

From Silence to Voice: Multimodal Meaning-making in EFL Dubbing Projects as a Critical Digital Literacy Practice

Muhammad Anjar Nugraha
Universitas Negeri Semarang
anjarnugraha@students.unnes.ac.id

Rudi Hartono
Universitas Negeri Semarang
rudi.hartono@mail.unnes.ac.id

Sri Wahyuni
Universitas Negeri Semarang
sriwahyunifbs@main.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students construct and represent meaning through scripting and dubbing a short silent movie. The project was conducted in an undergraduate EFL Speaking course consisting of two groups (each group consists of four students) at a private university in Subang during the 2025-2026 academic year, after they learned the topic about slang expressions and idiomatic language. This study employed an artifact-based qualitative case study focusing on students' scripts and the final dubbed videos as the primary data. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through coding, categorizing, interpreting, comparing, and concluding to uncover patterns of language use, performance, and multimodal meaning-making. The findings indicate that students actively reconstructed meaning from visual texts, demonstrated narrative and expressive techniques, and reflected their agency in constructing meaning in a digital communication context. This study suggests that dubbing projects can serve as a pedagogical practice that integrates language learning with critical engagement in digital environments.

Keywords: Dubbing, Multimodality, Critical Digital Literacy, Project-based Learning

INTRODUCTION

The integration of digital technology in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of language pedagogy. Recent shifts in the field emphasize that communication in the digital age extends far beyond linguistic forms, encompassing a wide range of semiotic resources such as images, sounds, and spatial designs (Lim, 2025). This multimodal turn requires EFL learners to not only master grammar and vocabulary but also to navigate and produce complex digital texts effectively (Eka & Rahmanu, 2024). Consequently, contemporary language education must prioritize students' ability to engage critically with these digital environments to ensure they become proficient global communicators.

just functional technical skills; it empowers students to identify biases, negotiate power dynamics, and exercise agency in digital spaces (Carcamo & Pino, 2025; Selwyn et al., 2022). By fostering a critical mindset, educators can help students move from passive consumers of information to intentional producers who use digital tools to represent their identities and perspectives (H. Wang, 2025).

Central to this pedagogical shift is the concept of multimodality, which highlights how meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes. Multimodal immersion in higher education has been

In this context, critical digital literacy (CDL) has emerged as an essential 21st-century skill, positioning learners as active interpreters and creators of meaning. CDL involves more than

shown to enhance language competency by allowing students to utilize various resources including visual, auditory, and linguistic to express complex ideas (Eka & Rahmanu, 2024). Scholars argue that multimodal literacy is no longer a supplementary skill but an integral component of communicative competence that must be strategically embedded in the TESOL curriculum (Jewitt et al., 2025; Lim, 2025).

Despite the growing importance of these literacies, many EFL classrooms still struggle to move beyond traditional, monomodal teaching methods. However, the use of Audio-Visual Translation (AVT) tools, particularly didactic dubbing, offers a promising solution. Recent research indicates that dubbing activities significantly improve oral language skills, pronunciation, and student motivation across different proficiency levels (Wang & Lee, 2025). By synchronizing their voices with visual cues, students engage in deep meaning-making that bridges the gap between mechanical language practice and authentic communication (Beltran, 2024).

The dubbing project in this study, conducted within a Speaking for General Communication course, serves as a practical application of these theoretical frameworks. By requesting students to create original scripts for silent movies, the project encourages transmediation, which is often defined as the process of transferring meaning across different semiotic modes (Wang, 2025). The absence of original dialogue forces students to reconstruct narratives independently, using authentic language forms such as slang and idioms, which reflects their creative agency and linguistic appropriation (Arbain, 2023; Sutrisno, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to explore how EFL students construct and represent meaning through dubbing projects as a form of critical

digital literacy practice. By analyzing student-produced scripts and final video performances, the research examines how the learners negotiate identity and expression through multimodal composition. This study contributes to the field by illustrating how digital creativity can be leveraged to foster critical engagement, moving EFL pedagogy toward a more inclusive and technologically responsive future (Aridasarie & Rohmah, 2024; Lim, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an artifact-based qualitative case study design to provide an in-depth exploration of students' multimodal meaning-making processes (Sutrisno, 2024). The research was conducted at a public university in Subang, West Java, Indonesia, specifically within the Speaking for General Communication course. The participants were two groups (that consisted of four students each) of undergraduate EFL students purposively selected based on their completion of a digital dubbing project as their final semester examination in the 2025-2026 academic year. By focusing on a specific case, the study aimed to capture the nuances of how multimodal resources are utilized to reconstruct narratives from silent visual texts.

The research procedure followed a structured pedagogical scaffolding. Initially, students received instruction on informal language, including expressing likes/dislikes, narrating past memorable events, and discussing future dreams. To provide a clear benchmark, the instructor implemented a modelling technique by showcasing exemplary dubbing projects from previous cohorts. Subsequently, students engaged in a collaborative scripting phase, where they practiced transmediation by interpreting silent films and constructing original dialogues. The final stage was the production phase, which involved recording and editing dubbed videos.

Data were collected through two primary artifacts: student-produced scripts and the final dubbed video performances. These artifacts were analyzed using multimodal discourse analysis to rigorously examine how students leveraged various semiotic resources (Jewitt et al., 2025). Furthermore, a thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns in linguistic appropriation, such as the use of slang and idiomatic expressions, to understand how students negotiated identity and meaning in a digital literacy context (Williams & Moser, 2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of student-produced scripts and dubbed videos reveals a sophisticated level of multimodal meaning-making. Additionally, it is evident that students demonstrated an ability to transform silent visual narratives into coherent linguistic structures, a process known as transmediation (Wang, 2025). In the *Dust* project (Group 1), students did not only describe what they saw; they gave life to inanimate objects, creating a narrative world where Lint and Fuzz possess distinct personalities and emotions. This move from visual silence to vocal presence marks the first level of critical engagement, where students exercise their agency to fill the semiotic gaps left by the original creators (Jewitt et al., 2025).

A prominent finding is the strategic use of informal language, specifically slang and idiomatic expressions, to establish social identity. In the *Salon* script (Group 2), the use of terms such as *slay*, *baddie style*, *sheesh*, and *lookin like a whole snack* illustrates how students appropriate contemporary digital vernacular to reflect Gen-Z culture (Faiza et al., 2024). This linguistic choice indicates that students are not merely 'parroting' textbook English but are critically selecting language that resonates with their own digital identities and social realities, a core tenet of

critical digital literacy (Carcamo & Pino, 2025).

Furthermore, the dubbing project facilitated a deep integration of various semiotic modes. Students had to synchronize their verbal output with the characters' gestures and the video's pacing. For instance, in Group 1's script, the transition from *sniffing* cheese to the frantic *RUN!!! NOW!!!* shows a keen awareness of how timing and intonation amplify the visual tension. According to Eka & Rahmanu (2024), this type of multimodal immersion allows learners to experience language as a lived performance rather than a static set of rules, thereby enhancing their overall communicative competence in digital-rich environments. The following Table 1 displays the condensed data from two groups and their interpretations.

Table 1. Multimodal Analysis of Students' Digital Agency

Data & Context	Analysis of Agency
Group 1 (Dust) Scene: Sniffing cheese Script: "Mmm... <i>CHEESE!</i> "	Meaning Reconstruction: Assigning human sensory traits to inanimate objects.
Group 1 (Dust) Scene: Vacuum starts Script: " <i>THE BEAST IS AWAKE!</i> "	Narrative Agency: Redefining technical objects into narrative villains.
Group 2 (Salon) Scene: New hairstyle Script: " <i>SLAY! Baddie style!</i> "	Identity Appropriation: Performing Gen-Z identity via digital slang.
Group 2 (Salon) Scene: Protecting partner Script: " <i>CHILL THE F OUT!</i> "	Critical Re-authoring: Using media tropes to reconstruct social roles.

It is indicated in the previous table 1 that students creatively changed the meaning of the silent films. They gave 'life' to inanimate objects, such as turning a vacuum cleaner into a 'beast,' and used modern slang like *slay* and *baddie style*. This proves that the dubbing project is more than just a regular

speaking task. It allows students to express their real identities as Gen-Z and shows their ability to create stories that are meaningful and relevant to their digital world. The upcoming Figure 1 illustrates the participating students' creativity in the form of a captured image from a student-produced script inserted in the video.



Figure 1. Vacuum cleaner as a narrative antagonist

The findings also highlight students' ability to construct complex narratives through collaborative dialogue. The interaction between characters, such as the conflict between Fuzz and Lint or the "telenovela vibes" in the Salon scene, demonstrates narrative engagement that goes beyond basic speaking skills. As noted by Liang & Hwang (2023), digital storytelling through dubbing fosters a two-way communication where students must anticipate how their audience will perceive the interaction between sound and image. This suggests that the script writing and video dubbing projects effectively developed the participating students' social semiotic awareness.

Critical digital literacy was particularly evident in how students reconstructed meaning rather than simply translating it. Since the movies were silent, students were forced to interpret the "homeowner's" actions in Group 1 or the "barber's" panicky reaction in Group 2 based on

visual cues alone. This interpretive act is a form of digital agency, where students take ownership of the text (Sutrisno, 2024). They are not just language learners; they are digital authors who decide the motives and backstories of the characters they portray (Wang, 2025).

In terms of oral performance, the dubbing app environment provided a low-stakes yet authentic platform for practicing pronunciation and intonation. The use of exclamations like *WHOAAA CHILL THE F OUT!* or *BABYYYYY NOOOOO* in the Salon script reflects an exploration of paralinguistic features that are often ignored in traditional EFL settings. Recent study by Wang & Lee (2025) confirms that such digital dubbing tasks lead to significant improvements in oral language skills because they require students to attend to the rhythm and emotional weight of the target language.

Moreover, the scripts revealed a moral cultivation aspect through the students' creative choices. In Group 1, the *Dust* creatures' decision to "get revenge" or "not just hide" suggests a narrative of resistance and agency. This aligns with the idea that multimodal practices can serve as sites for exploring moral and social themes (Wang, 2025). By giving a voice to the invisible (the dust), students indirectly engaged with themes of marginalization and survival, which are central to the critical pedagogy of digital literacy (Lim, 2025).

The analysis also indicated that students leveraged intertextuality by bringing in pop culture references. The mention of "superhero poses" and "telenovela vibes" indicates that students are drawing from a vast repertoire of global media to inform their language production. This ability to link classroom tasks with broader cultural trends is a hallmark of critical digital literacy, as it prepares students to navigate a

world where meanings are constantly being remediated across different platforms (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021; Selwyn, 2022).

However, the findings also suggest challenges in managing the "technical-pedagogical" balance. While students were highly motivated by the creative aspects, the technical demands of synchronization occasionally led to simplified linguistic structures in the final dubbed versions compared to the written scripts. This highlights the need for ongoing teacher support in navigating the affordances and constraints of digital tools (Aridasarie & Rohmah, 2024). Nevertheless, the overall engagement level remained high, confirming the efficacy of dubbing as a pedagogical tool.

In summary, the dubbing project successfully integrated linguistic development with critical and multimodal literacy. Students proved to be both producers and consumers of digital content, utilizing English not just as a tool for communication but as a medium for creative and critical expression (Arbain, 2023). This study reinforces the argument that the future of TESOL lies in embracing the multimodal turn, where students are empowered to use all available semiotic resources to make meaning in an increasingly digital world (Lim, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind the findings and discussions provided previously, it can be concluded that the implementation of digital dubbing projects in the EFL classroom effectively bridges the gap between functional language practice and critical multimodal engagement. By transforming silent visual narratives into spoken dialogue, students demonstrate more than just linguistic proficiency; they exhibit creative agency and the ability to negotiate complex semiotic meanings through the strategic use of informal language and digital vernacular. This pedagogical approach empowers learners to

move beyond the role of passive information consumers to become active "prosumers" who can authentically represent their identities in digital spaces.

Ultimately, fostering critical digital literacy through such multimodal tasks prepares students for the nuances of modern communication, suggesting that language education must continue to evolve by integrating technology not merely as a tool, but as a site for meaningful social and cultural expression. It is recommended for EFL practitioners who are interested to perform the identical projects to be aware and to anticipate the challenges they may encounter. Moreover, it is suggested that further researchers to cover diverse contexts to pursue a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

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