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An investigation of prospective English language teachers' multimodal literacy

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Abstract

With the development of digital communication technologies, we are required to re-define the term *literacy* as *"multimodal literacy"*. The current generations, as digital natives, are literate not only in the conventional sense but in an innovative way which involves texts with static and dynamic images, gestures, audio, spoken language and written language. Citizens of today need to be able to comprehend meaning that is constructed through two or more communication modes. Likewise, it is equally important that teachers of the digital world need to possess multimodal literacy knowledge and skills. The teachers should be able to comprehend and interpret multimodal texts, and effectively design and communicate meaning through such texts and finally need to transfer this knowledge and skills to their students. This quantitative study aims to investigate multimodal literacy levels of 383 pre-service English language teachers at Gazi University, Turkey. The multimodal literacy of prospective teachers are assessed through the Multimodal Literacy Scale developed by Bulut, Ulu and Kan (2014) and the scores are evaluated in terms of gender, grade, and other background features such as internet use and parents' education level. Conclusions are drawn and suggestions are made for the English language teaching programs.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed emergence of new technologies and a diverse array of media we communicate. Today the way we live and communicate often includes print along with use of email, texting,

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voicemail, and Internet web-pages with image, sound, and music. Eventually, the notion of "text" has broadened to include digitally constructed texts constituted through more than one mode or means of representation such as words, dynamic and static images, sounds, symbols and gestures. These texts are dynamic, nonlinear and interactive. To be able to function in today's world, a shift is required in literacy training from the conventional sense towards producing and understanding texts involving different modes of human communication such as visual, verbal and gestural (Leu, 2002; Harste, Woodward & Burke 1984: 208). Hence multimodal literacy, defined as "a framework that requires a collective interpretation of two or more scripts, visuals, videos, graphics, animations, sounds, music, gestures and facial expressions for producing meaning" (Kress, 2010: 54). Multimodal texts are inherently associated with digital technologies because in many digital texts, different modalities, aural, visual, gestural, spatial and linguistic come together to construct meaning. Multimodal literacy is about understanding the different ways of knowledge representations and meaning-making, understanding discourse by investigating the contributions of specific semiotic resources such as language, gestures and images, using various modalities such as visual and aural elements to create meaning and understanding how various modalities co-work to construct a coherent text.

Digital natives surrounded and shaped by these technologies act differently in communication and meaning making. Literacy training based on words on a piece of paper ignores other ways of communication and interaction and is insufficient to train and educate students for life and work in the digital world (Alvermann, 2002; Buckingham, 2003; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2003; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; O'Brien & Bauer, 2005). Given the fact that more and more students arrive at school more competent in new technologies and literacies than their teachers (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004), changes need to be done in education and teacher training.

Ignoring this phenomenon in our classrooms would be a mistake. If we do so, we run the risk of losing touch and school may become boring and irrelevant for students as a result. The gap between conventional print-based schooling and the new multimodal literacy practices is called "the digital divide and disconnect" (O'Brien & Bauer, 2005: 126). Students are more interested and competent in new literacies than their teachers who experience problems creating and understanding multimodal texts using new technologies (O'Brien & Bauer, 2005, Jewitt et al., 2007). Print-only instruction is far from addressing to the needs and interests of students of the digital world and lack of multimodal literacy practices is often cited as resulting in increasing student disengagement (Gee 2004). Hence, it is recommended that educators should hold a more constructive approach to benefit from new technologies at play on students' literacy practices.

The current generations, as digital natives, are literate not only in the conventional sense but in an innovative way which involves texts with static and dynamic images, gestures, audio, spoken language and written language. It is equally important that teachers of the digital world also need to possess multimodal literacy knowledge and skills. The teachers should be able to comprehend and interpret multimodal texts, and effectively design and communicate meaning through such texts and finally need to transfer this knowledge and skills to their students.

Research indicates that using multimodal texts contributes to students' use of cognitive skills and increases their creativity, attention, participation and production (Callow & Zammit, 2012) .Walsh (2010: 220) suggests that the use of multimodal texts in language skills courses changes the nature of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The use of multimodal texts not only changes in the process of teaching a class, testing and evaluation, participation in courses but also the roles of teachers and learners (Walsh 2010: 222). Introduction of hardware, software and the Internet does not guarantee technology integration to classrooms. The teachers need opportunities to make use of multimodal literacies in their own lives before integrating them effectively to their teaching practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). To this end, teacher training programs should involve knowledge and skills to integrate multimodal literacies to their practices.

As to learning a foreign or second language, teachers may often be resistant to integrate multimodal practices to their teaching (Tan & Mc William, 2009; Warschauer, 2008). "Reducing L2 learning to the flat literacies of paper-based resources in the classroom raises questions of authenticity in L2 learning" (Lotherington & Jenson 2011: 228). To design authentic communicative activities necessitates use of new dimensions of literacy as they are in indispensable part of life and communication today. What is more, use of multimodal texts makes it possible to draw on students' out-of-school literacies to help them perform better in our classrooms (Sewell & Denton 2011: 61).