodal activities attract and sustain learners' attention. Studies in ESL classrooms reveal that tasks combining multiple modes promote collaboration, peer interaction, and active participation [12,13]. For example, audio-enhanced presentations, interactive charts, and digital storytelling tools allow students to engage with language in a dynamic, context-rich manner, supporting both comprehension and practical usage [14].

Student and teacher feedback suggests that motivational factors-such as challenge, curiosity, control, fantasy, cooperation, competition, and recognition-play a critical role in sustaining engagement [1]. By offering diverse pathways for expression, multimodal activities can meet the varied interests and cognitive styles of learners, increasing the likelihood that students will remain motivated and invested in their learning.

2.3. Teacher Perspectives and Implementation Challenges

From the teachers' perspective, multimodal teaching has been applied across reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. Online multimodal resources, for example, immerse students in rich language experiences, promoting reading comprehension and strategic learning [8]. In writing instruction, tasks such as podcasting have shown that careful course design and community engagement are essential for motivation, particularly when assignments are intended for authentic audiences [15]. Overall, multimodal teaching supports learners in overcoming language barriers and academic pressures, contributing to the development of vocabulary, reading, speaking, writing, and communication skills [7,11,16].

Despite these advantages, potential challenges persist. Overreliance on entertainment-based activities may limit content absorption, while information overload and unfamiliar formats can cause confusion or frustration, negatively affecting motivation [1,11,14,15]. Furthermore, teachers must be adequately trained to design, implement, and guide multimodal activities effectively. Without proper planning and support, the potential benefits of multimodality may not be fully realized.

In summary, research highlights the significant potential of multimodal teaching to enhance motivation, engagement, and skill development in English learning. However, further investigation is needed to understand its broader implications, optimize instructional design, and address challenges in diverse educational contexts.

3. Personal Context

3.1. Project Design and Implementation

During my internship at a primary school, I implemented a multimodal teaching project designed to reinforce the simple past tense in English. Following the lesson, students were assigned a task to create a PowerPoint presentation documenting their family vacation and produce a corresponding video introducing their trip. This design integrated multiple modalities to provide a comprehensive and engaging learning experience:

- 1) Text: Students wrote descriptive captions and personal reflections using the simple past tense to narrate activities.
- 2) Images: Photographs captured during the vacation were incorporated to visually support the narratives.

- 3) Audio: Students recorded voice narrations highlighting memorable moments or conducted brief interviews with family members to enrich the content.
- 4) Video: Short video clips showcased key experiences, such as visits to landmarks or participation in special events.
- 5) Interactive Elements: During presentations, peers were encouraged to ask questions-e.g., "What did you do in that place?"-practicing the formation of past tense questions and promoting classroom interaction.

The project was designed to integrate linguistic knowledge with personal experience, providing learners with opportunities to consolidate grammatical understanding while expressing themselves creatively. Teacher feedback was provided for each submission, and exemplary projects were selected for classroom presentations, further motivating students to engage with the task.

3.2. Implementation Outcomes and Student Engagement

The project yielded positive outcomes in both language learning and student engagement. The majority of students participated actively, creatively combining text, images, audio, and video to narrate their experiences. Their presentations reflected not only linguistic accuracy but also improved organization, storytelling ability, and self-expression. Subsequent unit tests indicated notable improvements in the accuracy of simple past tense usage, suggesting that multimodal activities can reinforce grammar knowledge while enhancing the meaningfulness of learning.

Students' engagement varied, but overall, the combination of modalities appeared to facilitate deeper understanding and stronger memory retention. Discussions and presentations stimulated peer interaction, collaborative learning, and motivation. Feedback from students highlighted the enjoyment derived from using multiple media, which made the learning process both dynamic and interactive. The project also allowed students to see tangible connections between classroom instruction and their own personal lives, fostering intrinsic motivation and a sense of accomplishment.

3.3. Challenges and Reflections

Despite these successes, several challenges emerged, reflecting broader structural and pedagogical issues in the Chinese educational context:

- 1) Inequality in Technological Access: Two students were unable to complete the assignment-one lacked the technical skills to embed videos in PowerPoint, and another did not have access to a computer at home. This underscores the digital divide between urban and rural schools, highlighting the need for teachers to consider individual technological capabilities and provide scaffolding before assigning multimodal tasks. Students who could not participate fully appeared disengaged during discussions, demonstrating the motivational impact of unequal access.
- 2) Exam-Oriented Concerns: Some students expressed reluctance to engage fully, fearing that creative multimodal activities would not contribute to their exam scores. This illustrates a broader tension in exam-oriented educational systems, where high-stakes assessments may limit students' willingness to embrace interactive or innovative learning tasks.
- 3) Assessment and Motivation: The selection of projects for presentation led to disappointment among students who felt their work was overlooked. This challenge highlights the difficulty of balancing fairness in evaluation with encouragement for creativity. While individualized feedback was provided, more inclusive and equitable assessment strategies-such as peer evaluation or self-reflection-may better support active engagement and motivation.
- 4) Time Constraints: Completing the project required approximately two to three hours, considerably longer than traditional paper-based homework. This added

pressure to students' extracurricular schedules, emphasizing the need to carefully consider workload when integrating multimodal tasks, especially in contexts where students already face heavy academic demands.

In conclusion, multimodal projects offer substantial benefits in terms of curiosity, engagement, and language practice. However, their successful implementation in the Chinese context requires careful attention to technological resources, assessment practices, student confidence, and time management. Teachers must provide adequate guidance and scaffolding to ensure all students can participate meaningfully, while schools and policymakers should invest in digital infrastructure and teacher training to foster equitable and effective multimodal learning experiences.

4. Analysis

4.1. Motivation and Engagement

Young learners possess a natural curiosity and are highly responsive to varied stimuli, making them particularly well-suited for multimodal teaching approaches. In classroom practice, the use of videos, songs, and interactive games consistently captures students' attention and maintains sustained engagement. Activities such as podcasting, digital storytelling, and role-playing voice-over games provide learners with opportunities to practice English in dynamic and creative ways. These tasks not only make learning enjoyable but also foster collaboration, peer communication, and social interaction, allowing students to learn both from the teacher and from one another.

A critical feature of effective multimodal learning is its ability to connect classroom content with students' personal experiences. For example, when learners describe real-life events using images, video clips, or voice recordings, they recognize that language functions as a tool for communication rather than an abstract subject. This connection enhances intrinsic motivation and reinforces retention of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures [11]. Introducing multimodal activities early in education is especially important, as research shows that student motivation often declines with age due to repetitive exercises, exam pressure, and learning materials that feel disconnected from real-life contexts [17,18]. Short animated stories, songs, and interactive games provide avenues for students to practice language while maintaining engagement. Additionally, these activities promote higher-order cognitive skills, including creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, which are essential for developing independent and adaptable language learners [19].

4.2. Challenges in Implementation

Despite the clear benefits, the implementation of multimodal teaching presents several challenges that require careful consideration. Some students may experience frustration when confronted with unfamiliar digital tools or multimedia formats [1]. Excessive sensory input can be overwhelming, particularly for younger learners [15], and poorly structured tasks may cause stress, reduce engagement, or even lead to disengagement. Consequently, lesson planning must ensure that multimodal tasks are appropriately scaffolded, gradually increasing in complexity, and aligned with learners' abilities and prior experience.

Technological limitations constitute another significant challenge. Not all schools or students have consistent access to computers, tablets, or stable internet connections. In China, urban and private schools are often well-equipped, whereas students in rural or underdeveloped regions may lack sufficient digital resources, creating disparities in learning opportunities. These gaps may prevent some students from fully participating in multimodal projects, potentially widening educational inequalities. Addressing this issue requires investment in digital infrastructure at both the school and government levels, including the provision of devices, reliable internet access, and technical support to ensure all students can engage effectively.

4.3. Assessment and Recommendations

Assessment in multimodal classrooms requires innovative approaches beyond traditional tests, which often fail to capture the full range of skills developed through multimodal activities [20]. Effective evaluation should consider creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. Flexible assessment methods, including peer review, self-reflection, and project-based evaluations, provide more holistic feedback and encourage learners to value the learning process rather than focusing solely on grades.

Teachers also play a central role in fostering motivation and confidence in multimodal learning environments. Students who are hesitant or less confident require additional support through positive reinforcement, individualized guidance, and structured opportunities to contribute. Providing clear rubrics and transparent criteria for assessment can help manage expectations and reduce anxiety, while also encouraging active participation. Furthermore, integrating multimodal tasks with traditional instruction and aligning them with learning objectives ensures that such activities complement curriculum requirements rather than overburden students.

In conclusion, multimodal teaching offers substantial advantages for young English learners, enhancing motivation, engagement, and opportunities for higher-order thinking and creativity. To maximize these benefits, successful implementation requires careful lesson planning, teacher preparation, adequate technological resources, inclusive access, and consideration of individual student needs. When these factors are addressed, multimodal learning can transform traditional classrooms into dynamic, interactive, and student-centered environments.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study indicate that multimodal teaching significantly enhances young learners' motivation, engagement, and language acquisition. By integrating text, images, audio, video, and interactive elements, students were able to connect classroom content with their personal experiences, which facilitated deeper understanding and retention of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures. These findings support previous research showing that multimodal approaches not only improve linguistic performance but also foster creativity and higher-order thinking skills [11,19].

The personal project implemented during the internship illustrated that multimodal tasks encourage students to actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive information. Students' enthusiasm and improved grammatical accuracy suggest that multimodal activities can serve as both a motivational tool and an effective pedagogical strategy. The varied modalities allowed students with different learning styles to engage meaningfully, demonstrating the inclusivity potential of multimodal teaching.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings also have practical implications for English language instruction in primary schools. Multimodal teaching encourages active participation, collaborative learning, and personalized expression, making lessons more engaging and learner-centered. Teachers should consider integrating multimodal elements strategically, ensuring tasks are aligned with curriculum goals, manageable within students' capabilities, and supportive of different learning preferences.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of technological and institutional support. Unequal access to devices or digital literacy gaps can limit participation and exacerbate educational disparities. Schools and policymakers should provide adequate digital infrastructure, teacher training, and scaffolding strategies to ensure equitable and effective implementation.

5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

While the study demonstrates the benefits of multimodal teaching, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was limited to one class in a single school, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the short-term project did not allow for longitudinal tracking of students' language development or motivation. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of multimodal instruction, variations across different regions or socio-economic contexts, and strategies to optimize assessment and feedback for multimodal projects.

Research could also investigate how to balance multimodal learning with traditional exam-oriented curricula, particularly in contexts like China where high-stakes testing significantly influences students' behavior and attitudes toward learning. Experimental studies comparing different multimodal designs, frequency, and intensity of implementation would provide further insights into best practices.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Benefits of Multimodal Teaching

Multimodal teaching offers significant advantages for young English learners. It can enhance motivation, engagement, creativity, and critical thinking skills, providing a richer and more meaningful learning experience. By combining text, audio, images, video, and interactive activities, students can connect classroom learning with real-life experiences and express themselves more creatively, going beyond traditional academic outcomes.

6.2. Implementation Considerations

Effective implementation of multimodal activities requires careful planning and consideration of students' needs. Teachers must be well-prepared to guide learners through diverse tasks, provide appropriate scaffolding, and design activities that are inclusive, manageable, and tailored to the class. Attention should also be given to students' individual circumstances, including access to devices, digital literacy, and confidence levels. Schools and government agencies should ensure the availability of necessary technological resources and high-quality multimodal materials. Balancing multimodal learning with traditional instruction and examination requirements is essential to avoid overburdening students. Flexible assessment methods, such as peer review, self-assessment, and project-based evaluation, can better capture the wide range of skills developed through multimodal tasks.

6.3. Future Implications

When thoughtfully integrated into the curriculum, multimodal teaching can transform traditional English classrooms into dynamic, engaging environments. It fosters both language proficiency and a lifelong interest in learning, enabling students to develop skills that extend beyond rote memorization and standardized testing. By addressing implementation challenges and providing proper support, multimodal learning can contribute to more effective, equitable, and meaningful English education in China.

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