

Multimodality and ELT

by **Lorena Maria Irimia**, Colegiul Național "Emil Racoviță", Iași

Abstract

With the proliferation of information technologies and communication channels, today's learners are immersed in multimedia and print-based literacy practices. The English language classroom, therefore, has a unique opportunity to integrate these diverse modes of meaning-making, where the textual intersects with the visual, audio, spatial, and multimodal. As research suggests, this integration is not just a merging of traditional print-focused notions and modern multimodal aspects but a redefinition of the nature of learning and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). It is a transformative shift with immense potential for our students and educational practices.

Keywords: multimodal text, modes of meaning-making, information technologies

Introduction

Technological progress has created new educational contexts, offering new challenges and opportunities. The rapid pace of progress in this era requires highly qualified graduates. Consequently, these conditions have prompted teachers and other educational professionals to help students develop skills and competencies that will allow them to perform well in society and their future careers.

Multimodality

21st-century students need to have three essential skills: information and communication, thinking and problem-solving, and interpersonal and self-direction skills. One way to empower them is to incorporate multimodality into English teaching practices. Multimodality refers to using visuals, sounds, texts, gestures, and technology so that learners can engage with their lives (Choi & Yi, 2016; Kress, 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2015). The central idea underpinning

multimodality is that meanings are created, distributed, received, interpreted and re-interpreted through multiple modes of representation and communication, not just language.

The ELT students are traditionally taught the four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. Nevertheless, we need to keep up with the world our students live in, a world filled with images and sounds combined with text - a multimodal world. According to New London Group (1996), Jewitt & Kress (2003), and Kress (2010, 2017), there are various modes in which students can create meaning, such as written and oral language, visuals, sounds, gestures, and movements. We need to rethink what communication entails nowadays and train students to communicate realistically with the world surrounding them and look for information in the digital era. Students need to learn how to 'read' multimodal texts and express meaning through multimodal texts on their own. To grasp today's text-based world, we need much more than the ability to read and write words and sentences. Siegel (2012) suggests using multimodality in the classroom for two reasons: Students live in an era that demands new literacies and often brings multimodal practices to school. Studies show that multimodal teaching brings content knowledge to life and makes it more authentic for learners. Multimodality highlights learners' underexplored skills, interests and personalities, which have a powerful impact on learning. Because of the wide range of abilities and interests, multimodal teaching reaches more learners. Learners are seen as creators and innovators who can shape their lives' cultural, social, and political contexts.

There are five modes of communication: linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial. Each has a different purpose and serves a different function.

The linguistic mode centres on the significance of written or spoken language in communication and involves word choice, word order in sentences and paragraphs, vocabulary, grammar and structure.

The visual mode centres on the significance of what can be seen by the viewer and involves images, symbols, signs and videos. It also requires text elements, such as colour, physical layout (how the parts of something are arranged), font type (style and design of letters) and size.

The aural mode centres on the significance of what the listener can hear and involves voice, sound effects, background noise, music, and silence. The meaning can be carried through volume, pitch, speed, and rhythm.

The gestural mode centres on the significance of communication through gestures and involves facial expressions, hand gestures, body language and human interaction.

The spatial mode centres on the significance of communication through physical layout. It involves position, spacing, distance between text elements and space between people/objects. Writers use this mode in the physical design and organization of a text.

When a text incorporates more than one of these modes, it is considered multimodal. Multimodal texts can be paper-based, live or digital in format. Paper-based multimodal texts include textbooks, picture books, graphic novels, comics and posters, and meaning is conveyed to the reader through different combinations of linguistic (written language), visual (still images) and spatial modes. Live multimodal texts, such as oral storytelling and dance performances, convey meaning through gestural, spatial, audio and oral language. Digital multimodal texts, such as videos, vlogs, film, animation, digital stories, podcasts, slideshows, video games and web pages, convey meaning differently through linguistic (written and spoken language), visual (still and moving images), aural, gestural and spatial modes combinations.

Teachers must consider designing multimodal learning experiences to enhance their students' communicative competence. This would involve selecting appropriate multimodal texts to work on with their students and deciding to explore these texts in the classroom. Victor Lim and Lynda Tan-Chia suggest four learning experiences teachers should consider: encountering, exploring, evaluating, and expressing.

The learning process of encountering centres on emotional engagement. The teacher involves students through learning experiences that include emotions. Students are invited to describe a multimodal text, share their emotional responses, and self-reflect on their emotional involvement. This emphasis on emotional engagement not only enhances their understanding of

the text but also fosters their emotional intelligence, a crucial aspect of their overall development. Here are some examples of questions that students might reflect on as they encounter a short film:

What is happening in the film?

How does it make you feel?

Which memories or does it stir in you?

In the exploring stage, the focus is on cognitive understanding. Students develop their knowledge, skills, and awareness of tackling multimodal texts through exploring. The exploring method can be achieved through explicit teaching and inductive learning. Students explore the meanings in the multimodal text among themselves before the teacher summarises their understanding. Here are some questions students might consider while studying a short film:

What happens at the beginning of the story?

Which character interests you the most? Why?

Which characters speak and which do not?

The next stage is evaluating, which is mainly characterized by critical perspectives. Students progress from simply describing and interpreting a multimodal text to developing critical perspectives. Students are urged to take a critical approach to analyzing the multimodal text and to raise questions about its messages. The process of evaluating can be done through individual or joint construction of meaning. Here are some questions students might consider while evaluating a short film:

How would you summarise its message?

Who do you think the intended audience is? Why?

The last learning process is expressing, which focuses on multimodal composition and empowers learners to be active creators of meaning. It can be done individually or in groups in which students collaboratively engage in meaning-making and negotiate meaning with each other. Here is a multimodal composition task students might be asked to do during the expressing process of a short film:

Write a multimodal review. You should include:

- a summary of the film's plot
- screenshots and descriptions of the main characters
- screenshots and descriptions of the main settings
- the performance of the main actors
- the film's message

Besides the four learning processes, teachers should integrate other vital elements into the classroom, such as authentic texts, digital technology, and collaborative and inductive learning. By using these techniques, teachers can devise more meaningful multimodal learning experiences. Auerbach (2000) sums it up: "The teacher poses problems and engages students in dialogue and critical reflection" as the students and the teacher are jointly engaged in building knowledge in the classroom.

In conclusion, using videos and images in the classroom is no longer an optional fun activity. Multimodal texts are essential for analysis, debate, and discussion. Successful communication today requires young people to be able to understand, respond to, and create multimodal texts in a variety of forms.

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Biodata

Lorena Maria Irimia has been teaching English for 27 years. She is a dynamic teacher who has been involved in a series of Comenius and Erasmus+ projects. Thus, she adds a touch of real-life communication to class and encourages international contacts.