

Chapter 6

Rethinking Migration: The Intersection of Multimodal Composition and Critical Reflection



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Abstract This chapter explores how multimodal composition and critical reflection can enrich English language learning and nurture critical engagement with migration discourse. Based on classroom-based research in Malta, it shows how a group of adult learners collaborated on reflective, multimodal texts about migration, combining AI-generated images with their writing. The analysis identified five key themes in students' compositions, from economic concerns to personal experiences, and highlights the challenges and opportunities of fostering balanced perspectives, critical media literacy, and intercultural empathy. The chapter argues that multimodal composition and reflection can empower students as agents of change, equipping them with the critical tools to navigate and shape migration narratives in a globalised world.

Keywords Multimodal composition · Critical reflection · Migration discourse · Critical media literacy · English language learning

6.1 Introduction

Migration has long been a complex and contested topic, both in public discourse and in the lives of millions of people worldwide. At a time when global mobility intersects with social, political and economic upheavals, the ways in which migration is represented in the media and how these representations shape people's perceptions have never been more critical (Mazzara et al., 2020; Pira, 2023). Media

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narratives often reduce migration to simple binaries: opportunity versus threat, growth versus strain, or economic gain versus social friction (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018). Yet behind these reductive headlines are real human stories of hope, displacement, cultural exchange and negotiation.

This chapter explores how multimodal composition and critical reflection can help learners of English engage more thoughtfully with the intricacies of migration. Drawing on a classroom-based research study carried out in Malta, it demonstrates how an international group of adult English language learners used multimodal techniques—combining written reflections and AI-generated images—to unpack the contradictions of migration as both a source of economic benefit and a site of discrimination (Bradford & Cullen, 2025; Mucha, 2024). Through these activities, students learned not just language skills but also how to examine the power of headlines, question underlying assumptions, and consider the personal and political dimensions of migration in their own countries (Neag et al., 2022).

In Malta, these tensions are particularly pronounced. Recent demographic and attitudinal data reveal the extent to which migration shapes the nation's socio-economic and political landscape, underscoring the tension between dependence and unease. At the end of 2024, Malta's total population stood at 574,250, of whom 29.4 per cent were non-Maltese citizens, and net migration accounted for more than 10,600 new residents, with non-EU nationals representing over three-quarters (76.6%) of this growth (National Statistics Office, 2025). Labour-market analysis shows that Malta's workforce has expanded dramatically, with foreign workers increasing from 9.9% of total employment in 2013 to 36.5% in 2023, providing over three-quarters of all job growth during the decade (Konnekt, 2025). Policymakers and business leaders recognise that Malta's economic vitality now relies structurally on migration, yet public and youth perceptions remain ambivalent. According to the 2025 Eurobarometer survey, 27% of Maltese respondents aged 16–30 identified irregular migration as the EU's top priority, placing it above climate, defence, or employment concerns (European Commission, 2025). At the same time, recent research highlights how migrants and racialised groups in Malta continue to face structural discrimination in employment, housing, and access to public services, reflecting persistent inequalities despite economic reliance on foreign labour (European Network Against Racism, 2023). This convergence of economic reliance and perceived insecurity situates the classroom discussions examined in this chapter within a broader national discourse that frames migration simultaneously as an economic necessity and a security or identity challenge.

Central to this chapter is the argument that multimodal composition incorporating structured critical reflection can foster empathy and intercultural understanding (Lähdesmäki et al., 2022). It provides a means for learners to articulate their own evolving perspectives, to grapple with ambivalence, and to become more critical consumers and producers of media. By engaging with migration through a critical and multimodal lens, students become active agents of inquiry and interpretation, challenging stereotypes and rethinking their own roles in a global community.

After a brief review of relevant literature on critical media literacy (CML) and multimodal composition, the chapter describes the classroom research project,

including its goals, design, and activities. This is followed by a discussion of the students' multimodal compositions, highlighting key themes and tensions.

6.2 Critical Media Literacy

In the current digital age, the unprecedented reach of social media and the democratisation of information have created both opportunities and risks for learners and educators. While digital platforms have amplified diverse voices, they also spread harmful disinformation, particularly during global crises (Schirrmacher & Mousavi, 2024). This means that educators face the challenge of preparing students not just to passively consume digital content, but to actively engage with it and take responsibility for their information practices (Brumbelow, 2023). Teachers must equip students to critically evaluate the information they encounter online, to discern reliable sources from misleading ones, and to understand the role of digital spaces in shaping social and political change. This active approach counters the temptation to rely on quick fixes and instead cultivates informed, engaged citizens.

CML extends beyond analysis of texts to include a focus on the interactions between audiences and the media they consume. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) assert that it involves helping students explore how audiences interpret both print and digital media, while also encouraging them to see differences in viewpoint as sources of insight rather than suspicion. Soßdorf et al. (2024) expand on this by proposing a Synergetic Literacy Model that integrates CML with digital literacy, blending critical reflection with practical digital skills like data interpretation and data participation. This holistic approach empowers learners to detect misinformation and to be active participants in democratic conversations, thereby fostering more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Importantly, CML also involves applying these skills to everyday encounters with social media. Higdon (2022) finds that teaching CML gives students the capacity to thoughtfully navigate social media, leading them to balance appreciation of its benefits with awareness of its risks. Similarly, Elmore and Coleman (2019) demonstrate how analysing political memes in the classroom can be a powerful entry point for CML, as these seemingly simple texts often contain complex rhetorical strategies that influence real-world discourse and policy. Teachers must also confront their own limitations in teaching CML. Many of them focus narrowly on reading comprehension and struggle with evaluating media sources or integrating diverse media into their lessons (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023). To fully support students, educators need to expand their understanding of CML to include media production and broader critical skills.

A broader perspective on CML highlights its potential to support social justice and democratic engagement. Integrating CML into EFL classes not only improves students' language skills but also prepares them to be informed and empathetic participants in community life (Afrilyasanti et al., 2024). In adult education, Tisdell and Thompson (2007) stress the value of using popular culture to encourage active,

ongoing discussions that develop CML. Addressing issues of race and power is also essential; in fact, race-centred CML can help challenge damaging media stereotypes that continue to shape discriminatory policies and social attitudes (Stamps, 2023). Williams and Woods (2018) further argue that it is crucial for teachers to directly address myths and misinformation, particularly since students may not encounter this level of scrutiny outside of the classroom. By focusing on these critical perspectives, educators can help learners become engaged citizens who are capable of navigating and challenging the complex media environment they inhabit.

Finally, reflection is a key, though often overlooked, component of CML. While educators typically prioritise analysing and creating media texts, reflection can deepen students' understanding of their own biases and the communicative processes that shape interactions with others (Friesem, 2016, 2017). Incorporating reflection into CML instruction not only enriches students' critical skills but also helps them develop as ethical and empathetic participants in media-saturated societies. While some progress has been made in recognising the importance of reflection, there is still much work to be done to ensure that it becomes a core aspect of CML education in practice.

6.3 Multimodal Composition

Multimodal composition is gaining significant importance in language teaching as educators increasingly recognise that it allows students to use more than just verbal language to create meaning (Stroia & Xerri, 2024; Xerri, 2016). This approach emphasises visual, gestural, and spatial elements alongside linguistic ones, enabling learners to develop more nuanced and authentic texts in the target language (Crawford Camiciottoli & Campoy-Cubillo, 2018; Donaghy & Xerri, 2017). In second-language writing, multimodal composition tasks like creating digital stories and essays encourage students to blend words, images, and sounds by leveraging digital technologies (Bowen & Whithaus, 2013; Selfe, 2007). Studies by Yang (2012) and Nelson (2006) have shown that when English language learners create multimodal texts, they thoughtfully combine these various resources to express meaningful messages that resonate with their identities. This process not only helps learners develop their authorial voices but also boosts their motivation and confidence, as they see the relevance of classroom learning to the digital practices they engage with in their daily lives (Street et al., 2009). By tapping into these familiar modes, multimodal composition helps bridge the gap between academic learning and authentic, real-world communication.

Multimodal composition extends beyond the mechanics of writing to cultivate CML and active engagement with the world. Tisdell and Thompson (2007) argue that having students create their own multimodal texts allows them to examine issues of representation, power, and production, moving beyond passive analysis to active authorship. In addition, Smith and Dalton (2016) highlight how reflection plays a crucial role in this process. Their work with college freshmen creating

Composer's Cut videos showed that multimodal reflection—using images, text, sound, and video—helps students revisit and make sense of their experiences in transformative ways. This process not only strengthens students' multimodal competencies but also encourages personal growth as they see their work from new perspectives. This form of reflection is particularly meaningful in the context of multimodal projects, where it helps learners understand how their choices as creators shape meaning and audience engagement. Encouraging reflection as part of multimodal composition transforms the classroom into a space where students can critically examine their identities as communicators and creators.

However, incorporating multimodal composition into classrooms presents challenges that must be carefully considered. Kang's (2021) study of Korean high school students found that while learners engaged in multimodal composition, they often privileged linguistic modes over other resources, questioning the legitimacy of multimodal work in academic contexts. This points to a need for teachers and learners to recognise multimodal composition as a valid practice for both daily communication and academic expression. Kang (2022) further explored how adolescent English learners in an after-school programme developed multimodal communicative competence by skilfully combining semiotic modes in narrative and argumentative texts. These findings suggest that integrating multimodal practices thoughtfully into curricula, while valuing students' unique approaches to communication, can help learners develop flexible and creative literacy practices. At the same time, addressing technical skill disparities and supporting students in bridging in-class learning with out-of-school digital practices can help ensure that all learners benefit from multimodal composition.

The research also underscores the motivational and practical benefits of digital multimodal composition (DMC). A longitudinal study shows that EFL learners maintain positive attitudes toward DMC, finding it engaging and meaningful rather than merely novel (Alrajhi, 2023). This positive attitude suggests that integrating DMC into language instruction can motivate students to invest more effort and time, transforming writing from a mechanical skill into a tool for deeper learning. DMC is particularly valuable in English-dominant classrooms, providing students with ways to collaborate, tap into their existing knowledge, and build digital literacies while expressing their unique voices (Smith et al., 2021). However, it is important not to idealise multimodal practices, given such challenges as unequal access to technology and the risk of superficial engagement with digital resources. These considerations highlight the importance of providing students with both technical and rhetorical support to fully realise the benefits of multimodal composition.

Emerging research on generative AI (GenAI) tools offers another dimension to multimodal composition. Jiang and Lai (2025) found that GenAI can help ESL learners create higher-quality multimodal texts by offering support with idea generation, outlining, scripting, and design. While GenAI use supported more coherent and example-driven writing, the study also highlighted challenges like limited access to advanced multimodal AI tools and concerns about misinformation. Similarly, Shen et al. (2025) explored how Chinese adolescents creating game-based videos used digital tools to craft engaging multimodal narratives and position

themselves as critical and creative prosumers. These studies highlight how DMC can foster representational, interpersonal, and compositional meaning-making while also building critical and creative skills. However, these findings also emphasise the need for balanced and ethically-informed support to ensure all students can engage with these new tools responsibly and confidently.

Reflection remains a vital aspect of multimodal composition, helping learners move beyond surface-level creation to thoughtful, self-aware communication. Multimodal pedagogies can support critical reflection on social issues like race, class, and gender, offering students more nuanced ways to engage with these topics than language alone can provide (Huang, 2019). While GenAI tools can support students in developing consistent authorial voices, they also raise practical and ethical challenges, reinforcing the need for intentional and guided reflection (Tan et al., 2025). Across the literature, it is clear that reflection enables students to critically assess their authorial choices and consider how these shape meaning and impact. Multimodal reflection encourages students to see themselves as active, responsible participants in the digital world, deepening both their academic learning and their growth as communicators in an increasingly multimodal age.

6.4 Classroom Research on Migration

This project revolved around a lesson on migration that took place at a private language school in Malta with a class of eleven CEFR B1 English language students originating from different OECD countries. The choice to conduct the project with this particular class was motivated by convenience, i.e., it was taught by the chapter's second author. These adult students were all following an intensive English course and provided signed informed consent prior to the lesson's delivery. At the start of the lesson, they were shown headlines from a wide range of Maltese newspapers and encouraged to explore how migration is represented in the media and to consider alternative perspectives that might be missing in those portrayals. Through a matching exercise, they were then asked to discuss vocabulary related to migration, such as 'discrimination', 'integration', 'asylum seeker', and 'media portrayal'. This ensured that they had the language needed to express their thoughts clearly and thoughtfully.

To foster deeper cognitive engagement among the students, they were invited to imagine writing an article entitled 'Rethinking Migration' for an online student magazine, with the goal of crafting a 150–200-word reflective piece. In line with Bray et al.'s (2000) reflective writing model, the lesson provided guiding questions for the introduction (descriptive reflection), body (evaluative reflection), and conclusion (practical reflection) to help students structure their writing, encouraging them to connect personal experiences and perspectives with broader media narratives about migration. For example, they were prompted to consider how migration is discussed in their home countries, their own thoughts and feelings about the topic, and how their views might evolve in the future.

The students were divided into five small groups to first discuss the guiding questions and then to produce collaborative reflections on migration by means of these questions. Working together and engaging in dialogue, they shared personal perspectives and drafted their articles. As a final creative task, students experimented with digital multimodal composition by uploading their work to ChatGPT and prompting it to generate images that complemented their written texts. They were encouraged to refine their prompts to produce more accurate and relevant images, critically assessing how well the images reflected their intended messages and discussing whether they enhanced the meaning of their reflections.

In engaging with AI-generated visuals, students were not merely producing digital artefacts but actively developing critical AI literacy: the capacity to question, interpret, and evaluate the biases and affordances of generative systems (Xerri, 2025a). Their critiques of the images' cultural representations and omissions revealed growing awareness of how AI reflects dominant narratives, rather than neutral objectivity, thus positioning the use of GenAI as a pedagogical tool for fostering digital discernment and ethical reflection.

Overall, the lesson fostered collaboration, language development, and critical reflection on migration as a global issue. It combined traditional language learning objectives with creative multimodal tasks, encouraging students to think about how digital tools can support meaningful communication. It also developed their awareness of how language choices can influence the output of GenAI.

6.5 Key Themes

The students' multimodal compositions were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis, revealing a rich array of themes that shed light on how these B1-level learners engaged with the topic of migration. While their texts varied in depth and perspective, common threads emerged that provide insights into their thinking. Specifically, five interconnected themes surfaced: ambivalent perspectives on migration, a strong focus on economic and security concerns, limited awareness of cultural and social dimensions, varying levels of critical engagement, and the influence of personal experiences and emotions.

Ambivalent perspectives on migration emerged across the student groups, reflecting broader societal tensions and media portrayals that often reduce migration to binaries of opportunity versus threat (Mucha, 2024). Group A's statement that "migration can be good but needs necessary control" echoes Arcimaviciene and Baglama's (2018) observation of how migration discourse simultaneously acknowledges potential benefits and risks. Group B's reflection that "social media focuses on negative stories" yet "some people think migrants are good for the economy" suggests an awareness of conflicting narratives shaped by the media (Bradford & Cullen, 2025). Group E encapsulated this ambivalence by describing migration as a "double-edged sword" that is essential for industries like "farming and fishing" but also "leads to social problems." This oscillation between positive and negative

assessments resonates with the idea that embedding reflection within multimodal composition helps learners confront such contradictions and gain critical awareness of their own assumptions in relation to such social issues (Huang, 2019; Smith & Dalton, 2016). In fact, when discussing their compositions, several students remarked that the AI-generated images failed to fully capture the complexity of their thinking about migration, with some noting that the visuals seemed to oversimplify or even reinforce the stereotypes they were trying to challenge.

The focus on economic and security concerns was particularly prominent, mirroring dominant media framings of migration as an economic and social strain (Pira, 2023). Group B noted that migrants “pay taxes and buy houses,” while Group C wrote that “migrants work for lower wages and take jobs.” Group E similarly described migrants as “essential” but causing “social problems,” and Group A warned that migration must be carefully regulated. Although these concerns reflect real-world experiences (Mucha, 2024), they overshadow deeper cultural and social dimensions, an imbalance noted by Pira (2023) and Neag et al. (2022). Here, the multimodal composition task provided an opportunity for students to engage in critical reflection on how these economic narratives are constructed and circulated (Soßdorf et al., 2024). Group D, for instance, critiqued how the images produced by GenAI reflected only economic themes, missing the deeper social and cultural tensions they wanted to highlight in their reflection. This underscores the role of CML in challenging narrow frames and prompting students to see a social issue like migration as far more complex and multifaceted than it appears to be, especially in terms of its associated discriminatory attitudes (Stamps, 2023).

Yet, while students acknowledged these economic and security aspects, their engagement with cultural and social impacts was limited. Group C’s remark that migrants should “adopt local culture and cuisines” points to a shallow understanding of integration, mirroring what Mazzara et al. (2020) identify as a common reduction of migrants to mere economic actors. Group E recognised that migrants bring “better and open cultures” that “we should accept” but didn’t explore how these contributions might shape communities. Only Group D offered a deeper critique by noting that “media can shape discriminatory attitudes” and called for social change, aligning with the argument that CML empowers learners to question harmful stereotypes (Afrilyasanti et al., 2024; Soßdorf et al., 2024). These students noted that while the GenAI images supported their text in some ways, they also risked perpetuating simplistic portrayals of migrants that overlooked human dignity and diverse stories. Such limited cultural engagement suggests that while students grasp practical dimensions of migration, they need more opportunities for reflective, multimodal practices that foreground intercultural empathy and social inclusion (Lähdesmäki et al., 2022; Neag et al., 2022).

The fourth theme highlights variation in students’ critical engagement. Group D’s recognition that media can influence how people develop prejudiced views showed the highest level of critical reflection, aligning with Tisdell and Thompson’s (2007) call to move beyond passive consumption of media to active critique. Group B’s observation that “social media focuses on negative stories” hints at an emerging critical stance. In contrast, Group A and Group C’s more limited focus on control or

job competition echoes Kang's (2022) findings that learners often struggle to move beyond conventional, surface-level arguments without explicit scaffolding. Overall, these patterns demonstrate that while multimodal composition can open pathways to deeper inquiry, the extent of critical reflection depends on students' comfort with complexity and their ability to question taken-for-granted narratives (Friesem, 2016, 2017; Smith et al., 2021). It must also be noted that the students might have lacked the linguistic proficiency needed to articulate more nuanced and balanced critiques regarding migration discourse.

Finally, students' personal experiences and emotions added depth and authenticity to their multimodal reflections. Group B's link between migration and "historical events" they remembered underscores how collective memories shape perceptions (Smith et al., 2021). Group C's wish to "make friends with migrants" and Group E's desire to "meet many national people" show how openness and curiosity can foster intercultural understanding. Conversely, Group A's focus on control suggests that community fears can overshadow personal empathy. Group D's sadness about media representations of migrants highlights the affective power of media discourse and aligns with Huang's (2019) argument that multimodal reflection can nurture empathy and inclusive thinking. These personal narratives illustrate how integrating reflection, CML, and multimodal composition can help students see migration not only as an economic or security issue but as a deeply human and intercultural experience, empowering them as agents of change in navigating and reshaping these kinds of discourse.

6.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the English lesson at the heart of this classroom research project provided a rich, engaging space for collaboration, language development, and critical reflection on migration as a national and global issue. By combining language learning goals with multimodal tasks, it encouraged students to explore how digital tools and semiotic resources can support meaningful communication. The five themes that emerged offer insights into how learners navigated meaning-making and positioned themselves within the complex global discourse on migration. The project highlights the challenges and opportunities of presenting a balanced view of migration in the English language classroom. It shows how the intersection of multimodal composition and critical reflection can promote CML, enabling students to analyse media representations of migrants more deeply and recognise biases and stereotypes. In engaging critically with AI-generated imagery, students also demonstrated developing critical AI literacy, i.e., learning to question how generative systems reproduce cultural assumptions and visual biases (Xerri, 2024, 2025b). This represents a significant pedagogical achievement, showing how GenAI can be harnessed to promote digital discernment and ethical awareness.

At the same time, the project's activities fostered intercultural understanding and empathy, helping learners appreciate diverse viewpoints and experiences (Xerri,

2012, 2017, 2018; Xerri & Xerri Agius, 2015). This development of empathy aligns with Byram's (2008, 2014) and Porto et al.'s (2018) conceptualisation of intercultural citizenship, where language learning extends beyond communicative competence to include critical reflection, civic engagement, and ethical responsibility. Empathy becomes not only an affective outcome but also a civic disposition, a readiness to view oneself and others through multiple cultural lenses and to act responsibly within interconnected communities. The students' reflective responses illustrate this process in practice: by recognising bias, re-evaluating perspectives, and imagining fairer representations of migrants, they were in a better position to begin enacting the kind of intercultural agency that underpins citizenship-in-action.

The approach used in this project empowered students to see themselves as agents of change, using their voices to challenge narrow forms of discourse and engage more actively with the world. As language educators embrace multimodal practices, attending to this balance between critical inquiry, empathy, and student agency will be key to creating more thoughtful and transformative learning experiences within ever-evolving technological affordances. Multimodal reflection extends beyond classroom learning; it cultivates learners' capacity to question, empathise, and act with awareness in a world mediated by technology and difference. In this sense, it plays a vital role in fostering critically engaged, socially conscious citizens who can navigate complex global narratives with both analytical insight and ethical responsibility.

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