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A Multimodal Approach to Using Comics in EFL Classrooms

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Aim of the paper

- ✓ To elaborate on the contribution of the multimodal nature of comics to the meaning-making process
- ✓ To discuss strategic EFL reading in comics, where the linguistic elements are intertwined with the visual ones, to help readers construct meaning

The emergence of multimodal texts

- ✚ Literacy pedagogy, which mainly focuses on language texts, where language is the only mode to provide information, has dominated in the so-called literate Western societies and, in particular, the field of education (New London Group, 1996)
- ✚ Nonetheless, the technological development, the inauguration of the digital era, and the globalization, have all rendered contemporary communication highly **multimodal** moving, particularly, towards the extensive use of image (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001; New London Group, 1996)

Defining the term *Multimodal*

Examples of multimodal texts



(e.g., comics, picture books, graphic novels, websites, video games, advertisements)

(Kress et al., 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Unsworth, 2001)

Multimodal → The integration of the various semiotic modes of communication where the linguistic mode of meaning is linked with:

- The visual mode (images, page layouts, screen formats)
- The gestural mode (body language/facial expressions)
- The spatial mode (environmental and architectural spaces)
- The audio mode (music sound effects)

(Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996)

The Role of Visuals in Reading

- ✚ Regarding reading, five major functions of visuals have been highlighted in literature (Levin, Anglin, & Carney, 1987; Levie & Lentz, 1982):
 - ✓ **Representation:** Visuals repeat the text's content or simply overlap with the text.
 - ✓ **Organization:** Visuals boost the text's coherence.
 - ✓ **Interpretation:** Visuals provide the reader with more concrete information.
 - ✓ **Transformation:** Visuals represent critical information in the text and recode it in a more memorable manner.
 - ✓ **Decoration:** Visuals are used for aesthetic reasons or to trigger readers' interest in the text.

Comics: A Scaffold for Reading

- ✚ A comic strip is defined “as a series of pictures inside boxes that tell a story” (Liu, 2004, p. 229)
- ✚ The educational strength of comics lies in that they are seen as a popular and interesting way to motivate and help learners, especially lower proficiency ones, become engaged in EFL reading (Jacobs, 2007)
- ✚ Comics, which belong to visual genres, render reading more pleasant and comprehensible (Liu, 2004)

Comics as Multimodal Literacy (I)

Comics

- are a typical example of multimodal narratives
- constitute a complex environment for deriving meaning, as they provide information using various semiotic modes, such as the linguistic, the visual, the gestural, the audio, and the spatial mode (Jacobs, 2007)

The layout of a comics' page consists of:

- ✓ panels
 - ✓ gutters (they divide panels from each other)
 - ✓ strips
 - ✓ speech bubbles or thought bubbles
 - ✓ images (depicting people, objects, animals, settings, lettering, sound effects etc)
- ✚ All the above elements form page layouts and are closely associated to create meaning in an increasingly multimodal manner



Comics as Multimodal Literacy (II)

- ❑ The process of meaning-making in comics is the result of a complex interplay of various modes and techniques, such as:
 - ✓ language elements
 - ✓ the type and size of font
 - ✓ the facial expression and body posture
 - ✓ the sound (words that resemble a particular sound)
 - ✓ the colour (which is usually used to denote feelings, Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002)

- ❑ When put together, the above elements form a multimodal way to derive meaning from comics (Jacobs, 2007)

An Example Drawn from *Asterix the Legionary*



Elements that are conducive to text-meaning:

- the size of font
- body posture and facial expressions
- the sound
- the use of colour

Strategic Reading in EFL Multimodal texts (I)

- ✚ EFL reading research has associated successful reading comprehension with explicit instruction and use of reading strategies (e.g., Kern, 1989; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Song, 1998).
- ✚ Reading strategies are seen as intentional actions used to facilitate reading (Erler & Finkbeiner, 2007).

Reading strategies:

- ✓ Skimming a text to get the main idea
- ✓ Scanning a text for specific information
- ✓ Making contextual guesses about the meanings of unfamiliar words
- ✓ Skipping unknown words
- ✓ Making predictions about text content
- ✓ Rereading
- ✓ Summarizing
- ✓ Activating prior knowledge (Carrell, 1998)

Strategic Reading in EFL Multimodal texts (II)

- Strategic reading
 - characterizes expert readers
 - is inextricably linked with “reading for meaning”
 - indicates not only the readers’ knowledge of what strategy to use but also of how to use it and orchestrate it with other strategies

(Anderson, 1991; Carrell, 1998)

- However, when readers deal with multimodal texts, the meaning-making process is more complex or different from the one used in language texts.
- In order to construct meaning from multimodal texts, the reader should be able to take advantage of the combination of both the linguistic and visual modes of communication usually available during the meaning-making process and, simultaneously, apply reading strategies, which have been so far linked with language texts (e.g., Kern, 1989; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Song, 1998)

Applying Strategic Reading in Comics

- Skimming to get the main idea of the text
- Scanning to locate a specific piece of information
- Contextual guessing to derive the meaning of an unfamiliar word



- ✚ When applying the above reading strategies to comics, the reader should:
 - go through the speech bubbles rather quickly
 - allow for the visual elements, because cartoonists usually make extensive use of the visual mode paying attention to details to maximize meaning (Bauldry & Thibault, 2006)

Discussion

- ✚ In this context, the semantic field of reading comprehension and reading strategy instruction should extend its limits beyond language texts to allow for multimodal texts as well
- ✚ Teaching students, in particular, EFL students that often face linguistic deficiencies (Bernhardt, 2005; Koda, 2005), to become aware of the ways in which they can derive meaning from multimodal texts, such as comics, where meaning usually resides in the integration of two modes, the linguistic and visual (Kress et al., 2001), is an efficient way:
 - ✓ To make them more active creators of meaning
 - ✓ To improve reading comprehension (Jacobs, 2007).
- ✚ In short, the use of reading strategies and knowledge of the complex interplay of the various semiotic modes can affect the way in which we read and construct meaning from a variety of multimodal texts.

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A stage with red curtains and spotlights. The stage is set with a wooden floor and several spotlights. The curtains are red and have tassels. The text is centered on the stage.

End of presentation

Thank you for your attention!

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