

USING MULTIMODALITY IN TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS TO THE MODERN GENERATION

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Abstract: The impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on education in the last decades has been considerable. Undeniably, ICT continuously adds renewed interest to communication and learning. Modern educational approaches aim at teaching foreign languages (FL) by means of effective, differentiated methods, multimodality being one of them. A number of empirical studies have been conducted on the subject of using multimodal methods in FL teaching/ learning efficiently. Understanding how our brain works, and how people process the information best could be considered one of the most important aspects that guarantees educational success. Moreover, the actual choice of FL teaching methods depends not only on the level of mastery of the material, but also on the students' age, gender, learning conditions, learning styles, as well as on the availability of resources. An essential issue to consider, while using multimodality, is the VARK learning style model (visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic) developed by N. Fleming, whose questionnaire results show the learners' sensory modality option in learning has a great influence on the quality of their knowledge. Multimodality is the blend of several modes of communication, i.e. images, music, sound, sight, print, and video that create meaning in a text. The present article considers the option of using multimodality in teaching English in a FL class to the digital generation.

Keywords: multimodality, learning styles, EFL, digital generations, digital natives; digital immigrants.

Introduction

Generally speaking, most English language syllabi regard "communication" in a rather traditional way, i.e. by means of the spoken and written language. On the other hand, with

the time, in the modern digital realia, traditional printed and verbal texts, most of us are used to, are being replaced by a mixture of written texts and images (both still and moving) the learners can watch on the screens of their gadgets. As literacy and communication in the 21st century are viewed in a more complex way, we can witness a shift from customary texts to up-to-date ones, that is, to the so-called multimodal texts which are much more attractive to the modern digital generation of learners due to their interactivity and attractiveness. Multimodal texts may contain audio and video of good quality, eye-catching colourful images and interesting original texts. This is why the teaching practices necessitate radical changes to stay in pace with the modern vision on literacy. Consequently, educational institutions worldwide face the need to adjust their teaching programmes including a new skill, called the viewing skill, which implies the understanding and reacting to multimodal texts. The new programmes also teach the students to share any type of data and concepts producing multimodal texts, combined with the traditional basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Presently, information technologies and the educational opportunities provided by the overflowing Internet resources are becoming an indispensable component of the modern educational process, which makes it possible to increase the quality and efficiency of education. It has become evident that digital educational resources play a great role in the up-to-date teaching models used in modern schools. This article examines the role of multimodality in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), its dynamism, original forms, contents, and efficiency.

Literature Review

The topic of multimodal pedagogies has been of great interest for teachers for several decades, that is why a number of efficient researches on the subject under discussion have been carried out. Mayer (2001) states there is confirmation that multimodality, applied in teaching/ learning, is a dynamic, student-centred means that makes students responsible for selecting those resources, which they consider appropriate to them (Mayer, 2001). In a nutshell, it indicates learners are to organise their own preferable learning contents, (i.e. words, pictures, etc.) into intelligible spoken and graphic models encompassing their conceptual representations and structures.

As it has been mentioned in the OUP brochure *Multimodality in ELT. Communication skills for today's generation*, in the 1990s of the 20th century, an avant-garde group of scholars called *the New London Group* which investigated the topic, highlighted the idea that great attention should be paid to the social, cultural, and technological modifications that occur in the world of communication. They wrote about a textual phenomenon they have termed *multimodality*, which requires several modes of communication intermingled in the same text to produce meaning. They debated persuasively “against the focus only being on language in literacy and introduced to the world the term multiliteracies” (“Multimodality in ELT,” p. 11). This term denotes the idea of regarding literacy deeper than focusing only on language learning. *The New London Group* stated that the outdated accent on ‘alphabetic literacy’ would definitely necessitate expanding and the integrating of a ‘pedagogy of multiliteracies’. In other words “this would involve learning how to interpret and create multimodal texts” (ibid, p. 11).

Even though multimodality is an efficient teaching tool that requires several ways of rendering the meaning in a text (verbal or written), it, nevertheless, needs thorough ground-work and meticulous attention. According to Jewitt, (2008) in the modern classroom multimodality denotes ‘multiple’ modes of representation, that comprise several “elements of print, visual images and design” (Jewitt, 2008). Moreover, various modes of representation

encompass the combinations of various language forms – oral and written language, visual, gestural, tactile and spatial representations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Multimodality can be defined as an interdisciplinary approach drawn with an emphasis on communication and representation (Jewitt, 2013). Thus, the quintessence of multimodality is to offer learners diverse forms of resources in order to motivate meaningful learning.

The various online educational resources that have recently appeared are successfully integrated into the process of EFL teaching. It has become evident that among the newest technologies in FL teaching, an important place is occupied by digital educational resources in developing learners' speaking skills. Hassett and Curwood, (2009) urge language teachers not to be afraid make a change and start using in practice contemporary theories of learning in order to make learning more engaging via student-centred pedagogies and resources. (Hassett & Curwood, 2009). To put this more pointedly, teachers should comply with the idea of accepting the transition from print-based texts to multimodal ones, though it necessitates the re-evaluating of habitual teaching/ learning practices.

Papageorgiou and Lameris (2017) have “argued that multimodality is based on the process of creating meaning through connecting and combining teaching strategies, approaches to teaching and learning with technologies that afford exploration, investigation and participatory learning. Against this background, meanings, practices and discourses were investigated in conceptualising and practicing multimodality in teaching and learning with the use of associated teaching approaches, technologies and resources” (Papageorgiou & Lameris, 2017, p. 133).

In contrast, Bell, Urhahne, Schanze and Ploetzne (2010), Cope and Kalantzis (2009) have specified that a considerable body of research has provided data on case studies, conceptual contexts and the planning of teaching/ learning activities based on the multimodal practices and not on the ones facilitated by technologies presently used by language teachers (Bell et al., 2010; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; 2015).

It is fairly certain that language teachers must be aware of several subjects if they want to stick to modern tendencies in education and correspond to the latest demands. First of all, they must get familiarized with the notion of multimodality; secondly teachers should be aware how to use it in their class on a more or less regular basis; thirdly teachers necessitate practical skills how to combine multimodality with modern digital technologies. Without a doubt, multimodal teaching/ learning aids students to comprehend that there are new means of sharing and getting information. It is of paramount importance to consider multiliteracies, to regard the option of using texts (verbal and written) in multimodal ways, to learn to create meaning, and recognize diverse communication modes.

The Digital Generation

Indisputably, representatives of various generations intermingle with modern technologies in a dissimilar way. It is of great interest that the modern generation has “never used a rotary dial telephone, never known a time when music wasn't totally portable or digital, never lived without hundreds of thousands of video images a day, never known a world without some kind of computer” (Prensky, 2001, p. 02-1 – 02-2). If the younger age groups, often named *digital natives* (DN) are at ease interacting with technology, the older ones are, as a rule, more undecided about using online resources due to certain reasons, being called *digital immigrants*. In other words, the modern digital generation (MDG) was born into and raised up in the digital era, which means they have got access to contemporary brand-new gadgets (e.g. computers, tablets, smartphones, the Internet, etc.). Thus, due to regular exposure to modern technologies and the acquired know-how, the MDG has got more expertise in the area which surpasses the skills of the prior generations.

To be more specific, the assertion that there is a generation of DN is built on two key beliefs found in specialised literature, which can be formulated in the following way: firstly, the younger generation known as DN is highly knowledgeable about and proficient in using IT; and secondly, compared to previous generations of students, DN have got distinct learning preferences or styles due to their background and involvement with technology. However, researchers have come to the conclusion that “The debate over digital natives is thus based on two key claims: (1) that a distinct generation of ‘digital natives’ exists; and (2) that education must fundamentally change to meet the needs of these ‘digital natives’” (Bennett et al., 2008, p. 777). Consequently, in educational settings teachers have to deal with the learners born between 1995–2010, who are representatives of the so-called *Gen Z* generation, and those from the *Gen Alpha* generation, born between 2010 to the present day. Accordingly, the “young people’s growing-up experiences and recreational interests [...] shifted radically” (Prensky, 2001, p. 02-3).

Considering how far up-to-date technology has advanced, modern teachers must be aware that technology is developing and progressing with huge speed, thus each digital generation becomes accustomed to these innovations at their own pace, that is why teachers must adjust their teaching practices to meet their students’ expectations and stay *cyber-wise*.

Multimodality

It has become evident that in the modern digital teaching/ learning environment multimodality, beyond doubt, helps students to realise there are many ways to create meaning in communication, as “all meaning-making is multimodal” (“New London Group (NLG),” 1996, p. 81). The tendency of emerging multiliteracies, in order to build meaning is vital nowadays. Multimodal communication (MC) is a general way of seeing it, considering all forms of communication, for instance, written, oral, body language, the expression of the face, gesticulation, etc. Multimodal learning advocates for paying attention to learners’ senses while designing lesson plans. It is common knowledge that the more senses are involved in the learning process, the better students understand and remember the material. It seems obvious that students’ learning styles are to be considered while planning teaching activities. It is alleged up-to-date audio-visual methods used in teaching English must satisfy the needs of all the learners in order to get good results, once teachers have chosen the video-based learning type.

In this state of affairs, we would like to highlight the idea that multimedia classrooms offer the students with different learning styles the chance to work on a variety of texts that provide them with a profounder understanding of their contents. It is assumed if teachers make regular use of multimodal texts, the learners’ motivation to study will increase and they will easily get used to multimodal approaches to FL teaching/learning. MC is considered a key constituent of people’s social interactions that undeniably aids us to express our thoughts, views, mental state, and attitudes. It describes how we share information; it can be done via oral language, texting, sending e-mails, writing by hand, using body language, etc., as the key issue here is to transmit the message. It is designed to raise the quality of education by creating optimal learning conditions, passing on messages in the most convenient mode of learning for students. Multimodal learning (ML) is thought to be rather beneficial for students since it gives the chance to engage everyone in class in the learning process. It, undoubtedly, increases the quality of education and improves students’ skills in all modes. ML also reveals the complexity of actual interactions, brings and sustains novelty in the classroom, as well as it enlarges teachers’ and students’ creativity in all its forms.

Multimodality is universal, as it can be used for teaching almost all type of aspects - vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is the duty of educators to

employ multimodal instruction for a specific goal. It has become apparent that “spoken language is a matter of audio design as much as it is a matter of linguistic design understood as grammatical relationships (ibid, p. 81). This is one of the reasons why a variety of semiotic resources, including written texts, images, symbols, and animation, are used in multimodal texts. Teachers should keep in mind that printed texts like posters and collages are also regarded as multimodal texts and can be successfully used in the language class.

Additionally, performative and speaking activities like, for instance, a presentation that uses modern technologies, or a sketch that needs knowledge of proxemics, i.e. “how people use and structure space or spatial arrangements in work, personal relations” (*Collin’s Dictionary Online*) and other semiotic means like gesticulations and facial expressions are included in a multimodal discourse. A codified group of abilities, knowledge, and semiotic consciousness that can be acquired via the instructive metalanguage of multimodality is known as *multimodal literacy* that has become a very popular teaching tool, so far. For this reason, many educational systems around the world have modified their curricula to incorporate the skill of viewing alongside the four basic language skills as a reaction to the evolving modern communication environment. In the modern educational world teachers and students must understand that the effective multimodal text interpretation ability is one of the key requirements for today’s students to gain. Teachers are required to bridge the gap between the simulated worlds in a classroom setting and the students’ real worlds by assisting them in interpreting multimodal texts. Not only does viewing aid students in knowledge acquisition, but it also fosters the development of the viewer’s own multimodal speaking proficiency and helps them understand concepts and experiences that others have communicated through multiple media.

Numerous studies show that reading and interpreting multimodal texts enhances students’ motivation, critical thinking, vocabulary retention, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and speaking expertise. The above-mentioned skills will certainly help learners to entirely engage in society, thus developing into modern, proficient and critical viewers. For example, in the report *Viewing and Representing Supporting English Language Arts* (2013) issued by the Saskatchewan¹⁸ Ministry of Education, one can learn it is crucial that teachers make an effort to incorporate viewing into their lesson plans without making it appear too drastic from the way they currently teach, as this could deter students from trying something new. Instructors must realize that viewing/watching can be taught in an integrated manner and that it relates to what they are already doing. Hence, they can teach viewing in addition to listening and reading. It is imperative that educators and students recognize the similarities between the viewing and listening processes and that comprehension of the former is just as crucial as the latter (“Viewing and Representing Supporting English Language Arts,” 2013).

Love (2005) explains how students construct meaning stating the following “Meaning making is becoming more multimodal because language is continually being reshaped by new forms of communication media” (Love, 2005, p.300). Thus, as it has been mentioned earlier, in order to create textual meaning, a print text interacts with graphics, sounds, animations, and other design elements. Nowadays, the term text is used to refer broadly to a variety of cultural items that can be read or understood, such as lists, songs, buildings, posters, rituals, paintings, and even the everyday routine and practices of the classroom (Seixas, 2001). We have to admit everything changes in the modern world very quickly, texts have evolved too, as they no longer only use the words that are printed on paper. As Doherty

¹⁸ A Province in Canada

(2002) states “dedication to print decoding” will not build the abilities and methods required to read graphics, hyperlinks, and images (Doherty, 2002). While reading or viewing, students need comprehend not only what the text is saying but also how the text works. They must do this by creating meaning by reading between the lines of the elements under consideration (images, symbols, conventions, and context) that are related to the visual message.

In order to become proficient and engaged viewers, educators and students may apply at least some of the following practices, keeping in mind that effective viewers need to ask themselves: “What is the visual text representing?, How was this visual text constructed?, What assumptions, interests, beliefs, biases, and values are portrayed by the visual text?, What assumptions, interests, beliefs, biases, values can be inferred about the author from this visual text?, What is the purpose of the text?, To whom is the text directed? Who does the text exclude?, What is my reaction to this visual text? What causes this reaction?, What personal connections and associations can I make with this text?, What use is made of language, image, and/or symbol? Is it effective? Why?” (“Viewing and Representing Supporting English Language Arts,” 2013, p. 1).

As a result, by viewing, students get and broaden the knowledge and abilities necessary to assess and analyse multimedia texts that incorporate images. Moreover, they learn information and gain an appreciation for the ideas and experiences as they watch. A wide variety of visual media, such as dance, graphics, drama, film, television, three-dimensional models, body language is viewed by students both extensively and critically. Some visual forms can also include oral, print, and/or other media texts.

In this respect, at the stage of planning a multimedia lesson, teachers should consider three main stages – pre, while and post viewing. During the *Pre-viewing* stage, in order to get ready to watch, students engage their previous awareness on the topic and try to anticipate, predict, speculate, ask questions, and set goals for their viewing. The *While viewing* stage implies the following issues: students view the multimodal text trying to comprehend the conveyed message, validating assumptions and inferences, deducing and summarizing, making pauses, discussing, revising, questioning and evaluating the viewed material. By making connections to their prior knowledge, asking questions, and reflecting, learners can control their own understanding. The last stage – *Post viewing* guarantees prospects for learners to react critically, creatively, and individually to multimodal texts, and in response, students consider, analyse, assess, and produce.

It is high time teachers understood that multimedia texts are not the types of traditional texts we are used to. The students really enjoy navigating on such educational sites and learn while scrolling the pages. The texts are very eye-catching, in fact, it is a combination of text and multi-coloured photos, images and drawings, filled with animation and different effects. In order to get familiarized with them we suggest accessing the link <https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/poor-millennials/> where several samples can be read.

It can be seen how interactive, lively, engaging and interesting it is to work with such an amazing tool. Indisputably, it is rather complicated to create digital multimodal texts, as it necessitates much time, imagination and energy. The creators (teachers) must have the skill of dealing with modern communication technologies. On the other hand, multimodal texts can also have other forms than digital ones, they can be paper-based (as in modern English textbooks), or they can even get the form of a live performance. In today’s classrooms, creating multimodal texts is becoming more and more common. We are not suggesting that multimodal texts, such as posters, storyboards, picture books, brochures, PowerPoints, blogs, and podcasts, are simple to create. Web pages, digital stories, interactive stories, animation, and film are examples of more intricate digital multimodal text productions. Students can get the

task to design multimodal texts, but to cope with it, they must possess the accuracy, fluency, and creativity necessary to produce them. In order to accomplish this, students must understand how the different modes employed in the text communicate meaning, and how different modes combine to tell a story or communicate information in different ways. In order to effectively tell their stories, students must be able to manipulate the various combinations of different modes throughout the entire text and choose the most optimal and interesting model to convey specific meanings. Proficiency in multimodal composition necessitates that students possess subject-matter expertise and textual comprehension regarding the most effective ways to communicate meaning through text; digital multimodal authoring similarly demands familiarity with the technology and procedures needed to create inventive digital media productions. Students working in groups might have varying levels of language proficiency, that is why, in order to create multilingual, multimodal texts for a EFL class they must improve their proficiency in English to be able to deal with such texts.

Conclusion

In FLclassrooms, multimodal pedagogy (multiliteracy) may offer students a more representative platform for creating meaning. English language learners can benefit from the use of multimodal pedagogy in their literacy development, especially in view of the increasing interest in semiotics and the variety of texts, technologies, and ways to interpret the world that exist today.

Teachers must accept the idea that digital literacy is here for long, so the best ways to integrate past, present, and future literacies must be carefully considered, so, that upon graduation, the students are equipped with both academic and practical knowledge of the outside world. Therefore, teachers are becoming gradually conscious they must pay more attention to the modern educational tools that enhance the advance of students' multimodal communicative competence. In order to help teachers make students aware there are not only other ways to communicate meanings, but also that those other ways can be interpreted in conjunction with language, they need to employ targeted and methodical approaches.

The creation and adoption of progressively more advanced digital technologies is driving the current wave of digital transformation. It takes longer to complete this process, during which various stages of digitization can be identified. The well-planned, extensive use of multimodal texts, textual, linguistic, and audio-visual modes used in the composition and transmission of messages, explains why the online resources are so effective in teaching learners of different age. Digital multimodal learning materials containing a range of interactive exercises enable effective FL instruction, differentiate the types of work done, raise students' interest in learning English, and reinforce traditional knowledge.

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