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Editors

This special issue compiles papers from the 48th Systemic Functional Congress (ISFC48 organised in March 2023 by the Systemic Functional Linguistics Association of Tunisia (SYFLAT) and the Laboratory of Approaches to Discourse (LAD-LR13ES15), under the auspices of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at the University of Sfax. This special issue, which explores the theme of power and empowerment in relation to language and systemic functional theory, is divided into two volumes. The contributions in the first volume provide some reflections on SFL notions, which can empower both the theoretical apparatus and its application to different types of discourse. The papers in this second volume showcase how SFL language descriptions can empower pedagogical practices.

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Students' empowerment in multimodal online learning environments: A social semiotic approach

Hassen Rebhi

Abstract

The aim of this study is to empirically investigate the potential of multimodal online learning environments to empower English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in higher education, utilizing a social semiotic approach to multimodality. The study specifically examines the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on students' sense of empowerment within these digital settings. A total of 139 MA and undergraduate EFL students participated in the study. The findings suggest that while multimodal online environments can foster student empowerment, they do so only partially, as certain intrinsic and extrinsic variables were found to negatively correlate with empowerment. These results indicate that barriers to empowerment persist, potentially leading to feelings of poweressness among students. The study's outcomes provide valuable insights for academic stakeholders interested in enhancing student empowerment in online learning environments. The findings also offer practical guidance for both educators and students, encouraging a collaborative approach to learning that emphasizes shared expectations, rights, and responsibilities. Furthermore, the integration of online learning into orientation and ongoing education programs is recommended to cultivate more empowering educational experiences.

Keywords

Online learning; social semiotics; multimodality; intrinsic and extrinsic predictors; learner empowerment

Introduction

Online learning has rapidly gained global attention for its potential to empower students by enabling them to actively engage in their own learning processes. Defined as instruction delivered synchronously or asynchronously over the Internet, online learning offers unique opportunities to create learner-centric, personalized, and interactive educational environments (Wong 2020). These environments can enhance student engagement by fostering favorable learning conditions, establishing learning communities, providing timely feedback, and utilizing appropriate technologies to deliver content effectively (Chakraborty & Nafukho 2014). When

implemented successfully, these technological tools can play a crucial role in student empowerment, allowing learners to take control of their educational experiences (Jensen et al. 2021).

To understand how empowerment occurs in online settings, this study adopts a social semiotic approach to multimodality. This perspective explores how various modes and resources are integrated within a community to shape the learning environment (Kress 2015). Multimodality emphasizes the importance of access to diverse modes, which, when combined with technological tools, can significantly enhance learning outcomes for both teachers and students (Bouchey et al. 2021).

Despite the increasing global interest in this area, research on empowerment within online learning contexts is still emerging, particularly in the context of higher education. For instance, studies have shown that collaborative learning and critical language education can transform traditional teaching practices, leading to improved classroom dynamics and increased student empowerment (Yaacob et al. 2021; León & Castro 2017). Pan (2022) further explored these dynamics by examining the relationships among online behaviors, individual characteristics, and the empowerment of English as Second Language learners.

In the Tunisian educational context, research on online learning empowerment remains limited. Dhieb-Henia (2008) addressed the challenges faced by EFL/ESP teachers in designing online courses, highlighting the need for improved e-learning practices. Sghari and Bouaziz (2022) investigated factors influencing the adoption of the Moodle Distance Learning Platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Essaber, Zammel, and Tebessi (2023) developed a conceptual framework for understanding the societal impacts of elearning in Tunisia.

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature by empirically investigating the potential of online learning environments to empower Tunisian tertiary students. By focusing on the role of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, this research seeks to provide insights that are relevant not only within Tunisia, but also in broader educational contexts. The study is structured as follows: first, we explore the conceptualization of empowerment in multimodal online environments; next, we discuss its predictors from a social semiotic perspective. The methodology section details the instruments and analysis techniques used, followed by a presentation of the results. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, including limitations and recommendations for future research.

1. Literature review

1.1. Learning empowerment

Empowerment, originally conceptualized by Conger and Kanungo (1988) in the context of the workplace, refers to an individual's psychological state that enhances motivation and engagement. This concept was further developed by Thomas and (1990) who introduced a cognitive model Velthouse of empowerment based on intrinsic task motivation. This model includes four key factors-meaningfulness, competence, impact, choice—each influencing an individual's and sense of empowerment. In educational settings, Frymier, Shulman, and Houser (1996) adapted these principles to emphasize the importance of fostering students' intrinsic motivation by minimizing obstacles that lead to feelings of powerlessness and by reinforcing a sense of personal responsibility in the learning process. However, Frymier et al. (1996) argued that, unlike in the workplace, the element of choice might not be as applicable in educational contexts, particularly for students in the early stages of learning who may lack the necessary competence to make informed decisions.

Meaningfulness is determined by the extent to which a task aligns with an individual's values and beliefs (Thomas & Velthouse 1990). In education, students are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to engage deeply with tasks they find meaningful, as these tasks resonate with their personal values and goals.

Competence relates to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully complete a task. This concept is closely aligned with Bandura's (1997) notion of self-efficacy, which posits that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to embrace challenges and persist in the face of difficulties, whereas those with low self-efficacy may avoid situations requiring new skills. In an educational context, fostering students' sense of competence is crucial for enhancing their motivation and empowerment.

Impact refers to the degree to which an individual believes their actions can make a difference in achieving the desired outcomes (Thomas & Velthouse 1990). When students perceive their efforts as meaningful and capable of effecting change, they are more likely to invest in their tasks, thus enhancing their sense of empowerment.

This foundational understanding of empowerment in educational settings provides a basis for exploring how these concepts translate into the online learning environment, particularly through intrinsic and extrinsic predictors.

1.2. Predictors of online learning empowerment

The online learning environment introduces unique possibilities for empowering students, driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

1.2.1. Intrinsic predictors

Motivation is a critical intrinsic predictor of empowerment in online learning. Defined as the desire and readiness to pursue an action (Brown 2007), motivation in the context of language learning involves the extent to which learners strive to master a language due to a personal desire and the satisfaction derived from the process (Gardner 1985). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 1985) and subsequent work by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) highlight motivation as a driving force that not only initiates learning, but also sustains engagement over time. In online environments, where students may experience feelings of isolation or detachment (Dixson 2015), maintaining motivation is crucial for sustained engagement and empowerment.

Engagement is closely linked to motivation and is a key factor in online learning empowerment. Engagement encompasses students' active participation in academic and non-academic activities and their identification with the goals of their educational environment (Audas & Willms 2001). It includes affective, behavioral, and cognitive components (Jimerson et al. 2003). High levels of engagement can lead to greater empowerment as students feel more connected to their learning community and invested in their educational outcomes.

Satisfaction with the learning process also plays a significant role in student empowerment. Thurmond et al. (2002) found that instructional decisions in online environments significantly impact student satisfaction, often more than personal attributes. Satisfaction is influenced by the quality of interactions between students and teachers, as well as the structure of the course (Settle & Settle 2005). According to the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al. 2000), engagement and satisfaction are outcomes of a dynamic online learning community where instructional conversations foster deep intellectual engagement and a sense of community is essential for higher-order learning (Garrison & Arbaugh 2007).

Self-esteem is another intrinsic predictor of empowerment. Cast and Burke's (2002) identity theory suggests that self-esteem is both an outcome and a crucial component of the self-verification process within social groups. In online learning, students' self-esteem can be bolstered by successful role identification and positive reinforcement, contributing to a stronger sense of empowerment.

1.2.2 Extrinsic predictors

Extrinsic factors also play a significant role in online learning empowerment. One key extrinsic predictor is content relevance, which refers to how well the course material aligns with students' personal needs, interests, and career goals (Frymier & Shulman 1995). When students perceive content as relevant, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged, enhancing their sense of empowerment.

Instructor immediacy—the communicative behaviors that reduce the psychological distance between instructors and students—also significantly influences student empowerment. Christophel (1990) and Frymier (1993) found that instructor immediacy can enhance both affective and cognitive learning outcomes by positively impacting student motivation. In online environments, where nonverbal cues are limited, establishing immediacy through clear communication and supportive interactions is crucial for fostering student engagement and empowerment.

Feedback is another extrinsic factor that influences empowerment. Personalized feedback, as noted by Hummel (2006) and Campton and Young (2005), is a critical component of effective online learning environments. Feedback not only serves as an extrinsic motivator but also promotes self-correction and deeper engagement with the material (Klecker 2007). In sum, both intrinsic and extrinsic predictors work together to empower students in online learning environments. Understanding these factors is essential for creating multimodal learning experiences that enhance student engagement and empowerment.

1.3. Theoretical framework

This study adopts a social semiotic approach to multimodality to explore how online learning environments can be designed to empower students. According to Kress (2015), multimodality is not a theory per se but a domain for study that focuses on how different modes of communication - such as text, images, and gestures - are integrated to create meaning. Social semiotics, the underlying theory, provides the tools to analyze how meaning is constructed and communicated within these multimodal environments.

In this context, Social Semiotics emphasizes the role of technology as a set of cultural resources that shape and disseminate meanings (Kress 2015). By integrating various modes, online learning environments can offer richer, more engaging learning experiences that cater to different learning styles and preferences, ultimately fostering empowerment. Kress (2015) highlights that every mode of communication influences the others in a dynamic, semiotic environment, which is crucial for creating an empowered learning experience. The goal of multimodality, therefore, is to explore the potential for various modes of communication to convey complex ideas and foster empowerment in learners. By leveraging modern technologies, educators can create online learning environments that not only convey content effectively but also empower students to take an active role in their education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study aimed to explore the potential of online learning environments to empower students in higher education, specifically targeting MA and undergraduate English Foreign Language (EFL) students who were currently or had previously enrolled in online courses. A total of 139 students were randomly selected from various Tunisian universities to participate. The selection process involved a simple random sampling technique, ensuring that each student in the population had an equal chance of being selected. This approach was chosen to minimize sampling bias and to ensure the representativeness of the sample.

The sample size of 139 was determined based on power analysis, which suggested that this number would be sufficient to detect medium-sized effects in regression analyses with a power of 0.80 at a significance level of 0.05. The demographic breakdown of the sample is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Students'	demographic	information	and technol	ogical
	profi	les		

Attributes		Frequency	
Gender	Male	41	
	Female	98	
Age	20-25	63	
	25-35	45	
	More than 35	31	
Educational	Undergraduate	88	
level	MA	51	

As shown in Table 1 above, the sample consists of 41 males and 98 females, with the majority (63) aged between 20 and 25 years. The sample included 88 undergraduate and 51 MA students, providing a diverse representation of the EFL student population in Tunisia. To avoid bias and ensure inclusivity, the study did not exclude participants based on digital proficiency, learning capabilities, or academic performance. This inclusive approach was designed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perceptions regarding online learning empowerment.

2.2. Data collection methods

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included several validated scales adapted for the online learning context. The selection of these scales was based on their relevance to the study's focus on empowerment and their established validity and reliability in previous research.

To measure learner empowerment, the study employed Frymier, Shulman, and Houser's (1996) scale. This scale was selected because of its comprehensive coverage of the constructs of meaningfulness, competence, and impact. The original scale was adapted by incorporating the phrase "online learning" to ensure relevance. The scale included 10 items for meaningfulness, 9 for competence, and 10 items for impact, rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) never to (5) very often.

To explore the influence of the intrinsic variables stated in the literature review, the study opted for the following scales. First, the Situational Motivation Scale (Guay et al. 2000) was used to assess motivation within the online learning environment. Eight items were selected, each rated on a seven-point Likert scale from (1) "does not correspond at all" to (7) "corresponds exactly." This scale was chosen for its ability to capture the nuances of motivation in situational contexts. Second, Dixson's (2015) Online Student Engagement scale was used to measure engagement. Ten items were selected based on their alignment with the study's focus, covering emotions, participation/interaction, and performance. skills. Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale, from (1) 'not at all characteristic of me' to (5) 'very characteristic of me.' Third, Wang's (2003) satisfaction scale, originally consisting of 26 items, was adapted to 9 items with the highest factor loadings, rated on a seven-point Likert scale from (1) 'strongly disagree' to (7) 'strongly agree.' Finally, The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) was utilized to measure self-esteem, with 10 items rated on a four-point Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree.

Three additional scales were used to measure the influence of extrinsic variables on learners' empowerment. Nine items from the Online Content Relevance Scale (Frymier & Shulman 1995) were used to assess content relevance, rated on a five-point Likert scale, spanning from (1) 'never' to (5) 'very often.' The Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale developed by King et al. (2009) was adopted to assess students' reactions to teachers' feedback. Respondents expressed their perceptions using a five-point scale, where (1) represents 'strongly disagree,' and (5) signifies 'strongly agree.' For our study, we selected nine items that exhibited stronger factor loadings. To assess teachers' verbal and non-verbal immediacy, Verbal and Non-Verbal Immediacy Scale (Gorham 1988) was adopted, encompassing a total of 34 items - 20 verbal and 14 non-verbal. Respondents provided ratings on a five-point Likert scale, where (1) corresponds to 'never' and (5) to 'very often.' From this scale, 10 items were chosen for this study, consisting of six verbal and four non-verbal items. Factor analysis revealed that both verbal and nonverbal items exhibited loadings on a single factor (Gorham 1988).

To validate the adaptations and ensure the reliability of the scales in the new context, a pilot study was conducted with a subset of participants. The results confirmed the scales' internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7 for all constructs.

Data collection was carried out using both online and face-to-face methods. Participants were invited via email to complete the questionnaire through Google Forms. In cases where online participation was not feasible, printed questionnaires were distributed and collected in person. To encourage participation and minimize bias, detailed information about the study's purpose, the importance of their contribution, and assurances of confidentiality were provided upfront.

2.3. Analytical tools

A total of 139 completed responses were retained for analysis. The data were cleaned and checked for missing values, outliers, and normality before analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic data and provide an overview of the participants' characteristics. Quantitative data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), chosen for its robust features and widespread acceptance in academic research. The analysis involved:

- **Descriptive statistics**: to summarize the means, standard deviations, and frequencies of the variables.
- **Reliability analysis**: conducted using Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of each scale.
- Linear regression analysis: performed to evaluate the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic predictors on learner empowerment. Multicollinearity was checked by examining variance inflation factors (VIFs) to ensure that the predictors were not excessively correlated.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the the participating universities. Participants were informed of their rights, including the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participants could access the online survey. The research ensured confidentiality by anonymizing all responses and storing data securely. The questionnaire was carefully designed to avoid any biases, cultural insensitivity, or promotion of stereotypes, ensuring that the study was inclusive and respectful of all participants.

3. Findings and discussion

The study aimed to investigate the extent to which online multimodal learning environments promote student empowerment and the role of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in this process. The findings reveal that while online multimodal environments do enhance certain aspects of students' experiences, they fall short in fully empowering students across all dimensions of empowerment.

3.1. Student empowerment in online multimodal learning environments

To assess empowerment, students were asked to rate their experiences on a five-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicated stronger feelings of empowerment. Table 2 summarizes the mean scores for the three constructs of empowerment: meaningfulness, competence, and impact.

Variable		Mean
Students' empowerment in	Meaningfulness	3.31
online multimodal setting	Competence	1.82
	Impact	1.56

Table 2: Mean scores of the learning empowerment's constructs.

The results indicate that meaningfulness had the highest mean score (3.31), suggesting that students generally find online learning to align with their personal values and goals. This implies that the online multimodal environment can create meaningful experiences for students, likely due to its flexibility and alignment with their preferences for learning.

However, the mean scores for competence (1.82) and impact (1.56) were significantly lower, indicating that students do not feel confident in their ability to accomplish tasks or make a meaningful impact in the online learning environment. This lack of perceived competence and impact suggests that while students may find the content meaningful, they do not feel empowered to perform or influence outcomes effectively in these settings.

3.2. Intrinsic and extrinsic predictors of empowerment

To explore the role of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in student empowerment, mean scores for variables such as motivation, engagement, satisfaction, self-esteem, content relevance, feedback, and immediacy were analyzed. Additionally, linear regression was conducted to assess the relationships between these predictors and the constructs of empowerment.

3.2.1 Intrinsic predictors

The mean score for students' motivation within the online multimodal learning environment was 3.12 (Table 3), which is below the threshold for high motivation (score > 4). This suggests that students are not highly motivated in these settings, potentially due to the lack of direct interaction and support, which are often more prevalent in traditional learning environments.

Table 3: Mean	score d	of students'	online	motivation

Variable	Mean		
Students' online motivation	3.12		

Similarly, the mean score for engagement was 2.21 (Table 4), indicating low levels of active participation and involvement in the online learning environment. This lack of engagement may be attributed to the absence of real-time interaction and the challenges of staying focused and motivated in an online setting.

Table 4: Mean score of students' online engagement.

Variable	Mean
Students' online engagement	2.21

The mean score for satisfaction was 3.14 (Table 5), suggesting that students are somewhat satisfied with their online learning experiences, but not to a high degree. This moderate level of satisfaction reflects the challenges students face in adapting to online learning, such as technical difficulties and limited interaction with peers and instructors.

Table 5: Mean score of students' online satisfaction.

Variable	Mean
Students' online satisfaction	3.14

However, the mean score for self-esteem was notably low at 1.43 (Table 6), indicating that students experience low levels of self-esteem in the online learning environment. This could be due to the lack of immediate feedback, peer interaction, and the challenges of navigating digital platforms, all of which may contribute to feelings of inadequacy.

Table 6: Mean score of students' online self-esteem.

Variable	Mean
Students' online self-esteem	1.43

In response to the potential of extrinsic variables in online learning environment, the study tested the following hypotheses. To test whether content is relevant, students used a five-point Likerttype scale. A rating of 1 indicated that the teachers have never used a specific behaviour and a rating of 5 indicated that teachers used a certain behaviour very frequently. The higher the mean score, the stronger the level of frequency. Scores above 3 indicate higher levels of frequency. The following tables summarises the mean scores for online content relevancevariable

3.2.2 Extrinsic predictors

The mean score for content relevance was 1.74 (Table 7), indicating that students do not perceive the online content as highly relevant to their needs and interests. Table 7 summarises the mean scores for online content relevance variable.

Table 7: Mean Score of Online Content Relevance Variable.

Variable	Mean
Online content relevance	1.74

This lack of relevance may contribute to the overall low levels of empowerment, as students are less likely to engage deeply with content they find irrelevant. In a related context, the mean score for teachers' online feedback was 1.82 (Table 8), suggesting that students do not highly value the feedback they receive in online settings. The low perceived value of feedback could be due to its impersonal nature or the delay in receiving feedback, which reduces its effectiveness in guiding students' learning processes.

Table 8: Mean score of teachers' online feedback.

Variable	Mean
Teachers' online feedback	1.82

Similarly, the mean score for teachers' online immediacy was 1.62 as revealed below:

Table 9: Mean score of teachers' online immediacy.

Variable	Mean
Teachers' online immediacy	1.62

This finding indicates that students feel a lack of immediacy in their interactions with instructors. This absence of immediacy may contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection, further reducing students' sense of empowerment.

3.3. Regression analysis and interpretation

Linear regression analysis was conducted to test the relationships between the intrinsic and extrinsic predictors and the three constructs of empowerment (meaningfulness, competence, and impact). The results are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10: Regression analysis of the hypotheses between intrinsic and extrinsic variables and students' learning empowerment.

	Hypotheses	R ²	p-value	Hypotheses Supported
H1: Students'	Motivation/Meaningfulness	.009	.014	No
motivation/	Motivation/Competence	.006	.016	No
empowerment	Motivation/Impact	.011	.009	No
H2: Students'	Engagement/Meaningfulness	.013	.022	No
Empowerment	Engagement/Competence	.019	.019	No
	Engagement/Impact	.014	.022	No
H3: Students'	Satisfaction/Meaningfulness	.010	.024	No
satisfaction/ Empowerment	Satisfaction/Competence	.023	.020	No
	Satisfaction/Impact	.045	.015	No
H4: Students' self-esteem/ Empowerment	Self- Esteem/ Meaningfulness	.070	.016	No
	Self-Esteem/Competence	.062	.016	No
	Self-Esteem/Impact	.054	.017	No
H5: Teachers' feedback/	Teachers' feedback/ Meaningfulness	.033	.019	No

Empowerment	Teachers' Feedback/ Competence	.076	.015	No
	Teachers' Feedback/Impact	.061	.016	No
H6: Content relevance/ Empowerment	Content Relevance/ Meaningfulness	.012	.023	No
	Content Relevance/ Competence	.048	.015	No
	Content Relevance/Impact	.027	.020	No
H7: Teachers' immediacy/ Empowerment	Teachers' Immediacy/ Meaningfulness	.017	.022	No
	Teachers' Immediacy/ Competence	.011	.022	No
	Teachers' Immediacy/ Impact	.013	.022	No

The regression analysis reveals that none of the intrinsic or extrinsic variables tested-motivation, engagement, satisfaction, selfesteem, content relevance, feedback, and immediacy - significantly predicted student empowerment in the online multimodal learning environment. The R² values were generally low, indicating that these variables explain only a small proportion of the variance in empowerment. Furthermore, the p-values were greater than the conventional threshold for significance (p < .05), suggesting that the relationships observed are not statistically significant.

3.4. Discussion

The findings indicate that online multimodal learning environments only partially promote student empowerment. While students find the learning experiences meaningful, they do not feel competent or impactful in these settings. This lack of competence and impact may stem from several factors inherent to online learning, such as reduced interaction with peers and instructors, difficulties in receiving timely feedback, and the challenges of selfregulation in an online context.

The low levels of motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and selfesteem observed in this study highlight the difficulties students face in maintaining these intrinsic factors in an online environment. The absence of significant relationships between these factors and empowerment suggests that simply participating in online learning is not enough to foster a sense of empowerment; other supportive mechanisms must be in place.

Extrinsic factors such as content relevance, feedback, and immediacy also did not significantly predict empowerment, which contrasts with previous research suggesting that these elements are crucial for student engagement and success (Hattie & Timperley 2007; Frymier et al. 1996). One possible explanation is that the quality and delivery of these factors in the online environment were insufficient to meet students' needs, leading to low scores across the board.

The research findings diverge from previous optimistic studies, as the latter suggest that online learning provides an ideal platform for empowering students, enabling them to actively govern and engage in their own learning pursuits (Jensen et al. 2021; Jones et al. 2021; Al-Fraihat et al. 2020; Kamal et al. 2020; Haron et al. 2017; Longstaff 2017). Consequently, the online environment did not eliminate barriers that could potentially result in a feeling of powerlessness nor did it enhance personal significance and a sense of responsibility toward their learning experience, as observed in prior research (Frymier et al. 1996). Instead, the results suggest that without careful design and implementation, online multimodal learning environments may fail to provide the necessary conditions for true empowerment.

A variety of intrinsic and extrinsic variables were shown to negatively influence students' learning empowerment in online context. There is a negative correlation between students' online motivation, satisfaction, engagement, self-esteem and their learning empowerment.

According to the study's results, students regarded extrinsic elements (online content relevance, teachers' online feedback and

teachers' online immediacy) as the most important factors influencing their learning empowerment in an online environment. Another significant finding of the study is that out of all the three basic external variables, teachers' online feedback stands out as the most significant predictor of students' learning empowerment in online environment. Hence, the results emphasised the significance of teachers' feedback as one of the most effective ways to improve student learning (Hattie & Timperley 2007). According to Campton and Young (2005), feedback on students' learning is an essential component of an effective online environment. Also, Owston (2017) has argued that providing students with continual feedback is another way to promote their potential for empowerment. According to Frymier and her colleagues (1996), communication is a primary factor in influencing learners' empowerment. Teacher communication can include open communication, trustworthiness, immediacy, relevance, constructive feedback, etc. (Frymier et al. 1996). Also, designing relevant content to students has been highlighted as a crucial aspect in increasing students' empowerment (Frymier et al. 1996). Therefore, for an effective empowering intervention and to promote individual task assessments, teachers' presence should be considered.

The findings of this study partially align with the social semiotic approach by demonstrating that online multimodal learning environments can enhance the meaningfulness of students' experiences. The highest mean score for the meaningfulness construct (3.31) suggests that when multiple modes are effectively integrated into online learning, they can resonate with students' values and goals. This resonates with Kress's (2015) assertion that multimodality allows for richer, more personalized learning experiences that align with students' individual contexts and needs.

However, the lower scores in competence (1.82) and impact (1.56) indicate that simply using multiple modes is not enough to fully empower students. This suggests that while the online multimodal environment can create meaning, it may not necessarily enhance students' abilities to perform tasks or influence outcomes effectively. In terms of social semiotics, this could mean that the modes being used are not effectively supporting the development of

key competencies or enabling students to see the impact of their efforts.

The study's findings challenge the assumption within the social semiotic framework that the integration of various modes automatically leads to empowerment. The low levels of motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and self-esteem observed among students indicate that the mere presence of multiple modes is insufficient to foster a fully empowering learning environment. This suggests that while multimodality offers the potential for more engaging and personalized learning experiences, it must be carefully designed to address the specific needs of learners. The lack of significant relationships between intrinsic and extrinsic factors and empowerment implies that the modes being used in these online environments may not be effectively supporting all aspects of learning, particularly those related to self-efficacy and agency.

The results suggest that for online multimodal learning environments to truly empower students, educators and instructional designers need to consider how each mode contributes to the development of competence and the ability to make an impact, not just how it adds meaning. This aligns with the social semiotic perspective that meaning-making is a dynamic process that involves the interaction of various modes, but it also highlights that this interaction must be intentional and targeted.

In practice, this means that educators should not only focus on the variety of modes used but also on how these modes can be strategically employed to enhance students' sense of competence and impact. For example, interactive modes that allow for real-time feedback or collaborative modes that enable students to see the tangible results of their contributions might better support empowerment.

The study reinforces the value of a social semiotic approach to understanding how meaning is constructed in online learning environments. However, it also challenges the assumption that multimodality alone is sufficient for empowerment. The findings suggest that to truly empower students in online learning environments, the design of these environments must go beyond simply integrating multiple modes. It must also consider how these modes interact to support all dimensions of empowerment meaningfulness, competence, and impact. This nuanced understanding can guide future efforts to create more effective and empowering online learning experiences.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed examination of the potential of online multimodal learning environments to foster student empowerment in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning. The findings indicate that while these environments can enhance the meaningfulness of learning experiences, they fall short in promoting students' sense of competence and impact. This suggests that online learning, while offering valuable flexibility and alignment with students' goals, requires additional support mechanisms to fully empower students.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to our understanding of learning empowerment by validating and extending the constructs proposed by Frymier, Shulman, and Houser (1996) within an online learning context. The study reaffirms the relevance of these constructs—meaningfulness, competence, and impact—but also highlights the challenges of applying them effectively in an online setting, particularly regarding students' perceived competence and impact.

Practically, the study underscores the importance of carefully designed online learning environments that not only provide relevant and meaningful content but also actively support student engagement, motivation, and self-esteem. The findings suggest that online learning can be a viable component of EFL education, but its success depends on addressing the specific challenges identified, such as enhancing feedback quality, improving instructor immediacy, and ensuring content relevance.

However, this study has limitations that should be considered. The sample size, though adequate, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different educational contexts, and the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases. Future research should explore these variables in more diverse settings, incorporate longitudinal approaches to capture changes in empowerment over time, and consider additional intrinsic factors such as self-confidence and attitudes, as well as extrinsic factors like teaching effectiveness and practices.

In conclusion, while online multimodal learning environments offer significant potential for creating meaningful educational experiences, they require intentional design and support to truly empower students. By addressing the gaps identified in this research, educators and instructional designers can enhance the effectiveness of online learning and better support students in achieving their educational goals. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the role of online learning in modern education and provides insights that can guide future efforts to create more empowering and effective learning environments.

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