

MULTIMODAL REPRESENTATIONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

This paper intends to analyze how freshman students of the Media Studies degree represent their relationship with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through an image in a multimodal environment. The aim is twofold: first, to study how students take advantage of the multimodal potential of the Mahara e-portfolio and, second, to explore what their reflection on their EFL learning process is like when conveyed through image and text and the relationships established between these two media.

Objectives

The study conforms to the Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis framework, which analyzes the use of language and the interactive communication features among humans in electronic environments (Herring, 2000), including the construction of identity. In a formal environment, ICT tools have also affected the way digital literacy is approached in learning/teaching processes (Cassany, 2010). Communicating in digital environments involves hypertextuality, intertextuality and multimodality, so developing digital communicative competence should cover all these dimensions. Using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001: 20) definition of multimodality, meaning is not build just as a series of elements presented in a linear, sequential way but conforming a multimodal syncretism in which there exist several simultaneous processes for meaning making. From this point of view, it is understood that the coherence of texts does not only lie in coherence in isolation but in relation with all the multimodal elements available interacting. Focusing on the multimodal dimension, language users do not only resort to written text but they also communicate using other semiotic modes that turn the electronic environment into a multimodal ensemble (Kress 2010: 81) in such a way that each mode develops its communicative and representational potential to generate global meanings. Consequently, in formal language learning contexts, multimodal discourse is increasingly cultivated (Jewit, 2009).

Nöth (2001) proposes four aspects to describe the relationship between text and image. From a syntactic perspective, images can relate to texts in terms of time and space. From a semantic perspective, five relationships can be established between text and images, which are:

- 1) Complementarity: when both text and image are needed to grasp the meaning.
- 2) Dominance: the relevance of the image in relation to the text depending on the type of document they appear in.
- 3) Redundancy: when the message repeats what is already perceived in the image.
- 4) Discrepancy, and 5) Contradiction: when there is no logical relationship between the text and the image, whether intentionally or not.

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A third approach would be the pragmatic relationship between the text and the image. As Nöth does not offer categories for such analysis, one possible way of analyzing this relationship is following Grice's (1975) principles.

Finally, Nöth suggests yet one new approach for the study of the relationship between image and text based on Peirce's perception of signs. Thus, we can find iconic, indexical and symbolic relationships between image and text.

On the other hand, this study also takes into account the representation of identity building as an EFL learner through images, considering aspects such as former learning experiences, both formal and informal (Ellis, 2001). The relationship of the learner towards the L2 can also be expressed through metaphors. The ones found by Ellis (2001) defined FL students as sufferers, travelers, fighters, workers and problem solvers.

Taking all these aspects into account, the present paper seeks to explore the relationship between image and text according to the following parameters:

- 1) Syntax
- 2) Semantics
- 3) Pragmatics
- 4) Intermodal semiotics
- 5) Metaphors

Development

The study was conducted analyzing the linguistic snapshot of 28 EFL learners. This is a compulsory activity for the e-portfolio of the English Language subject to be done using the Mahara portfolio. This linguistic snapshot consists in:

1. A video where the students introduce themselves.
2. A composition where students write about their relationship with English, focusing on how they have used it in formal and informal contexts and their motivation to learn it, among other aspects.
3. An image (photo, drawing, collage) reflecting their feelings towards EFL, with a caption explaining the rationale behind their choice.

The students, between 18 and 21 years of age, have different levels of proficiency and are supposed to be especially motivated to represent concepts audiovisually, given the nature of their degree. The image-word relationship is analyzed regarding the aspects mentioned above. The data were collected taking screenshots using free plug-ins such as Fireshot or Screengrab.

The results show that students avoid the excessive fragmentation of the page layout even though columns were used to distribute the contents. A uniform distribution of columns is understood as attaching the same level of importance to the contents in them, while a broader space is meant to confer greater relevance to the contents in that column. Most images tend to be placed on the top of the page, with a slightly larger preference for placing the image on the right side.

Regarding the semantic relationships, 60% of the images are dominant in the page, performing a complementary function simultaneously at times. However, 30% of the images were redundant. An example of complementarity is the one below where a flower symbolizes the EFL learning process, which has to be watered so as to make it grow.



This project has been funded
with support from the
European Commission.





Picture: my relation with English so far (II)



Watering the flower

This picture was taken by me in an excursion I did with my friends last year. I think it's a good photo to finish the course.

This flower represents my English. Well, the English I want to have in a future. Now my flower is flourishing step by step. I hope that someday it will grow into a beautiful flower, this is my wish. I know that I don't "water" it every day, and then the flower can fade and, why not, die. But I know that someday I will take care of it to get the best plant!

Here's my promise: This flower will never die, I will look its carefully doing the best I can for its. This flower will grow up wonderfully!

In contrast, in the example below, there is a clear example of image-text redundancy, where the title, the text and the very image refer to the phone box.

A telephone box



A K6 Telephone Box and a King Edward VII Pillar Box at the Amberley Working Museum. The author is Unisouth (Wikipedia)

All the images chosen were pragmatically correct, conforming to a semiformal registered, to be expected in an academic context. Grice's principles were respected as well at all times.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.



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Questions and/or considerations for discussion

In future practical experiences with this activity, the teacher should foster the use of images with meaning-making that goes beyond literality or indexicality, both of which do not necessarily mean that pragmatic principle are not going to be followed. Regarding metaphors, it is natural that the same metaphors found in Ellis (2001) are also found in our study, although more creative risks from the students could certainly make a difference in this regard too. Surpassing academic barriers in favor of creativity would certainly foster the development of the students' digital communicative competence.



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