

17 Critical visual literacy: the new phase of applied linguistics in the era of mobile technology

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Abstract

In our society, which is full of images, visual representations and visual experiences of all kinds, there is a paradoxically significant degree of visual illiteracy. Despite the importance of developing specific visual skills, visual literacy is not a priority in school curriculum (Spalter & van Dam, 2008). This work aims at (1) emphasising the importance of integrating visual literacy as the fifth linguistic skill in English classes, and (2) showing a visual activity exploring a video called Price Tag. We will show some strategies that can be applied in foreign language classes in order to teach students a way to encode and decode the artifacts of their own culture and perceive the affordances of multimodal composition. In this research, the students' cell phones were used with which we developed activities using videos as multimodal texts.

Keywords: critical visual literacy, material designing, mobile learning, modal affordance.

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1. Introduction

Integrating visual ability in the language classroom is beneficial for the teacher because it allows students to think in more complex ways, since new technologies lead to new forms of information, thus requiring new vocabulary and new methods for a more critical interpretation. However, our educational reality is different. Spalter and van Dam (2008) point out that the practice of visualisation is neglected in our classrooms, especially in the curriculum of foreign language teaching in an era in which the development of visually literate citizens is fundamental. Spalter and van Dam (2008) state that students are engaged in a constant cycle of consuming and producing visual media, but, as mentioned by Metros (2008), “they are not visually literate. They do not have the skills to understand how to decipher an image and make ethical decisions [about the] validity and [value of information]” (p. 98).

This work will help teachers to develop learning experiences in language classrooms using the concepts of critical visual literacy. It is organised into the following sections: Firstly, we will begin with a brief introduction to our theoretical framework presentation of the concept of modal affordance. Secondly, it will be explained what a multimodal text is. In the following section, we will present a linguistic/pedagogical activity using a video clip as a multimodal text. Finally, the article concludes pointing out the contributions of the integration of visual literacy in the curriculum of English teaching.

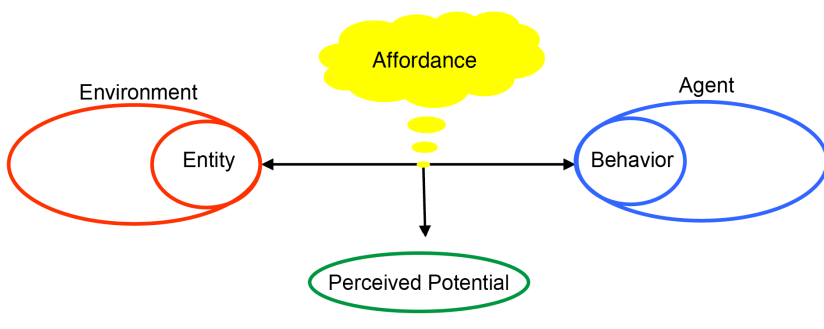
2. Modal affordance

The term affordance has its origins in Gibson’s (1979) studies, it indicates that the context offers an opportunity to the agent to do an action, independently of whether the agent makes use of it or not, in other words, he defines affordance as all possible action in the context.

What do we see when we look, hear, smell or hold something? Gibson (1979) answered this question by saying that what we perceive are the values and

meanings of things. What we perceive are not necessarily objects, but the possibilities of action that they provide for some kind of agent's behaviour. For us, affordance is an interactive process between the individual and the environment, and the latter is a set of resources for actions available to the agent who needs to perceive their potentialities and initiate action (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Affordance concept (adapted from Şahin et al., 2006)



Kress (2010) developed the notion of modal affordances in which modes have particularities and limitations in terms of affordances that offer different potentials for communication and meaning of the text, such as Linguistic Affordance for example, which involves the oral and written language (vocabulary, punctuation, grammar); visual affordance, which includes stationary and moving images (colour, vector, line, plane); gestural affordance, which comprises facial expressions and body language (movement and speed, body position); auditory affordance, which involves music and sound effects (volume, tone, rhythm, silence, pause); and spatial affordance, which involves the layout and organisation of objects in space (proximity, direction, position in space).

According to Santos (2013), in the process of interaction, the modes of communication have different meanings for each person because affordances are not the same for all learners. We perceive different potential meanings

depending on goals, interests, intentions, background knowledge and cultures. The concept of affordance was introduced recently in the research of second language and foreign language teaching and researchers have been challenged to perform it. In the current studies, modal affordance is accomplished as any discursive movement that provides sociolinguistic information or intends to enable the critical consciousness of the student about the language phenomena and social power, mainly through multimodal texts, which refers to the use of different semiotic resources to produce meanings.

3. Multimodal text

Kress (2010) also argues that the shift toward literacies or multiliteracies has led to the inclusion in our classrooms of multimodal denomination or text that moves beyond alphabetic print to utilise additional modes as well, such as video, audio, or still image. Any discipline can explore different aspects of multimodality. This is not a theory.

These approaches are concerned with the social and cultural construction of meaning, and can be applied to investigate the power, inequality and ideology in human interactions and artefacts. According to Knoblauch, Schenettler, Raab, and Soeffner (2006), the interest in multimodality is a consequence of the use of digital photography and video that is becoming a standard practice in qualitative research.

The definition of multimodality from the New London Group (1996) is the combination of semiotic modes in a single composition to take effect or meaning. However, in order to be considered a semiotic mode, there must be a cultural sense shared within a community and all these modes perform social functions that are organised to make sense. For example, a gesture, an intonation of voice and a look are part of the way for the construction of meaning. Halliday (1978) suggests that all modes simultaneously tell us something about our ideas of the world (ideational meaning), enactment of our social relations (interpersonal meaning) and produces a structured and coherent text (textual meaning).

Multimodality arises as a combination of semiotic modes and ways of culturally created organisation.

The modes have different affordances and people always use different modes simultaneously to make meanings or senses. There is a general view that multimodal texts attempt to persuade through the use of various visual modes, words, sounds and other ways of communicating. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), for example, argue that in multimodal texts, the meaning refers to all modes, and a unified interpretation makes a cohesive argument, giving many voices to the reader. The authors of a multimodal text as a video clip use many ways to strengthen their arguments and realise that several semiotic modes contain unique possibilities and limitations that make them particularly able to communicate specific meanings.

4. Design of a critical activity

We will show some strategies that can be applied in foreign language classes in order to teach students a way to encode and decode the artefacts of their own culture. In this research, we used the students' cellphones with which we developed activities using videos as multimodal texts. We chose videos because they are one of the participants' favorite cellphone affordances. In fact, 52 % of them told us that they send or receive videos through their cellphones on a daily basis. The video Price Tag was downloaded from the YouTube site and processed in 3pg format for mobile technology and transferred by Bluetooth to the students' cellphones (Figure 2). This video features a song by the British singer Jessie J, released on January 30, 2011, criticising over-consumption. Jessie J sings with rapper B.o.B.

The critical part of this task is the analysis and discovery of the social and political interests in the production and reception of images in relation to social, cultural effects of power and domination in the context of students' lives. In the section below, we analyse five answers from a high school student. Carlos is a fictitious name chosen to preserve his identity.

Figure 2. The video “Price Tag” in cell phone



Activity

1. What was the author’s purpose in beginning this clip with these images? Use evidences from the text and your ideas to support your answer.

Figure 3. Image from video clip



Carlos says that the image shows the simplicity of childhood in relation to adulthood. Adults are blinded by money and very consumerist. Therefore, the bear beside the child is happy, and the one next to the adult is blind, sad and amputated. In his comments, Carlos reveals a critical view of real life experiences. He notes the shapes and figures of the bear as a symbolic element reflecting two meanings: one of innocence and the other of consumerism nowadays. According to the observations made by the student in his reply in relation to the video image, we can infer that the bear, in the first image, is in the foreground, a position of importance in relation to the child and, in the second image, the bear is secondary in relation to the adult (middle ground). With this observation, we emphasise the importance of teachers having knowledge about how the different modes of image, sound and movement can influence or not in the way that meaning is constructed. In addition, this meaning is constructed along with the sequence of overlapping images in the clip.

2. What kind of proverb or expression does that image refer to? And in what situations are they employed in real life?

Figure 4. Image from video clip



Carlos answered: “Money does not grow on trees. It is usually used when someone asks for money. Then, someone uses the phrase to emphasise that it

is difficult to get money”. This answer shows that visual literacy helps students to appreciate the multiple ways of representing life experiences, and that our interpretation of images is linked to culture: the images we see interact with our culture, attitude and belief systems so that our perceptions and interpretations depend on culture and context, as mentioned before. According to [Beare \(2008\)](#), ideas, experiences and cultural perspectives found in verbal and nonverbal texts help us to shape our worldviews. The vision we gain allows us to understand our cultural, linguistic and literary entail.

3. In our society, there are certain prejudices and/or behavioral differences in our daily lives. See the pictures and mention some prejudices and differences of life explored in the video clip (and discuss these images with a classmate).

Figure 5. Image from video clip



The question about the symbolism of colours and toys that were exemplified by the clip also got a positive response. Carlos said that the video clip criticises the differences observed in our real life: the girl plays with dolls and the boy with cars and war. The feminine colour is pink, and the male is blue, the woman is more consumerist than the man because of the quality and quantity of clothes, shoes, jewellery and toys shown in the clip. Therefore, the colour of the objects

can carry symbolic connotations. All these symbolisms associated with colours and objects in particular together with all observations are Carlos's culture examples. He critically evaluates the visual senses of his real life.

4. What kind of message did the author want to convey with these images? And to whom was it addressed?

Figure 6. Image from video clip



When we asked Carlos about these images, the student said that the author was inviting people to give less importance to consumerism, and getting rid of the expensive labels. Thus, it should be clear and we should reconsider when students have the opportunity to discover the meaning of images with critical thinking, it will allow them to see world in which they live with critical eyes. Carlos responds positively to this visual text, because text analysis is coherent with his daily experiences. We also note that the personal interpretation is not isolated from social and political forces as said [Kress \(2002\)](#).

5. Was this activity difficult to answer? Explain a little about it.

Many of the students said that this visual activity was more difficult than expected, not because of technology, but because critical literacy emphasises

the need to use language as a vehicle of social change and writing requires students to think about their opinions and feelings before writing (Wood, Soares, & Watson, 2006, p. 57). Besides, one of Carlos's concerns in this answer is to emphasise that the teacher has a different analysis. We note that he was awaiting for confirmation of a correct answer from the teacher. It is important to highlight that, in this type of exercise, the analysis of the answers is not intended to be as either right or wrong, but to give feedback about the student's critical thinking, as teachers cannot give the correct interpretation of a specific visual element. Thus, the visual activity requires students to be aware of the intentionality of the text and allows them to see that interpretations are determined by their culture.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion reached, during the analysis, was that visually literate students could read, decode, create, question, and interpret the purpose and intended meaning of a variety of text forms associated with mobile multimedia technologies. The learners developed a more socially conscious way to evaluate images. This is crucial, because through these kinds of activities students become not only technologically literate but also visually literate. Critical visual literacy, as the fifth linguistic skill in English classes can be developed through a variety of activities. It might help a learner achieve positive results in any field, foreign language included. We should not forget that each person has a unique way of perceiving the world. The visual image is one more tool to facilitate understanding of the social world (Freire, 2007).

The videos also had an impact on the motivation and interest of students. They were tools to demonstrate the significance and meaning of daily scenes and culture of the students. According to their statements, the cellphone helped and made the interpretation of images easier, especially because mobile technology has helped to improve language learning. It placed students in a more realistic context and made this process more attractive, interesting and motivating.

With mobile technology, the students were able to maximise the acquisition of skills, linguistic competences and to optimise their time of study. They were also able to have access to their didactic activities anywhere and anytime. Thus, the use of cell phones in teaching and learning foreign languages has enabled a variety of ways of teaching and learning which were not possible in an atmosphere of traditional or formal teaching.

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