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Multimodal English language learning in the life sciences: The case of interactional proficiencies

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Abstract

The majority of Hong Kong undergraduates are second-language (L2) users of English in English-medium programs of study, and in their post-university professional lives, will need discipline-specific skills in English, for some purposes at least. For such students, developing skills for multi-disciplinary literacy is essential. Students who successfully master English in their disciplines will have better academic achievement. For students in the Life Sciences, the disciplinary demands on communication are particularly significant. They are expected to perform highly demanding tasks such as reading medical cases, giving diagnoses, explaining treatment plans and writing referrals and medical reports. These tasks are in addition to the demands placed on academic literacy skills by university study more generally (e.g., reading textbooks, understanding lectures, writing assessment genres). Effective English language skills are important to address these students' learning challenges at university and in their future careers. This project will investigate the academic literacy needs of students in this environment, and specifically their abilities in educational and professional interactions, and will build on those findings to produce multimodal teaching and learning materials that are both relevant to students' needs and capable of stimulating critical reflection on communication practices in academic and professional contexts.