

The case for multimodal learning and teaching

Daniel Xerri suggests a way of engaging digital natives.

Introduction

Given the potential of digital tools as a means of engaging learners as well as an awareness of the possibility that in some educational contexts – such as the one in Malta where I teach – learners might not be availing themselves fully of such potential, this article reviews the benefits of adopting a multimodal approach to language learning and teaching. In recent years multimodality has increasingly become renowned as an effective way of enhancing learner engagement. This is probably due to the idea that by means of a multimodal approach, teachers can enable learners to enter a text, play with the English language and transform the text into a performance.

Multimodality

Multimodality is defined as ‘the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001: 20). For Dressman (2010: 71), it is ‘the crafted integration of two or more ways, or modes, of communication, so that their combined meaning as a whole is greater than either mode separately or their simple combination’. This usually, but not exclusively, involves the use of digital technology. The use of a multimodal approach is becoming ever more necessary given that the needs of digital natives put pressure on education to change (Bennett *et al.*, 2008).

Given the different and evolving ways of communication that contemporary learners can utilise to communicate

meaning and understand the world, a multimodal approach is necessary. According to the New London Group (1996: 78), ‘One of the key ideas informing the notion of multiliteracies is the increasing complexity and inter-relationship of different modes of meaning.’ What relates different design elements (i.e. linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial) to each other are ‘the Multimodal patterns of meaning’ (New London Group, 1996: 65). Given that ‘all meaning-making is multimodal’ the latter is considered to be ‘the most significant, as it relates all the other modes in quite remarkably dynamic relationships’ (New London Group, 1996: 80–81). The ‘transformation’ of texts that is allowed by digital technology means that ‘as a way of reflecting on text, exploring and experimenting with it in a new medium can offer insights into and shifts of meaning that can well be characterized as refraction’ (Twedde *et al.*, 1997: 54). Unsworth (2001) refers to ‘technoliteracies’ and in his opinion these will not supplant traditional literacies but complement them, especially since ‘hard-copy forms of “linear” texts will continue to co-exist with electronic hypertext for some time’ (p281). Hence ‘the work of the English teacher clearly involves developing students’ use of multiliteracies in the composition and comprehension of texts in computer based and conventional formats’ as well as ‘developing students’ meta-semiotic understanding and the associated meta-language’ (Unsworth, 2001: 282). A multimodal approach presents learners with:

‘...different potentials for engagement with a text: the point of entry, the possible paths through a text and the potentials for re-making it. In multimodal texts, each mode offers a different way into representation and focuses on different aspects of meaning’ (Jewitt, 2005: 7).

In Alvermann’s opinion (2009: 105), ‘reaching and teaching adolescents in currently changing times will require a healthy respect for their past, present, and future literacies’. This issue is particularly significant given the fact that some contemporary ELT coursebooks and syllabi do not yet make any reference to multimodal texts or to any conjunctive literacies.

Multimodal learning and teaching

The notion of multimodality redefines pedagogy because learning itself is reconceptualised, partly because of the impact of new technologies. For example, Kress (2003: 141) argues that ‘the increasingly and insistently more multimodal forms of contemporary texts make it essential to rethink our notions of what reading is’. This is partly because ‘the demands on readers, and the demands of reading, will if anything be greater, and they will certainly be different’ (Kress, 2003: 167).

In the USA, the NCTE (2005, 2008) indicates that the definition of literacy for 21st-century classrooms goes beyond the traditional ability to read and write print texts but also incorporates the sense of reading and writing multimodal

texts. McBride (2004) feels that those who teach the humanities need to 'reconceptualise the intersections between the humanities classroom and visual rhetoric' (pxix). This is important because just like language and literature, 'film is a signifying practice through which students make meaning'; its use in the classroom leads to 'active and engaged viewers who must participate in the viewing experience in order to create meaning' (McBride, 2004: xiii). According to Jewitt (2005: 8), 'The multimodal character of new technologies requires a re-thinking of learning as a linguistic accomplishment.' In her opinion, 'The almost habitual conjunction of "language", speech and writing, with learning is ... especially paradoxical in relation to technology-mediated learning' given that speech and writing are 'a small part of a multimodal ensemble' (Jewitt, 2005: 2). For Kress *et al* (2005: 2), 'A multimodal approach is one where attention is given to all the culturally shaped resources that are available.' They consider it 'essential' due to 'the ways in which it creates new kinds of identity for students and teachers' (Kress *et al*, 2005: 14). It may actually lead to a reevaluation of the teacher/learner hierarchy: 'changing learners in changing times may eventually alter how we, as teachers and teacher educators, view the expert/novice relationship' (Alvermann, 2009: 102).

Conclusion

A multimodal approach promotes the formation of a learning community in the classroom whereby teachers and learners forge learning partnerships so that new knowledge is generated and connected to the world by means of digital tools and resources (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). This is particularly significant when one takes into consideration the central role that teachers play in traditional forms of language learning and teaching.

Multimodality seems to be a key priority for all those teachers hoping to engage digital natives with language learning via a variety of texts. As Hughes (2009: 228) points out, 'Immersing students in a digital environment that

serves as a model for their own digital performances views performance as a purposeful and creative process interwoven with other literacy events.' Multimodality allows teachers to harness a text's communicative potential. However, despite all the advantages of a multimodal approach, teachers are still the most significant factor when it comes to inspiring learners. Digital technology has the potential to make the learning experience a more engaging one and to lift a text off the printed page but, as a number of systematic reviews suggest (Low & Beverton, 2004; Torgerson & Zhu, 2003), it is certainly not the panacea for all the challenges that teachers face when attempting to engage learners with language learning. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that non-ICT methods of instruction are inferior to those employing digital technology, despite the fact that the latter can be highly motivating for learners (Andrews, 2004).

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