MULTIMODALITY AS AN ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the various dimensions of multimodality and its growing acceptance as an alternative pedagogy in the English language classroom. The responsibility to decipher, accept, decode and ultimately present the gamut of multimodal discourse before the students lies with the educators. This in turn, leads the students not only to understand the existing forms of communication but go ahead and form coherent and whole meanings from all the available multiple modes. The importance of multimodal literacy necessitates an awareness of this aspect in education. An increasing awareness of and identification with the multiple meanings derived from the various modes of communication results in multisemiotics.

Reading material has undergone a sea-change. The printed pages have now become web pages where the child reader is subjected to a plethora of information by way of hyperlinks and pop-up-images. The unassuming reader constructs newer meanings of texts from these extra bits of information. Stories with pictures have always proven to hold child attention better. Graphic novels, which initially had been relegated to the status of comics, therefore help to intrigue, interest, and ultimately motivate children, of this technical age to take up serious reading. They have the ability to add layers of meaning by way of colour, expressions and images to kindle child imagination, and thereby prove to be an effective tool for multimodality. This article therefore advocates an innovative implementation of graphic novels along with regular college/school syllabi for effective education apt for the present.
KEYWORDS: Multimodality, alternative, pedagogy, multisemiotics, discourse, communication, Graphic novels, comics, discourse, motivate, children, technical, information, pages, reading, educators, meaning, serious, effective, education, multiple, meanings, coherent, students.

INTRODUCTION

The perspective of looking at texts worldwide has undergone a slow but sure shift in focus from monomodal to multimodal texts. Texts in the present times no longer exist in the traditional printed form alone, but can be accessed digitally too. Reading material has undergone a sea-change. The printed pages have now become web pages where the child reader is subjected to a plethora of information by way of hyperlinks and pop-up-images. The unassuming reader constructs newer meanings of texts from these extra bits of information. The responsibility to decipher, accept, decode and ultimately present the gamut of multimodal discourse before the students lies with the educators. This in turn, leads the students not only to understand the existing forms of communication but go ahead and form coherent and whole meanings from all the available multiple modes. The importance of multimodal literacy necessitates an awareness of this aspect in education. This article discusses the various dimensions of multimodality and its growing acceptance as an alternative pedagogy in the English language classroom.

Recent educational publications have featured avid discussions on the kind of literacy skills students would require to be able to keep pace with the changing scenario (Bellanca and Brandt, 2010). The need of the hour demands competency and familiarity with the new technologies to comfortably read traditional printed texts in the new digital format and respond to them in a similar manner. Challenges occur by way of visual and multimodal aspects that readers encounter while dealing with texts in an entirely interesting mobile environment. Multimodal and visual representation of discourse as an essential part of an alternative pedagogy has been argued for in academic circles (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). An increasing awareness of and identification with the multiple meanings derived from the various modes of communication results in multisemiotics. The immense potential of technology to enhance learning has been proved many times over. The need of the hour is to recognise and profitably harness its multifaceted uses.

The relationship between ICT and language learning in the present times is a very important area of interest. The relationship becomes all the more interesting and viable when the language in question is English. The impact of multimedia software and word processing on the importance of design within meaning making is an area of keen interest. The visual aspect of texts and their related meanings become more obvious when technology makes its way into the process of creating texts. In the so created texts, language gets virtually replaced by other forms of communication and expression. Printed texts have made way for never before thought of forms like web sites, hypertext stories, videopapers and interactive poems which are a resultant combination of linguistic, audio, visual and dynamic modes of communication. As traditional teacher-educators, our understanding of the process that goes behind the creation of such multimodal texts is still in its infancy. Conventional teachers are comparatively more adept and comfortable with the process of regular texts.
Most teachers of English agree that the impending change in attitude towards curriculum needs to be acknowledged now. Teachers of English acknowledge that all these new ideas about websites, web designing, power point presentations, etc. are a part of English. Having acknowledged these new parts they should now decide to welcome it and make all possible efforts to make it work in positively. Experiments have been done on this front with students set the task of creating multimedia stories with the help of web tools. The idea being this exercise would help them in creating a multimedia story which in turn would turn their interest towards conventional stories which are purely language based. The results of such exercises however were startling. Students had for the most part changed their story ideas so much so that the original storyline could not be recognised. This was however not what the teachers-experimenters had bargained for. It only proved that coaching along existing lines was necessary- reading similar stories, discussing forthcoming ideas, planning about future course of action, etc. The end result of such endeavours was that teachers came to a conclusion that approaching the task of writing stories from an ICT approach did not yield very encouraging results as far as judging from the point of view of writing language based stories were concerned.

Other experiments followed with more emphasis being laid on the ability to create better texts within the framework of a multimodal approach. Results were, however, more encouraging this time. Students could co-relate more comfortably when set the task of working within the multimodality of a multimedia presentation rather than using the multimodal approach as a teaching tool to facilitate the language mode. The students’ knowledge of ICT and using English as a subject both showed improvement, although different modes had been used to arrive at the conclusion. Multiple meanings thus arrived at, paved the way for multisemiotics.

Results of experiments conducted, data collected and analysed showed frequent instances of English and technology clashing uncomfortably. Teachers needed to evaluate on measures that would prove to be useful in a technologically rich environment. The New London Group’s pedagogy on multiliteracies is a landmark proposition on this theme.

In this book we attempt to broaden this understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning to include negotiating a multiplicity of discourses. We seek to highlight two principal aspects of this multiplicity. First we want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies; to account for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate. Second we argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning of texts forms associated with information and multimedia technologies.(Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Teachers need to build a metalanguage for describing the multimodality of the classroom task and the way students made use of this in their presentations. The connection between teaching and multiliteracies also needs to be looked at seriously. The underlying tension between the metalanguage of multimodality and key terms and concepts of English as a subject culture needs to be established. What more needs to be established are the subject boundaries of English vis-à-vis other subjects. Students’ ability of negotiating multimodality, particularly the way they present their multimedia products and video data of their working. The key terms and concepts associated with English as a subject culture and language of technology needs to be addressed in detail. How do students relate to English when it comes to choosing particular colours to
represent it? Would they use black to show their displeasure with it or level of discomfort? When it comes to choosing fonts to display their work, how would they go about it- in an artistic, creative manner or matter -of-fact ordinary, everyday script go a long way in letting the teacher know of their attitudes towards the subject. The use of the audio mode in terms of music and sound when it comes to creating the web site is also an important aspect.

How different modes work together to create meaning is of utmost importance when it comes to addressing the concept of multimodal literacy. These are areas which allow the student to move beyond the areas of traditional literacy with their ability to download from the Web and make fruitful Power-Point presentations. Students show remarkably creative acumen when it comes to using technology based presentations as against their scoring marks for their proficiency with the verbal and written word. Experiments have proved that students learn better and faster when technological aids are used to aid language learning. The pressing urgency to develop a metalanguage for multimodality needs to be recognised and worked upon on war footing for a consensus for students and teachers to arrive at. Levels of understanding would most certainly be raised by this. Emphasis on the visual mode necessitates less time to be spent on oral instruction to students.

One might say the following with some confidence. Language-as-speech will remain the major mode of communication; language-as-writing will increasingly be displaced by image in many domains of public communication, though writing will remain the preferred mode of the political and cultural elites.(Kress,2003).

This observation needs to be considered with great importance before one can unanimously advocate a multimodal literacy concept foe English in the classroom. In all likelihood, speech and writing will remain the most highly valued modes of traditional literacy. Multimodality in writing becomes important when the question of designing the layout of the page and its text comes into focus. How much guidance should be gi

even to the students for the visual aspect of literacy is debatable. Students are guided by their own instincts and perceptions and do not require much prodding in this regard. They use ICT to structure, refine and present information in different formats as the case may be. First time learners might even show limited knowledge and use of ICT. Various forms of communication promote different kinds of learning among learners.

Multimodal texts present information across a variety of modes including visual images, design elements, written language, and other semiotic resources. These texts challenge novice readers as they work across multiple sign systems to construct meaning.(Siegel, 2006). Readers actively select objects from their visual fields to attend to and interpret in an order that their purposes and interests. The reader determines the path during their transaction with the text as they decide how to navigate its textual, visual, and compositional elements. Multimodal texts require readers to decode written text, and additionally navigate the compositions and structures of design elements and visual images. These skills are too often missing from reading composition lessons (Serafini, 2005).

Readers keep inventing texts as they read, thus adding newer meanings to the already existing ones, based on their interpretation of the available semiotic resources. Design is the process of
organizing what is to be navigated and interpreted, shaping available resources into potential meanings realized in the context of reading multimodal texts (Serafini, 2012). The New London Group (1996) suggests, “Meaning making is an active process, and not something governed by static rules”. Through this process of reproducing and simultaneously transforming the path and text the reader becomes an active, purposeful agent in their construction of meaning during the act of reading multimodal texts.

With the marked changes in the new millennium educators need to overhaul their existing teaching methodology and methods of instruction to provide active support for students as they struggle to make meaning of the plethora of information at their fingertips. The instructional approaches too need to adapt to the changing needs of the students as they wade through the challenges of multimodal texts, like hypertexts, text messages, blogs, etc. Educators need to further help students understand and use the regular print based texts traditionally taught in schools.

Stories with pictures have always proven to hold child attention better than any other form of the printed word. Graphic novels, books essentially made of comic content, had initially been relegated to the status of comics. Novel normally refers to long fictional works. The term ‘graphic novel’ is applied broadly, and includes fiction, non-fiction, and anthologized work. It is distinguished from the term ‘comic book’, which is used for comic periodicals. The term ‘graphic novel’ was first used in 1964; it was popularized within the comics community after the publication of Will Eisner’s A Contract With God in 1978, and became familiar with the public in the late 1980s after the commercial successes of the first volume of Spiegelman’s Maus, Moore and Gibbons Watchmen, and Miller’s The Dark Knight Returns. The term is not strictly defined, though one broad dictionary definition is “a fictional story that is presented in comic-strip format and is presented as a book.” Krashen (1997) makes a strong case for comics and graphic novels as a major underutilized genre for development of literacy skills, part of the pedagogical core of the ‘power of reading’.

In Britain the genre was pioneered with the classic When the Wind Blows (1982) by Raymond Briggs which is about a nuclear attack on England seen from the perspective of an elderly working class couple in rural Sussex. Interest in the graphic narrative is fast gaining momentum in the U. K. Mulholland (2007) says that “the graphic novel- loosely defined as a novel whose content is displayed in both images and text – has, in the past two years, begun to break into the British mainstream.” In Japan, manga and other forms of graphic literary materials have long been an integral part of the national reading culture, for adults as well as children. This has been a part of their heritage since WW II.

A major achievement has been the publication of canonical works of literature in graphic version like Eisner’s (2001) Moby Dick, Kuper’s version of Franz Kafka’s The Metamorphosis (2003), and Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (2005), Shakespeare’s Macbeth. These editions can be used with advantage for students at the intermediate or more advanced levels.

Whatever be the criticism faced by graphic novels, the hard fact is that they however, help to intrigue, interest, and ultimately motivate children, to take up serious reading. Children of this technical age do not naturally have the urge to take up serious reading. Graphic novels have the
ability to add layers of meaning by way of colour, expressions and images to kindle child imagination, and thereby prove to be an effective tool for multimodality. Postmodern picturebooks also might serve as a link or bridge from the print based texts of the past to the multimodal texts encountered in the future. Postmodern picturebooks invite students to navigate non-linear structures and attend to various visual representations, design elements, and structures in order to comprehend the complexities inherent in these texts. (Serafini, 2005). These complex texts call upon readers to become more self- reflexive, active readers who utilize a variety of interpretive strategies in order to construct meaning with the texts they encounter (Bull, 2002).

In turn postmodern picturebooks require literacy educators to become sophisticated readers of picturebooks themselves in order to demonstrate and support the types of interpretive strategies and reading practices necessary for dealing with these innovative elements and structures. To be successful in facilitating discussions with postmodern picturebooks, teachers need to address the ambiguities inherent in postmodern picturebooks, and suspend premature closure on students’ interpretations in order to explore a variety of meaningful potentials available. These picturebooks also require teachers to attend to visual images and design elements in their discussions and instructional experiences to help students construct meaning (Serafini, 2008).

Postmodern picturebooks often contain non-linear plots, polyphonic narrators, intertextual references, a blending of genres, and indeterminacies (Mc Callum 1996). These features of postmodern picturebooks require the reader to navigate and interpret these texts in new ways, drawing upon their understanding of traditional print based texts and their knowledge of visual images and design elements. As print based texts, the contemporary picturebooks, adopt the non-linear and polyphonic structures of multimodal and postmodern texts, they will better serve as a bridge between the print dominated classrooms of the past and the digitally and multimodal texts of the new millennium. The strategies and skills readers will draw upon to make sense of these texts will need to expand as the complexity of the texts they encounter expands.

Visual images are no longer included as simply illustrative of the printed text, but add to the story and the overall meaning of the novel in new and varied dimensions. Images no longer depend on the text for meaning but are treated as text in their own right. They further contribute to the design element of the graphic novel and the illustrated text. Learning to read and appreciate a novel is no longer limited to a mere reading of the printed text and decode its implied meaning, but also decode the visual images, design elements and graphic structures- all adding to the meaning of the printed word. The use of graphs, diagrams, maps, models, drawings and photographs often increases the informational and aesthetic value of print publications. Additionally, a heavily illustrated magazine or textbook offers the reader a variety of choices. The reader who does not have a great fancy for the printed word can form a good idea of what the article has to say from the pictures and accompanying captions. Along with this, the background accompanying information can be read to get a fair idea of the full story. Whatever be the order of deciphering information, pictures first and text later or vice versa, the objective of the endeavour is achieved. The eyes of the reader jumps back and forth between text and illustration, at times appreciating and admiring both, and at others wanting illustrations to be presented in a different way altogether. Direct visual perceptions will complement or replace the mental images usually produced during the reading process. Such a manner of reading, however, hinders a continuous reading of text in the pure sense of ‘reading’.
Multimodal reading, on the other hand, takes over, and goes on uninterrupted. The reader will gather meaning in a visual-verbal sense, not reducible to any of the two modalities. However as the use of illustrations increases, a visual logic eventually takes precedence and dominates the reading process. This is mostly the case with modern magazines and text books. In these instances, verbal text plays an auxiliary or reciprocal role, anchoring and contextualising pictures. Readers are happy to be not having to read ‘boring’ words of a text and are given the choice of interesting illustrations to go along. Students learn more, faster, and retain better when taught with visual aids. This is a great conceptual shift from the traditional methods of teaching and should therefore be cashed in on while interest is sustained. These different semiotic choices are integrated to make meaning. Some teachers are of the opinion that graphic novels do not supplement learning but that is actually the important part of learning. It is time that teachers explore the genre of graphic novels as a possible tool to build multiple literacies.

The graphic novels require teachers to acquire skills related to the understanding of sequential arts, and at the same time expand their pedagogical approaches to include strategies to comprehend visual images. Multimodal texts and incorporation of visual images in texts is more or less a permanent feature of classroom activities at present and will continue to do so in the years to come. Technological changes have made it mandatory for a text to be accompanied with a visual image. Even textbooks of subjects like mathematics and science are illustrated with pop up images and popular cartoon characters to keep young readers interested in the matter at hand. So it needs to be established that the teacher-educators be prepared to wholeheartedly accept and be in tune with the changing times. The traditional novel might not have paved the way entirely for graphic novels but if young readers show tendencies of moving away from serious reading, they (graphic novels) might just be the answer to bring readers back into the habit of reading. The interest once developed can then be channelized towards other serious reading or genres which have yet not been represented graphically. It might be a good idea to ask young readers to work out how very abstract genres could be rendered graphically- thus lending more meaning to the text.

The vast differences students face between texts read at school and those read out of it need to be bridged. Education at the school level needs to be made very interesting with all ‘ingredients’ that students find captivating in out of school encounters. They also need to be educated with new methodology and strategies required to make sense of visual design elements and images. But before embarking on the mission of educating students with the new methodologies it needs to be ascertained whether teachers themselves are adept and how many are ready to be initiated with the new changes. Willingness to accept changes wholeheartedly on the part of the teachers will surely go a long way in creating much needed interest among students towards the complexity of texts. The reluctance among teachers to change their methodology of teaching has already been established. Teachers, more so the seniors in the list are complacently cocooned in their own well established world with its set methodologies. They need to be convinced to come out of that shell and boldly face the new challenges and embrace the new role of facilitators. They need to quickly assume the role of responsible facilitators introducing young readers to ever modern methods. Teachers can assume a very friendly role in trying to learn from students at times and together creating new ways of presenting data and making the teaching-learning process more interesting. The idea should be to not teach a child but try and awaken the urge to
learn. This article therefore advocates an innovative implementation of graphic novels along with regular college/school syllabi for effective education apt for the present.

REFERENCES


