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# SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND MULTIMODAL ASSESSMENT OF L2 ADULT EMERGENT READERS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

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**ABSTRACT:** The goals of this action research are to create a feasible set of assessments for refugee background adult emergent readers from non-Western countries, and to gain an understanding of how this population makes meaning from multimodal texts. The research draws on Critical Applied Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, and critical multimodal social semiotics to analyze the multimodal written assessments used by a community ESL language and literacy program. Investigating writing, still image, and layout, data was gathered in three ways: multimodal social semiotic analysis of the assessments, artifact analysis of student assessments, and semi-structured qualitative interviews. Findings are beneficial for assessment and pedagogical practices for adults with refugee backgrounds who have emerging literacy, and are from non-Western countries.

**KEYWORDS:** visual literacy, multimodality, social semiotics, adult emergent readers, assessment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research is action research with a goal of creating a feasible set of assessments for L2 adult emergent readers from refugee backgrounds and non-Western countries. Focusing on writing, still image, and layout, the research seeks to understand how this population makes meaning from multimodal texts. The research presented is a critical analysis of the written assessments used by the Adult ESL Refugee Program (AERP)<sup>2</sup>,

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2. Denotes pseudonym.

a community ESL language and literacy program. This pilot study is part of a larger project that also includes the analysis of the program's oral assessments. The data presented are preliminary results from data collection during spring and summer 2016.

## 2. CONTEXT

### 2.1. PEOPLE FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS IN ARIZONA AND SECO COUNTY\*

In FY 2015, Arizona resettled the 4<sup>th</sup> highest number of refugees in the United States. Seco County received 961 of the 4,449 refugees resettled in Arizona in FY 2016; most of Seco County's refugees originated from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, and Burundi (Arizona Refugee, 2016: n.p.). In recent years, individuals from African nations comprised the largest population resettled in Seco County.

### 2.2. ADULT ESL REFUGEE PROGRAM (AERP)

AERP, part of Seco Community College Adult Basic Education, has been operating since the late 1970s. AERP is funded by the Department of Economic Security/Arizona Refugee Resettlement Program, and grants; it is a free program that provides English as a Second Language and English literacy instruction to adults from refugee backgrounds who have been in the United States for fewer than five years. AERP consistently serves on average 600 students annually; in FY 2016, the program served 678 students. The classes, which have open enrollment and no attendance policy, are intensive, meeting for two hours a day, four days a week.

Mirroring Seco County's resettled refugee population, AERP's classes are diverse. The study occurred in a class where students originated from Afghanistan, Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria, and spoke Arabic, Amharic, Bembe, Dari, French, For, Gouran, Gumuz, Italian, Jula, Kifluero, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Kiswahili, Lingala, Masalit, Moro, Somali, Spanish, Zaghawa, and/or Zoba.

### 2.3. CURRENT WRITTEN ASSESSMENT

The tests AERP uses to assess traditional literacy skills, *i.e.* reading and writing, were created many years ago by a previous AERP teacher. The program support technician, who has no training in assessment or education, has altered the tests numerous times since they were first made.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What ideologies are hidden in the composition of the original written assessment?
- How do non-Western adult emergent readers from refugee backgrounds make meaning from multimodal texts?

I will now briefly review terminology and the theoretical frameworks used in this research, and then turn to the data analysis.

## 4. TERMINOLOGY

### 4.1. ADULT EMERGENT READERS

Previously, scholars characterized people without print literacy as preliterate, nonliterate, or semiliterate; however, these perspectives define individuals according to something they lack. In opposition to these notions of deficit, Bigelow and Vinogradov (2011) proposed the term *emergent reader* as it "expresses the sense of becoming literate" (p. 121). Students who are non-Roman alphabet literate can also be said to have emerging English literacy. This paper is concerned with students who are L2 adult emergent readers, that is, they are becoming literate for the first time, and doing so in a language other than their first language, and with students who are non-Roman alphabet literate.

### 4.2. LITERACY, VISUAL LITERACY, TEXTS

The definition of literacy I use for this research extends beyond just reading and writing. Per New Literacy Studies, literacy is embedded in a social context (Barton, 2009); it is also the ability to interact with and understand a variety of text forms including "visual images and their relationship to the written word" (New London Group, 1996: 61).

Bruski (2011), Burt, Peyton, and Schaetzel (2008), and Linney (1995) note that charts, maps, clipart, graphs, pictures, and drawings can be perplexing for students with emerging literacy and limited visual literacy. Emergent readers with emerging visual literacy may not recognize meaning in a printed image, particularly if depicted objects are from outside the student's home culture. As Stein (2008) notes, "meaning-making is 'sense-making';" it is tied to how humans understand objects, and to the extent that interacting with an object makes sense within their frames of reference (p. 32).

For the purposes of this paper, I define a text as any product that is written or spoken, is a visual image, or is a combination of words and images; thus, a text can be multimodal (Fairclough, 1995: 4; Kress, 2010: 59).

## 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Drawing on Critical Applied Linguistics (CALx), this paper also employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and critical multimodal social semiotic analysis (Pennycook,

2001: 78-79). These various threads in the literature are interwoven, and held together by their common concerns of language, power, and social contexts.

### 5.1. CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTICS

A central element of Critical Applied Linguistics (CALx) is “a way of exploring language in social contexts that goes beyond mere correlations between language and society, and instead raises critical questions to do with access, power, disparity, desire, difference, and resistance” (Pennycook, 2001: 6). Concerned with macro and micro relations, CALx relates applied linguistics to the broader social, cultural, and political domains, and aims to highlight how any classroom, text, or conversation must be studied in relation to these larger domains (Pennycook, 2001: 5, 11). The classroom – its content, texts, materials, curriculum, and languages used – are a microcosm of the broader social order; dominant ideologies of the outside world are reproduced in the classroom (Pennycook, 2001: 115). Keeping these macro and micro realms in mind, Critical Applied Linguistics involves constant skepticism or questioning of the assumed norms of applied linguistics, and aims to enact change through critical, reflective praxis.

### 5.2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse is the whole process of social interaction whereby discursive events shape social structures, institutions, and situations, and are also shaped by them (Fairclough, 1995). Critical Discourse Analysis describes, interprets, and explains relationships between texts and the social world, and considers these relationships at the micro and macro levels. It is concerned with mediation between the textual and the social, and how people move between them.

### 5.3. CRITICAL MULTIMODAL SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Expanding the concept of discourse to include non-linguistic modes of meaning-making, Kress uses a multimodal social semiotic approach to study how and what meanings are made (2010: 57). Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, and speech are examples of modes used in representation and communication (Kress, 2010: 80). Modes are the “socially made and culturally available material-semiotic resources for representation” (Kress, 2011: 208); these modal resources can be similar or different across cultures. Kress defines *multimodality* as “the many material resources beyond speech and writing” that can be used to make meaning” (2011: 208). Multimodality is founded on the notion that the meaning of signs created from multimodal semiotic resources is social, contextual, and temporal. Modal systems, such as an entire test or set of assessments, can be studied as texts, with a focus on their use in the given social context.

Kress’s approach is not a critique of discourse but one concerned with how meanings are designed and re-designed through interaction, and how meanings materialize

through mode or a multimodal ensemble. A critical multimodal social semiotic theory goes beyond description, and analyzes multimodal texts and their role in creating, re-producing, and transforming social practices.

#### 5.3.1. *Multimodal Composition*

Investigating writing, still image, and layout, this research uses Kress’s approach to analyze the multimodal composition of AERP’s assessments; it also utilizes Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996) visual grammar to read the images in the assessments.

##### 5.3.1.1. Writing

The mode of writing has socially-constructed affordances that differ from the mode of speech. “Writing has words, clauses, and sentences; graphic resources such as font, size, bolding, spacing, frames, color, punctuation marks; and visual means such as space between words or around paragraphs” (Kress, 2010: 79). The mode of writing is spatially displayed, governed by the culturally/socially-determined directionality of the line, and tied to syntactical orderings (Kress, 2010). The use of writing is socially and culturally regulated and contextually dependent.

##### 5.3.1.2. Still Image

Unable to be expressed by words, sounds, phonology, or syntax, still images are based in the logic of space; meaning is established by both spatial arrangement and the relationship between depicted entities (Kress, 2010). This mode of communication is also culturally-specific and socially regulated (Kress, 2010). Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) grammar of visual design (for Western cultures), comprised of narrative representations and conceptual representations, is useful for the consideration of still images. The visual grammar is concerned with the set of socially-constructed resources for the construction of meaning.

##### 5.3.1.3. Layout

Layout can orient viewers to notions of centrality and marginality, Ideal and Real, and Given and New (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). For Western cultures, the top, as the generalized essence of the information, is Ideal, and the bottom, the details, down-to-earth, practical information, is Real. In a culture with a left-right reading direction, the visual reader starts at the Given and ends at the New (Kress, 2010). Because layouts are organized according to socially-constructed norms such as left-right and top-down, they ascribe readers to a particular audience. Readers who do not belong to the intended audience may misunderstand the intended message, glean a different message from the composition by benefit of their sociocultural resources.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is tripartite (see Table 1). 1) I employed a critical multimodal social semiotic textual analysis on the assessments, focusing on the modes of writing, still image, and layout. 2) I analyzed the artifacts (the assessments) created by the students, examining what they wrote, how they wrote it, and where they wrote it, as well as what students chose to not write. 3) I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews in the students' L1 with the help of three interpreters. I met with each participant individually, and asked questions about the original and first two revised assessments; each participant took part in one interview after the second revision of the assessment. The interviews, which ranged from 30 minutes in length to 1 hour and 25 minutes, were recorded with a video camera; the camera was aimed at the assessments on the table so that deictic gestures could be recorded. All the data were coded according to theme, and triangulated with the other analyses.

To ensure that a difference in score or meaning-making was not due to learning over time, students were given the original and first two revised assessments on three consecutive class days. The original assessments were on day one; the first revised assessment, which contained the same questions as the original assessment but with different images, was day two. The second revised assessment, created with the data obtained from the critical textual analysis of the original assessment, was given on day three. Finally, the data from the interviews, coupled with the data from the original and first two revised assessments and participant artifacts, was used to create the third version of the revised assessment. The third revision of the assessment was given to students approximately eight weeks after the second revision; the data from this third revision is in the process of analysis. Not all participants took the original version and first two revisions of the assessment due to the program's open enrollment and open attendance policy; furthermore, not all students who took the assessments participated in the interviews, though all interview participants took the assessments. Finally, students were interviewed only once to ensure that the act of interviewing and asking them about their meaning-making did not affect how they interacted with the assessments on subsequent, near-future sittings.

|   | Spring 2016                           | June 2016   | June/July 2016   | Aug. 2016                                  | Sept. 2016                                  | Post Sept. 2016 |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|-----------------|
| Data Collection Part 1  | *Original assessment                  |   |  |  |   |                 |
| Data Collection Part 2  |                                       | *Students took the original assessment on the first day<br><br>*Students took the first revised assessment on the second day<br><br>*Students took the second revised assessment on the third day |  |  | *Students took the third revised assessment |                 |
| Data Collection Part 3  |                                       |   | *Students participated in semi-structured interviews (1 interview per student) |  |   |                 |
| Analysis Part 1: Critical multimodal social semiotic textual analysis | *Original assessment textual analysis | *First revised assessment textual analysis<br><br>*Second revised assessment textual analysis   |  | *Third revised assessment textual analysis | *Third revised assessment textual analysis  |                 |

|  | Spring 2016 | June 2016   | June/July 2016   | Aug. 2016  | Sept. 2016 | Post Sept. 2016                             |
|--|-------------|---|--|--|------------|---|
| Analysis Part 2: Artifact analysis of students' writings |             | *Original assessment artifact analysis<br><br>*First revised assessment artifact analysis<br><br>*Second revised assessment artifact analysis |  |  |            | *Third revised assessment artifact analysis |
| Analysis Part 3: Interview data                          |             |   | *Interview data concerning original assessment, first revised assessment, second revised assessment analyses | *Interview data concerning original assessment, first revised assessment, second revised assessment analyses |            |   |

Table 1: Phases of Data Collection and Analysis

## 7. PARTICIPANTS

Participants were students from the literacy class the researcher teaches for AERP; their participation was voluntary. Their ages ranged from 18 – 63 years old; both males and females participated. 28 students gave permission to study their tests; 18 of those students participated in interviews. Of those 18 students, nine countries were represented (Burundi, Chad, Colombia, Congo [DRC], Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Ethiopia, Iraq, Sudan).

## 8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss the multimodal aspects of the assessments. This discussion is based on the multimodal social semiotic analysis of the assessments, the students' artifacts, and the interviews. The quotes that are provided in the following discussion section are each one person's response. Occasionally more than one person provided a


similar response; however, numbers for such responses are not indicated below. Responses were selected to showcase what was thematically representative of the data gathered, as opposed to quantitatively represented. The data was categorized into six thematic groups: clip art image, directions, layout; boxes and parentheses; lines and layout; narrative images and symbols; stylized words; and conceptual images. Participant responses for each of these categories will be discussed in the following sections.

### 8.1. CLIP ART IMAGE, DIRECTIONS, LAYOUT

On the original assessment, the top of page 1 has an image of a clip art pen to the left of a set of bolded words (Figure 1).

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



**Fill out the form**

1. Last Name \_\_\_\_\_

2. First Name \_\_\_\_\_

3. Male ☐ Female ☐

Figure 1: Image and Directions on the Top of p. 1. Original Assessment.

The pen is meant to supplement the words, providing the student with guidance for completing the page; this meaning was not recognized by most participants (Example 1). When asked what the image to the left of the directions is, representative student responses included:

Example 1.  
"fish"  
"insect"  
"I don't know"  
"pen"

These responses highlight the range of interpretations that occurred. The students' responses were experiential, relying on previous knowledge to both make a connection and understand the image. Follow-up questions clarified how the participants' lived experiences affected their interpretation of the image, with students referencing the fish, insects, and pens they have seen and interacted with, as well as the students who said they had never seen such a thing.

The bolding of the directions in Figure 1 is a graphic means of writing that shows the words' importance, much like how significance is designated by a change in volume or intonation in speech. Example 2 details some of the responses students provided when

asked if there was a relationship between the words and the image, and if so, why the words were bolded, and how the image and words were related to the entire page.

Example 2.

"The color is the same; they are the same because they are black."

"Here they used a lot of ink... Maybe this one they put ink just show that this is bigger than this."

"No, I don't know for sure."

"Because if you have a pen, you write."

Example 2 shows that some of the participants did not make a connection between the still image and the writing (the bolding), and they also did not understand the significance of the layout. As defined previously, Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework for analyzing layout states that the Ideal, the generalized information, is located at the top of the page, and the Real, the practical information, is located at the bottom. Because this still image and these words are located at the top of the page, they are the Ideal, and the remaining section is the Real; here, the Ideal is the directions, and the Real is the answers students are meant to provide. The clip art and bolded words add to the salience of this layout. As noted in the examples above, however, many students did not see this relationship of the Ideal and the Real, and the clip art and bolded words. Both Figure 1 and Example 1 exemplify a common image type, writing style, and layout of the original assessments, and the sorts of responses students gave.

## 8.2. BOXES AND PARENTHESES

As seen in Figure 1, the first page of the original assessment is composed of single words or short phrases with a line on the right. This fulfills Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) Given/New concept where the question or prompt is the Given, and the answers are the New. Here, the boxes to the right of the words "male" and "female", and parentheses along the right side of the page are the New; they should be marked in some fashion (Figure 1). Artifact analysis showed that many students marked both boxes; they did this with either different marks (Figure 2), or the same mark (Figure 3).

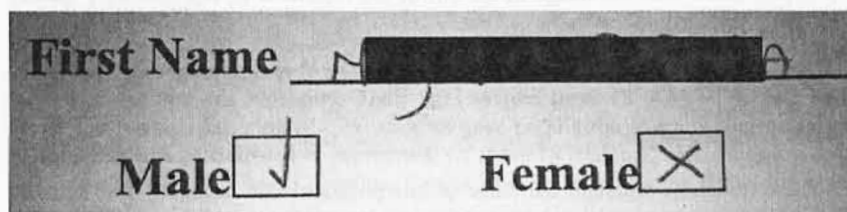


Figure 2: Different Marks in the Boxes to the Right of the Words "Male" and "Female" on p. 1. Original assessment.

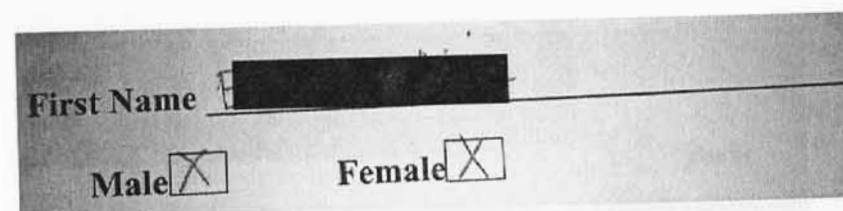


Figure 3: Identical Marks in the Boxes to the Right of the Words "Male" and "Female" on p. 1. Original Assessment.

The interview data revealed that some students thought they should put an "x" in the box for the gender they were not, and a tick in the box for the gender they were (Example 3).

Example 3.

"I mark here because I am male, and here because I am not female."

Some students wrote the same mark in both boxes because they believed they must interact with all the empty boxes (Example 4).

Example 4.

"I think I will tick everywhere. Both."

There are empty parentheses, representing the New, at the end of every line on the right side of the first page of the original assessment (Figure 4); here, the New is the score students earned for every line.

5. City \_\_\_\_\_ )

6. State \_\_\_\_\_ )

7. Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_ )

Figure 4: Parentheses on the Right Side of p. 1. Original Assessment.

The graphic resources, writing, and layout do not make clear that students should not write in this area. It was common for students to write in the parentheses (Figure 5).



Date \_\_\_\_\_

23

**Fill out the form**

1. Last Name \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

2. First Name \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

3. Male ☐ Female ☒

4. Address 1400 \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

5. City \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

6. State \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

7. Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

8. Phone number (Home) \_\_\_\_\_ (Cell) ☒ none (✓)

9. Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

10. Signature \_\_\_\_\_ (✓)

10

Figure 5: Marks in the Parentheses on the Right Side of on p. 1. Original Assessment.

Some students believed it was necessary to write in the parentheses, and that they could write whatever they wanted (Example 5), while others thought they needed to write in the parentheses only if they wrote on the line to the left (Example 6).

Example 5.

"I can put here the number. ... I can put any number ... 5, 0, 3."

"I have to put in a word."

Example 6.

"If I write, I can make a mark."

"I will put my name here, and then I will tick here."




The effort to write in all potential areas (specifically boxes and parentheses) of the assessment either shows the students' determination to respond to every request, or a perceived notion of requirement for different varieties of blank spaces. This evidence demonstrates the students' willingness to try, but also their emerging knowledge of schooling and assessment.

### 8.3. LINES AND LAYOUT

On the second page of the original assessment, there is a section in the middle with another stylized clip art pen and directions that are surrounded by two heavy black lines (Figure 6). Regarding the questions at the top of the page, per the Ideal/Real composition, the questions are the Ideal, the essence of information, and the answers are the Real, the practical details.

(✓) Answer

1. What is this used for? 2. This sign means? 3. How much money is this?

A. Laundry.  
B. Recycling  
C. Trash

A. Women's Restroom.  
B. Men's/Women's restroom  
C. Men's restroom

A. \$2.11  
B. \$0.10  
C. \$1.11

(✎) Write

4. Complete the sentence.

He is at the \_\_\_\_\_

5. What is the best price per pound?



| Savory Market   | LEE'S MARKET  |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| \$0.59 lb   | \$0.55 lb   |
| It is _____ per pound.  | It is _____ per pound.  |

Figure 6: Top and Middle Section of p. 2. Original Assessment.



As seen in Figures 7 and 8, rather than writing a check mark next to the correct answers, students wrote the answer from the top section between these two lines. Figure 8 shows an inconsistent use of the check mark above, and use of the lines in the middle of the page.

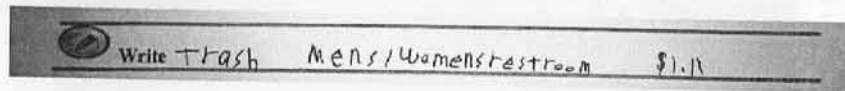


Figure 7: Student Writing on Lines in Middle Section of p. 2. Original Assessment.

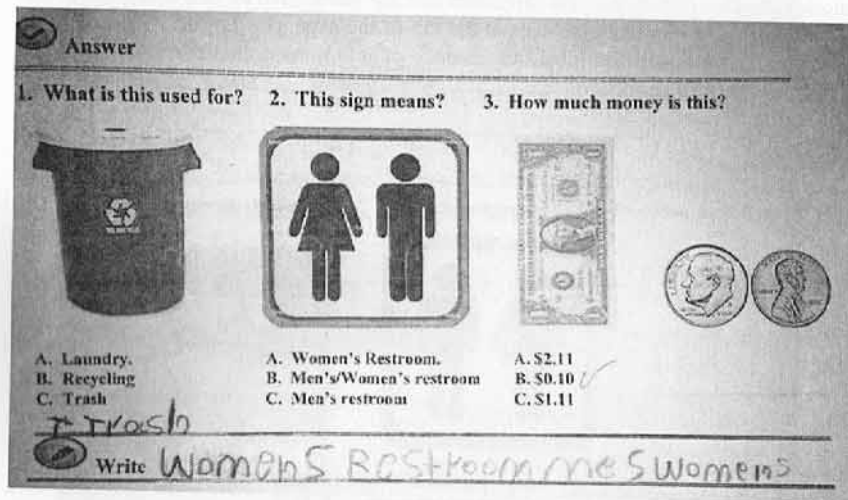


Figure 8: Student Writing on Lines in Middle Section of p. 2. Original Assessment.

Participants' responses (Example 7) concerning why lines were in the middle of the page, and what, if anything, should be written there, are as follows:

Example 7

"I can write here."

"[I write] ... The answer to the questions above."

Participants also noted that they preferred to write about images below them, and that they preferred multiple choice answers to be placed above the image (Example 8). This preference for provided answers above the image is an inversion of the (Western) Ideal and Real; this data evidences that students prefer the generalized essence to be below the details/practical information. This information explains the writing in Figures 7 and 8.

Example 8.

"The writing would be better on the bottom, and the circling on the top."

On revised versions of the assessment, though the multiple-choice answers had been placed above the images, participants continued to write on dividing lines which had been changed to dashed lines (Figures 9, 10).

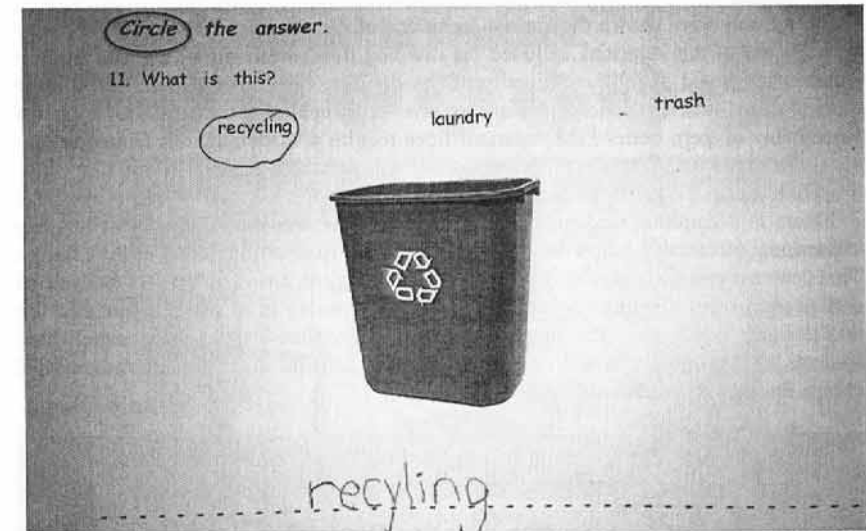


Figure 9: Student Writing on Dividing Lines. First Revised Assessment.

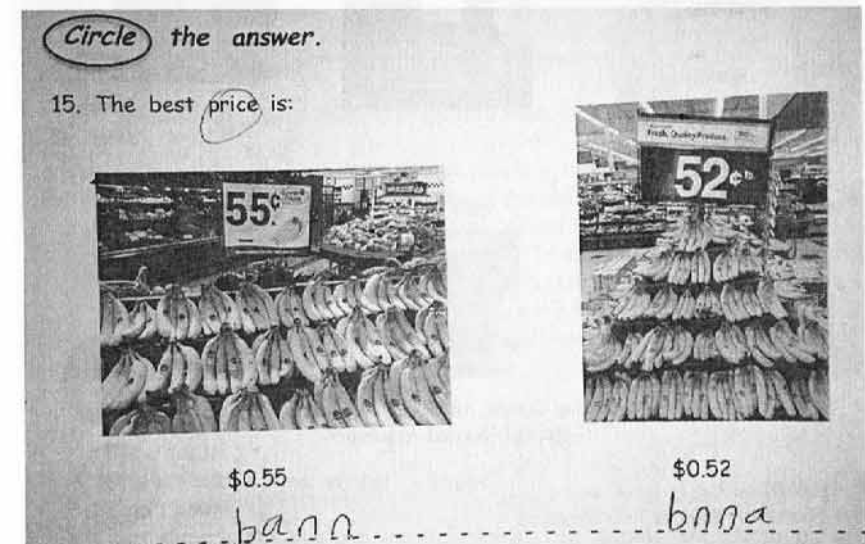


Figure 10: Student Writing on Dividing Lines. First Revised Assessment.

Participants were shown the various iterations of the assessments during their interviews; some of the iterations included the dividing lines, while others did not. Participants, when asked about the necessity of the dividing lines, regardless of if solid or dashed, stated that it was not necessary to have lines separating the sections of the test since many of them believe the separator lines require a written answer (Example 9).

Example 9.

"It means I have to write here."

Figure 11 exemplifies students choosing the correct answer above, and not writing any extraneous information below because dividing lines were not included in the section. This demonstrates a successful revision of the assessment, based on artifact analysis of earlier assessment versions, as the students made meaning in a way that matched the text designer's intention. The interview data supported the artifact data; namely that students preferred to not have dividing lines in texts, and that students preferred multiple choice answers to be provided above the images.

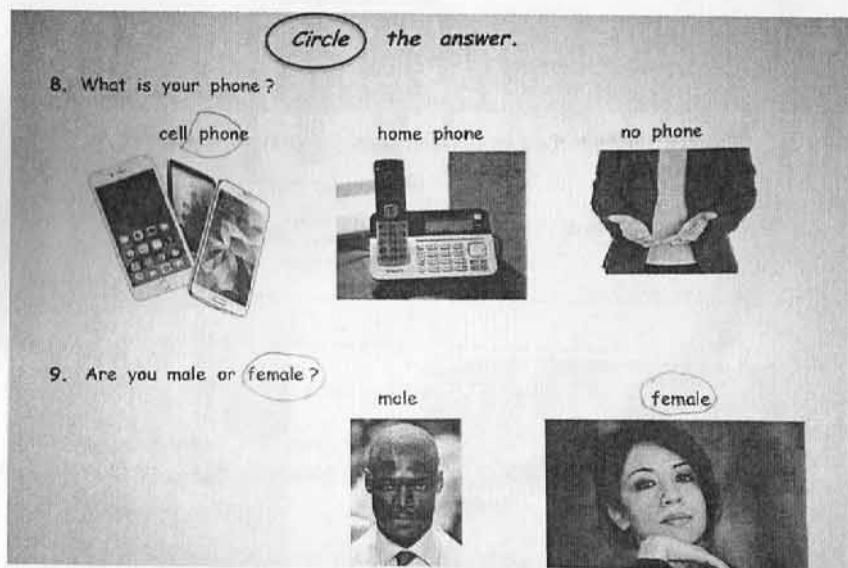


Figure 11: Student Choosing Correct Answer Above Image; no Additional Writing. Second Revised Assessment.

#### 8.4 NARRATIVE IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

There is a narrative image with a row of seven symbols above it on the second page of the original assessment (Figure 12). The image and symbols are meant to be read in concert, with the symbols providing a second layer of information about the visual ensemble. Utilizing Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework, the image is a narrative process where the man, the Actor, hands money to the teller, the Goal, and a reactional process shows the other woman, the Reactor, looking at the man, the Phenomenon.

#### 4. Complete the sentence.



Figure 12: Clip Art Image of People at a Bank. Original Assessment.

There are also Possessive Attributes for the people in this clip art image. The woman standing behind the counter has the attributes of the counter and the money; these attributes index her as a bank teller. The man at the counter has the Possessive Attribute of the briefcase, which indexes him as a businessman. The attributes and narrative process indicate this is a bank; however, these are Western content schemata.

Example 10 details the responses students gave when asked what was happening in the image, and where the people in the image were.

Example 10.

"This is an office."

"That woman is mopping."

"It is a school."

"They are exciting one another ... angry."

"I don't know."

"They came to see this one who fell down. This money here and people are having money. For example, this one falls down and he has to go to the hospital and he will be needing money to pay."

These responses demonstrate the salience of lived experiences and personal history in meaning-making. Most of these students do not have jobs, and, as told to the researcher during both the semi-structured interviews and during the classes she teaches, they do not regularly visit banks; participants therefore map this image onto their personal

experiences, seeing an office that may be similar to their resettlement office, a school because two people have bags, or a woman mopping because it looks like how they clean their homes. The participant who believes that the man in the lower right corner has fallen down, and the others are doing something with money to help him, is also constructing socially-contextualized meaning from this multimodal ensemble in a way other than it was intended. Furthermore, the grainy quality of this clip art image could potentially affect how students make meaning from it.

Many students saw no relationship between the dollar symbols and the image, or they did not know what the symbols were (Example 11). Their lack of understanding of the symbol meant that they did not receive additional support to help them comprehend the image below it. The participant who responded with "dollar" is the one referenced above who concluded that the man fell and needed money; his response seems to have been partially guided by the interpretation of the dollar symbol above the image.

Example 11.

"S with a line through it."

"S"

"Flowers"

"I don't know."

"Dollar"

The first revised assessment included a photograph of a bank teller to determine what type of meaning students made from it (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Bank Teller With Money. First Revised Assessment.

During the interviews, participants were asked about who and what were in the photograph, what was happening in the photograph, and where the people were; many students said this was a woman who had cash, but they did not connect that woman to working in a bank (Example 12). This image was chosen for its iconic and culturally-specific features, e.g. a person behind a counter who is handing over money, the hint of a computer keyboard, the blurry shape of the wad of cash in the background, the unattached hand of the person receiving money, etc. As noted in participant responses, it seems this image was too iconic and culturally specific for students to recognize the bank teller's job or her location.

Example 12.

"That is a woman. She has money."

"Cash"

The second revised assessment included an image of a woman at a grocery store (Figure 14). This image was chosen because it had more concrete, recognizable features such as the grocery cart, the full body of the woman and child, the vegetables on shelves, etc.



Figure 14: Woman Shopping at the Grocery Store. Second Revised Assessment.

During interviews, all participants were able to correctly respond to “where is she?” and “how do you know?” Participants explained that they had similar experiences which allowed them to recognize the woman’s location (Example 13).

Example 13.

“Because I see it.”

“She is picking some items – food – and is putting in, and this baby, this small baby is sitting.”

“I see the peppers and the vegetables.”

Photographs therefore must have recognizable details and reflect students’ lives. While this shopping experience appears quite American, potentially making it unrecognizable for this population, an explanation posits students are now regularly participating in similar shopping environments, and have created a frame of reference for understanding the photograph. Banks, on the other hand, as shown in the prior photograph, could be unrecognizable since students are not frequenting them; conversely, the image of the bank, as noted previously, could not have enough identifiable features.

### 8.5 STYLIZED WORDS

Figure 15 is a grainy clip art image; it has stylized directions with the word “look” appearing as if it has eyes.

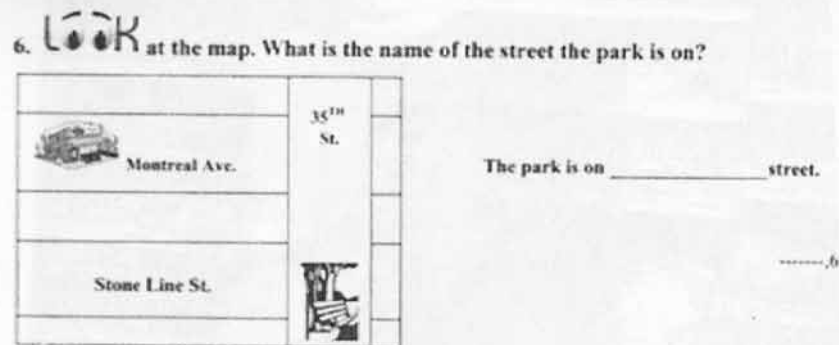


Figure 15: Stylized Directions; a Neighborhood Map. Original Assessment.

Participants’ responses (Example 14) to the questions “what are these?” and “what is their relationship to the rest of the word(s)?” are:

Example 14.

“Eggs”

“Chicken eggs”

“I don’t know.”

“Eyes ... a face.”

Most did not recognize the stylized letter “O” or acknowledge a relationship. Some participants identified the “O”s as eyes, but did not see a significance between them and the rest of the page.

### 8.6 CONCEPTUAL IMAGES

Per Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) framework, the image underneath the stylized eyes is an analytical process (Figure 15). The store in the upper left is a Carrier with signs, shelves, light poles, and an awning as the Possessive Attributes that make up the whole of the store. The image of the park in the lower right corner consists of the park as the Carrier, and the bench and tree as the Possessive Attributes that compose it. The lines and two analytical processes of the store and park create an analytical process of a neighborhood map where the map is the Carrier, and the store and park are the Possessive Attributes. There is a high degree of abstract visual literacy, Western content schemata, and Western visual grammar needed to correctly comprehend this image, and answer the question.

The majority of the participants were unable to identify the store (Example 15), park (Example 16), or map (Example 17) as exemplified in these responses.

Example 15.

“I see a camera.”

“That is a car.”

“It is a house.”

“I don’t know.”

Example 16.

“This is a tree.”

“I don’t know.”

Example 17.

“I don’t know.”

“This is a person [with his arms up]. ... This is the face of the person and this person is having a car, and will go in this car. ... These are tires.”

The second answer in Example 17 is salient as the participant combines all aspects of the multimodal visual ensemble, pointing to the eyes as the face, the park as a man with his hands up, the store as the car of the man/face, and the tires of the car. The participant, however, does not make meaning as the creator of the original assessment intended.

### 9. IMPLICATIONS

Turning from how meaning is made in these multimodal assessments, we must now consider principles of language assessment in reference to AERP’s original written assessment. Utilizing Brown and Abeywickrama’s (2010) principles of language assessment (practicality, authenticity, reliability, validity, and washback), it is evident AERP’s original assessment violates the principles of reliability, validity, and authenticity. The test content and items must be unambiguous to the test-taker for the test to be considered reliable; this research has shown many items that are ambiguous to the test taker. Additionally, the tests are not valid because they do not measure what they are supposed to measure (*i.e.* English literacy skills and English language skills), but instead measure how meaning is constructed from Western multimodal texts. The assessments do not offer useful, meaningful information about a test-taker’s ability as the content



being assessed is different from the desired content; thus, the tests are not valid. Finally, the assessments are not authentic. While the first page of the assessment is similar to the type of form a student may see at his resettlement agency's office, the majority of the images presented throughout the assessment are not authentic. Students would not witness events that looked like these images in everyday life, nor are students able to draw from their prior social context to understand them. The revised assessments strive to follow the principles of language assessment.

Tests are administered by powerful institutions and can have detrimental effects on test-takers (Shohamy, 2001). Regular discouraging assessment could lead students to have negative thoughts and deep fears about assessments with very high stakes such as the U.S. naturalization test. Because of the power tests hold, it is essential for assessments, even low-stakes program-specific assessments, to be realistic and achievable as high levels of anxiety or self-consciousness can negatively affect student performance. Thus, if instructors and administrators desire an accurate view of the English language and literacy skills and knowledge of adult emergent readers, they should provide students with assessments that mirror and support how students make meaning from writing, still image, and layout.

## 10. FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The data from this action research pilot study provided rich results. The revisions and analysis of the literacy level assessments will continue in the future; the oral assessment, not discussed in this paper, will be revised and piloted, as well as the intake and diagnostic exams, and the exams for the program's upper levels. A similar methodology as was used in this pilot study will be utilized in the future research. A standardized set of rubrics will also be created, and the instructors and administrators of the program will be trained on their use.

Because this was a pilot study with a relatively small number of participants, the results may not be generalizable to all L2 adult emergent readers from refugee backgrounds and non-Western cultures. Additionally, because not all students who took the original and revised assessments participated in the interviews, there may be some gaps in the study's results. The methodology also allowed only a limited amount of time for researching different varieties of photographs; future research will consider different varieties of photographs in more depth in interviews.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

The following answers have emerged to the research questions posed: 1) What ideologies are hidden in the composition of the original written assessment? and 2) How do non-Western adult emergent readers from refugee backgrounds make meaning from multimodal texts? Regarding the ideologies hidden in the composition of the original assessment, it is evident that the original written assessment presents an ideology of Western knowledge and schooling; it does not take into account the lived experiences and personal histories of the students. The assessment a) utilizes test-taking norms that may be unfamiliar to students from this population, b) assumes a high level of visual literacy, and c) presupposes knowledge of Western visual grammar and content schemata.

Additionally, in consideration of how non-Western adult emergent readers from refugee backgrounds make meaning from multimodal texts, we can see that they make meaning in different ways than literate students from Western cultures. This is evidenced from what they write on lines and in boxes, and how they understand layout, images, and relationships between images and layout. A successful redesign of the assessments will provide a more accurate depiction of the language and literacy skills and knowledge held by L2 adult emergent readers from refugee backgrounds.

The study's findings have provided a glimpse of which types of writing, still image, and layout are most appropriate for adults with refugee backgrounds from non-Western countries, who also have emerging literacy. These findings are useful for both assessment practices and for pedagogical practices. It is recommended that instructors 1) use realistic photographs with recognizable, contextualized details, 2) do not clutter pages with additional lines, boxes, and/or parentheses, 3) do not use abstract, symbolic images whether they be photographs, clip art, graphic devices, or line drawings, 4) recognize that students may make meaning in ways different than the instructor assumed. L2 adult emergent readers may also benefit from classroom instruction in (Western) visual and multimodal literacy in addition to traditional literacy.

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