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Developing university students' multimodal communicative competence: Field research into multimodal text studies in English

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 July 2017

Received in revised form 8 January 2018

Accepted 13 January 2018

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Multimodal communicative and meta-communicative competence

Text studies in English

Multimodal text analysis

ABSTRACT

Reconsideration of Hymes' concept of communicative competence within a multimodal perspective implies that learners of a foreign language should develop a metalanguage that enables them to talk about how semiotic resources are co-deployed in specific texts and to relate their insights to these texts' contexts of situation and culture. This article reports on how research into multimodality, developed within Halliday's systemic functional framework, has been integrated into a university syllabus for text studies in English through a specific course designed to achieve this goal. In other words, students engaged in text analysis activities using analytical tools that guided them in the exploration of the complex array of semiotic resources that contribute to a text's meaning, but within a wider-ranging syllabus whose ultimate goal is to promote overall communicative competence. The article describes instruments for multimodal text analysis and sample materials created for the course. It then draws conclusions about the feasibility and benefits of an approach to text studies in English that fosters multimodal communicative competence, which naturally has an important metacommunicative component as it encourages reflection on texts.

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1. Introduction

The use of authentic texts in language teaching is nothing new; what is new are the frameworks and models through which language practitioners use these texts in the language classroom. With the onset of the communicative approach in the 1970s, many (e.g. Cook, 1981; Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1988; Morrow, 1977; Wilkins, 1976) advocated the use of authentic texts, such as radio and television broadcasts, recipes, leaflets and advertisements, which were slowly introduced into the language classroom. These texts were considered “as a main source of the target language input” (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1994: 43), that were particularly useful in helping learners understand the language used, as well as the target culture, and “the means by which [the learner] can bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and an effective capacity to participate in real language events” (Wilkins, 1976: 79). At present, these materials are still present in the language classroom, but with the rapid spread of research into multimodal discourse that has ultimately been triggered by the rise of digital genres and

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.01.004>

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media, their use in many contexts goes beyond a linguistic component and embraces other semiotic resources with which language functions (e.g. images, gestures and movement).

The intention of this article is to contribute to research into multimodal pedagogies in the context of English language teaching and learning in higher education. In particular, it provides a proposal under which upper-intermediate students of English as a foreign language at university level are provided with analytical frameworks and methods for multimodal text analysis developed within Halliday (1978) social semiotic approach to communication (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen, [1996] 2006, Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Eggins, 2004). The proposal includes genre-focused activities whose ultimate goal is to raise students' awareness of the multimodal nature of meaning-making in English in today's world.

The article is arranged as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature most relevant to this study in an attempt to interpret the term *multimodal communicative competence* (Royce, 2002; 2007), which represents the main focus of this article. Section 3 provides a description of the objectives of the study and the learning context in which this course was carried out, while Section 4 describes two classroom applications created for the course based on two authentic multimodal texts, namely a procedural text and a pedagogical animation. Finally, Section 5 draws some conclusions about the feasibility and benefits of the multimodal approach in the course, and suggests future steps for its further implementation.

2. Literature review

Undoubtedly, constant advances in communication technology have revolutionized our ways of interacting and led to the emergence and diffusion of new text genres, especially multimodal ones (Cambria, Arizzi, & Coccetta, 2012; Campagna, Garzone, Ilie, & Rowley-Jolivet, 2012). The affordances provided by social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, allow us to combine different modes of meaning to fulfil a number of communicative purposes, including sharing our feelings, narrating either wonderful, terrifying or meaningless events that have occurred in our lives, or commenting the news of the day. Facebook is an obvious case in point. Here, for example, we are used to simultaneously posting a picture, visualizing the feeling it arouses within us with an emoji, and adding our comments in the form of written language. In the L2 context, these changes call for a reconsideration of the competences language learners need to develop. It is no longer sufficient for language learners to become competent *language users*, as advocated by the Council of Europe (2001), as they also need to become competent *text users*, i.e. capable of understanding and producing effective texts in the L2 using all the media that now exist for communication and interaction, above all in English.

In the L1 context, the impact of technological developments on literacy education has been investigated extensively (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Unsworth, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Kress, 2003; Jewitt & Kress, 2003). This area of research was triggered particularly by research into multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, [1996] 2006) and the *New London Group's* (1996) manifesto, which called for a multiliteracy approach to pedagogy in response to the proliferation of new forms of communication emerging at that time. The *New London Group* (1996) held that, besides traditional reading and writing skills, students needed to develop a broader set of literacies to be able to cope with the multiple modes of meaning making (e.g. visuals, gestures, spatial disposition) that characterize the texts produced in the digital age. They also argued that, *inter alia*, in a pedagogy of multiliteracies teachers and students need:

a metalanguage [...] for talking about language, images, texts, and meaning-making interactions [...]. [T]he primary purpose of the metalanguage should be to identify and explain differences between texts, and relate these to the contexts of culture and situation in which they seem to work. (*New London Group*, 1996: 77)

In the L2 context, teachers have typically favoured the use of multimodal texts (e.g. radio and television broadcasts, leaflets and advertisements). In the 1980s, for example, videos were introduced because access to visual clues facilitates learners' understanding of the language used (e.g. Loneragan, 1984; Stempleski & Arcario, 1993). However, some teachers seem to have been reluctant to accept the fact that learners should develop some multiliteracies to cope better with these texts. In this regard, Valdes (2004) points out that:

[t]he view that there are multiple literacies rather than a single literacy, that these literacies depend on the context of the situation, the activity itself, the interactions between participants, and the knowledge and experiences that these various participants bring to these interactions is distant from the view held by most L2 educators who still embrace a technocratic notion of literacy and emphasise the development of decontextualised skills. (p. 79)

In a similar vein, Royce (2007) observes that language teaching professionals' concern about developing their learners' linguistic communicative competence is reflected in language teacher training programmes worldwide which focus on language only. Nevertheless, the promotion of multiliteracies in L2 settings is now a well-established area of research in the international context. In Italy, for example, the promotion of multiliteracies in L2 university contexts and the integration of multimodal discourse analysis into English language teaching have been investigated since the second half of the 1990s, as illustrated by the papers collected in Baldry (2000a) which were presented in many conferences in Italy between 1994 and 1999. The papers aimed to give voice to, and interpret, the changes discourse was undergoing in the multimodal and multimedia world of the 1990s, and were a preliminary attempt to reconsider the role of English linguistics, teachers, and language learners in that age. More recent studies on the topic have extended these foundations and include, among others, Campagna and Boggio's (2009) work on multimodal discourse in the fields of business and economics, Baldry's (2012) research into multimodal web genres of scientific English, and Plastina's (2013) study of multimodal pedagogy in ESP.

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