



# ELT RESEARCH

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## Researching language teaching and learning in a classroom setting

Special Conference Issue, edited by Mirosław Pawlak and Sarah Mercer

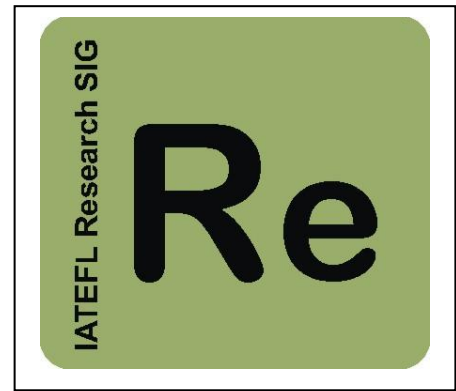


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## Editing and layout

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# Adopting a multimodal German as a foreign language (GFL) coursebook approach

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## Introduction

"Oh no ... I forgot my textbook at home". Experienced and novice teachers alike are familiar with such a statement. Students at times forget to bring with them in class what is frequently treated as the bread and butter of the daily teacher conduct. Textbooks indeed are the most popular tool used globally within the classroom (UNESCO, 2007). The Foreign Language (FL) classroom is no exception. In this case, textbooks together with other authentic texts (Widdowson, 1990) bring the learner closer to the target language being taught.

While acknowledging the importance of texts, this paper goes one step further and aims at analysing a number of German as a Foreign Language (GFL) texts multimodally. This will be done, initially by defining the terms 'mode' and 'multimodality', highlighting the conventional distinctions which often feature in literature, i.e., distinguishing between superordinate – subordinate modes as well as embodied – disembodied modes. Adopting a practical multimodal text analysis, the paper then moves on to analyse whether particular GFL texts are indeed multimodal, a question rarely tackled by literature.

## Defining modes and their qualities

Texts – be it the textbook or other possible authentic materials used – are wholes made of parts. The text is made up of a variety of small units through which the message may be transmitted or presented (Kress, 2010). These small units are called *modes*. Each mode has a particular potential which Stein (2008) refers to as *affordances*. Thus, what the printed text mode can do is different from what may be achieved through other modes such as spoken text, clothes, colour, layout or music.

Since each text consists of a collection of these modes presented together, the text is considered to be multimodal i.e., containing more than one mode, thus consisting of an array of modes. As should be clear from

the different modes identified above, the latter (i.e., modes) vary in nature. Norris (2004, p. 65) highlights two major types of modes:

- *Embodied modes* including spoken language, gesture, gaze, or posture. These are bodily produced modes. Language here is not the only mode available. Instead, other embodied modes apart from language "can play a *superordinate* or an *equal* role to the mode of language in interaction, and therefore, these modes are not merely embellishments to language".
- *Disembodied modes* "include among others music, print, layout, colour, clothes and any other mode deriving from the setting or material world where the interaction is happening. These too can take a superordinate role in interaction and at times even 'overrule' embodied modes".

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) also distinguish further between the *superordinate* and the *subordinate mode*. The superordinate mode – what I call the leading mode on which all other modes depend and thus the one transmitting the main message – is therefore supported by other *subordinate modes*, which eventually help to form a fuller picture, complimenting the *superordinate* mode opted by the designer of the text.

## The Study

### Research question

The study reported below addressed the following research question: Are the texts used to teach GFL actually multimodal? This might appear to be a question with a straightforward affirmative answer. However, since very little multimodal research has been conducted till now in the GFL field, I felt that before exploring further avenues about the effects of different modes on GFL students (as I am currently planning to do in the near future), it would be worth analysing and getting familiar with the multimodal nature of commonly used GFL texts.

### Methodology

When selecting the GFL texts to include in the study, I have selected three GFL textbook series proposed and promoted by the Goethe Institute, the institution promoting the learning of GFL around the globe. The series selected are:

- the *Schritte International* series published by Hueber;
- the *Magnet* series published by Klett;
- the *Geni@I* series published by Langenscheidt.

This selection was done with the intention to analyse texts used by a wider audience and consequently larger number of GFL students. Each text was analyzed in

great depth with the help of the following step-by-step procedure:

1. Initial reading of text focusing on the general qualities of each text.
2. Identifying the modes distinguishing between superordinate and subordinate modes.
3. Analyzing the modes individually distinguishing between embodied and disembodied modes,
4. Conducting an intermodal analysis – looking at modes as a whole.

## Research findings

The above chronological process produced a list of modes. The compiled list was later analysed in detail. The outcomes of the detailed analyses of modes indicates that:

1. The GFL texts analysed are indeed multimodal.
2. The superordinate-subordinate and embodied-disembodied distinctions apply to all GFL texts analysed.
3. A third additional distinction needs to be added when categorizing modes, i.e., that between easily perceived – less easily perceived modal arrangements.

The discussion below intends to elaborate on the three findings above. The analysis of the data shows that while some texts clearly entail multimodality, others although still entailing the multimodal element, manifest it in 'silent' ways. Due to space constraints, the explanation of this point will be illustrated with examples derived only from one of the three series analysed, the *Schritte International Series*. I opted for *Schritte International* since it is the set textbook proposed for GFL Maltese classrooms. Thus, this article can hopefully also offer Maltese GFL teachers and students a further source of reflection about the texts they are using and about the benefits those able to identify modes may obtain.

### Easily perceived arrangements

At times, as soon as the reader views the text for the first time, the reader may easily realize that there are various modes playing their role in transmitting a particular message. For example, an analysis of each DVD track which the book offers to supplement chapter content clearly indicates how the designers amalgamate a variety of embodied modes including speech, gestures and gaze with other disembodied modes such as music, colour, clothes and layout to transmit the message.

### Less easily perceived modal arrangements

At other times, however, this clarity is absent from the GFL text. Instead, other texts at first glance seem to offer just one or few modes; however, a more in depth analysis of the same texts provides evidence that the

text is composed of a complex array of modes. Such is the case of the *Photo Story* section opening each chapter of *Schritte International*. The superordinate mode of the Photo Stories is spoken speech. A dialogue between different participants sets the context of the chapter. Eight pictures presenting eight snapshots from the dialogue make the image the 'more easily perceived' subordinate mode used in this particular modal arrangement.

Stopping at this level, however, would mean being satisfied with a very shallow analysis. In fact, a closer inspection reveals that other, less easily visible modes are also present in this text. These include, among others:

- the layout of the participants in the picture;
- the perspective of the photos;
- the colours used;
- the different picture levels including the background and the foreground;
- the layout of pictures themselves;
- the different levels of speech including rhythm and intonation.

To give one more example of the role that such less easy to perceive modes may play, it is worth stating that *Schritte* includes also a *Zwischenspiele* which concludes each chapter. In each *Zwischenspiel*, images represent the superordinate mode, which is in fact easy to perceive. Furthermore, this image mode is aided by other less visible modes which include:

- colour of objects or clothes;
- posture of people featuring in the pictures;
- the layout and arrangements of the objects and people featuring in the pictures;
- the gaze of people featuring in the pictures;
- the gestures one observes of those seen in the pictures.

Although very 'silent', all of these work hand in hand with the superordinate mode to convey to the reader messages which complement the messages presented by the *superordinate mode*.

## Conclusion

Modes, i.e., channels through which GFL texts transmit their messages, are not always very clear to identify. At times as evident from the investigation conducted and the examples presented above, some of these channels are difficult to identify since they invisibly reside at the background because of the effect(s) of other more predominant, more obvious modes (i.e., the superordinate modes).

The findings of this paper are a very preliminary attempt in the analyses of modes. Indeed the main aim here is to encourage other similar GFL text analyses exercises

and to whet the appetite for further practical questions investigating visible and less visible modes in GFL learning contexts. Indeed, this is not the end ... it is just a beginning.

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