Global Semiotics: Bridging Different Civilizations

THE 11 TH WORLD CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION FOR SEMIOTIC STUDIES

NANJING CHINA
5-9 OCTOBER | **2012**

❖ CHINESE ❖ ENGLISH ❖ FRENCH ❖ GERMAN ❖ SPANISH

A Semiotic Quest for the 'Fifth Element'
in Foreign Language Acquisition

Anastasia CHRISTODOULOU[1], George DAMASKINIDIS[2]
[1] Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece)
[2] Faculty of Education, The Open University (UK)

ABSTRACT

In the last three years, our research in visual literacy in higher education has shown that using non-verbal semiotic elements in the area of foreign language acquisition is a novel experience for university students. Of particular interest has been our difficulty in making students understand why we need these semiotic modes in teaching and learning foreign languages in addition to the traditional four language skills, namely reading, writing, speaking and listening. We call this research a *quest*, since proposing that non-verbal skills be on an equal footing with the four traditional skills would require great exertion on the part of any researcher, who would have to overcome many obstacles. These would include the inability to define precisely what constitutes a visually literate person, a lack of extensive experimental research on the impact of the non-verbal on foreign language acquisition, making it impossible to defend its role as an autonomous skill, and the relatively narrow focus of semiotics as a field of study in several countries. This paper nominates the non-verbal semiotic element as the 'fifth skill' in foreign language acquisition. This 'visual nomination' includes a self-examination of our research and teaching experience in visual literacy, and a review of studies that investigate the effects of language instruction that incorporates varying degrees of non-verbal components. We aim to stimulate interest in enhancing the role of the visual in teaching and learning foreign languages, with the long-term ambition of having it formally introduced as an examinable component in international foreign language certifications. Finally, we aspire to contribute to the efforts to make visual literacy a subject to be taught in itself and across the curriculum in higher education.

1. Introduction

The teaching of the four basic literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) has revolved almost exclusively around verbal language. This dominance of verbal language in the field of visual communication has also been pointed out by several researchers (e.g. Damen, 1997; Moriarty, 2002; Love, 2008; Jim and Boling, 2010). Love (2008) argues, on the basis of the proliferation of multimodal texts within the new communicative landscape, that in the twenty-first century the traditional notion of literacy as consisting of the 'four basic skills' is inadequate. If we accept, then, that there is a new type of literacy that is not (solely) verbal in orientation, then we need to adopt a systematic approach to the study of visual education (Jewitt and Kress, 2003).

Based on our research and teaching experience in using non-verbal semiotic elements in higher education (Christodoulou and Damaskinidis, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, in press), the non-verbal element in the area of foreign language acquisition is a novel experience for university students. We are aware that proposing that we put non-verbal skills on an equal footing with the four traditional language skills would require great exertion on the part of any researcher, and that many obstacles would have to be overcome. Such difficulties would include defining precisely what constitutes a visually literate person, a lack of extensive experimental research on the impact of the non-verbal on foreign language acquisition, and the relatively narrow focus of semiotics as a field of study in several countries.

This paper nominates the non-verbal semiotic element as the 'fifth skill' in foreign language acquisition. This 'visual nomination' includes a self-examination of our research and teaching experience in visual literacy, and a review of studies that investigate the effects of language instruction

that incorporates varying degrees of non-verbal components. We aim to stimulate interest in enhancing this new role of the visual, with the long-term ambition of having it formally introduced as an examinable component in international foreign language certifications. We also aspire to contribute to the efforts to make visual literacy a subject to be taught in itself and across the curriculum in higher education.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we outline a number of approaches to the concept of foreign language acquisition skills; second, we examine the role of non-verbal semiotic elements in the foreign language classroom; third, we briefly present our own research and teaching-based data on the use of non-verbal semiotic elements in the language classroom in higher education; and fourth, we provide a tentative description of the present state of our semiotic quest.

2. Approaches to the concept of foreign language acquisition skills

Traditionally, the four language skills, namely reading, writing, speaking and listening, have been essential components of EFL classes. These skills are supposed to help students increase their communicative competence, which is the goal of most EFL instruction, in order to use the language system appropriately in any circumstance. Brown (2000) claims that the best way to attain communicative goals is to pay attention to language use rather than just usage, to fluency rather than just accuracy, to authentic language and contexts, and to the students' ultimate need to apply classroom learning to real-life circumstances. A number of studies have shown that teaching by combining verbal and non-verbal semiotic elements has a better outcome than teaching either with verbal or non-verbal elements only (Jin and Boling, 2010; Mayer, 2003). Although some students find visual images to some degree distracting (ibid.), Clark and Lyons (2011) argue that the educational benefits of visual images are indisputable.

One attempt to add an additional, fifth, skill to the four traditional skills has been Damen's (1997) claim that language learning implies and embraces culture learning. She bases her claim by reference to Brown's (2005) argument that language teaching is also a teaching of cultural customs, ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Damen (1997) states that culture is a skill that differs from the traditional four because it intersects and overlaps with them in specific ways. An assumption made by EFL teachers is that it is safe to focus on the four mentioned skills since students have already acquired some knowledge of the second language's culture. However, the idea of culture as a skill in foreign language acquisition has been met with scepticism. For example, while teaching the culture of the foreign language increases, according to Vernier et al (2008), students' overall learning experience, they argue against its autonomy as a skill. Also, Kramsch (1993) argues that culture, as a skill, should not be simply an expansion of the four traditional skills. On the contrary, if language is viewed as a social practice, culture will become the core of language teaching, and will even become the overall context of meaningful cultural learning into which the four language skills would be integrated.

Another skill proposed to be added to the four traditional skills, for example, in teaching English, has been called 'viewing skills' under the broad field of visual literacy (No Author, Date). It is argued that visual literacy components should be integrated into one or more of the steps (pre-, post- and during teaching) of the teaching-learning process. Nevertheless, the visual is not considered as an equal skill but simply as a tool through which the other four skills could be taught. While there have been examples of using visual images for teaching reading, speaking, listening and writing skills, it is not proposed the other way around. That is, there are no examples of these skills being used to teach the visual skill. Moreover, for the visual image to be employed in this way, a teacher would have to be 'visually literate'. This gives rise to the question of who is visually literate. This is a problematic aspect of integrating, or adding, the visual to the language teaching process, since generic criteria of what constitutes a visually literate person have yet to be established.

The need to look for additional skills in the language classroom is also derived from other factors which are not strictly educational, such as space, agents of learning and teaching and display learning

(Heath, 2000). A number of related activities are proposed in reference to these factors (No Author, Date). By leaving the traditional indoor space of the language classroom and moving to other outdoor teaching and learning spaces, like museums or parks, or going sightseeing, students would be able to experience the subjects they study in their books. In these spaces, teachers would have to design visually integrated lessons, thus creating a more socially meaningful education experience.

When training to become an English language teacher, students could be treated as agents of learning and teaching. For example, they could go to a community centre and find people who want to learn English and then design a project to help them learn. Such a project would turn students into agents of teaching and learning, providing them with a direct perspective on how teaching and learning processes take place. This way of learning requires a type of training that Kiraly (2001) calls a social constructivist and collaborative learning approach to pedagogy.

The concept of 'display learning' is dependent on the provision in the classroom of specialized educational modes of learning, such as videos and cameras. Teachers who opt for such different modes of learning should also design different types of assessment that suit the learning type. However, curriculum documents and assessment requirements for reading and writing are based on established theories on the reading and writing of print-based texts. These theories have determined specific approaches and strategies for teaching reading and writing to assist learners at all stages of learning. Yet, ongoing research is required to theorize the interactions that occur as learners read and process various visual, aural, spatial and textual modes, separately or simultaneously, in texts that consist of various semiotic modes.

In the previous examples, it has been taken for granted that English language teachers are visually literate. As it has been noted already, it is very difficult to determine who is visually literate generally speaking, let alone for the purpose of teaching English as a foreign language. Although there are not many studies about the visual literacy levels of foreign language teachers, some of them are indicative of the wider situation in the field of foreign language acquisition. For example, Abdel-Moneim (2010) conducted a study in Egypt in order to discover English teachers' attitudes towards the understanding and use of visual literacy concepts. According to this study, one hundred percent of the instructors indicated that they did not have to take any formal course in visual literacy instruction as part of their university training. These teachers recalled that there was not even a reference in the curriculum in regard to the concept of using visual literacy in the English language classroom. Moreover, they went on to reveal that even the English language schools and institutions they worked in provided no formal in-service training in visual literacy instruction.

3. The role of non-verbal semiotic elements in the foreign language classroom

Well before the twenty-first century, we were flooded with visual messages of all types in a wide range of media, mainly the Internet and television, both in personal and private spaces. The ability to decode visual expressions and to consider them critically has become an essential skill for researchers and teachers in education. It is important to be able to decode, encode and critically consider visual expression. These are essential skills for researchers and teachers in education. We think it is high time that this skill was passed on to students as a powerful learning tool in the development of creative, critical and independent thinking. We do not imply that teachers and researchers have fully mastered this visual literacy skill. On the contrary, we strongly believe that imparting this body of knowledge to students will better enable teachers and researchers to reflect on their practices and to propel the field of visual literacy one step forward.

Bernhardt (1986) argues that reading electronic texts in front of a computer screen is not a passive activity. The reader interacts physically with the text by means of the mouse, the cursor, the touch screen, or voice activation. In contrast to the print book, the text becomes a dynamic object, capable of being physically manipulated and transformed. This might also involve continuous transfers from one electronic text to another to the point of potentially losing track of the start in this reading process.

Bernhardt (ibid.) goes on to stress that we must begin using visual literacy in the composition class because our students are interacting more and more with these 'dynamic' texts in school and on the job. Following these arguments, before using video as a teaching medium, for example, rather than merely viewing it, students should be instructed to use it in a more interactive mode to convey ideas and to solve problems. This interaction may take the form of using specialized software to re-edit the video in order to convey ideas and solve problems.

Nevertheless, visual literacy-based activities should be included in the language classroom with great caution. For example, in the First-year Writing Program at Virginia Tech, teaching visual literacy was believed to be just too much for the level of first-year composition (Brizee, 2003). This concern was voiced because the addition of lessons to cover visual literacy moved the academic essay to more electronic or visual formats. Therefore, since the core writing requirements shifted, then first-year composition would have to shift to match the change.

In the field of foreign language teaching, visually literate teachers that are capable of choosing or creating visual images could use them to enhance the students' achievements in learning. In addition to teaching visual literacy skills to language learners per se, the integration of a visual component in some of, or all, the stages of the teaching and learning processes might foster the teaching of the four traditional English language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Visual literacy may also help teachers to design more attractive teaching and learning processes that could better engage students in learning activities. Studies have consistently revealed that teaching with words and visuals has more favourable results than teaching using only words or only visuals (Jin and Boling, 2010).

However, language and image should not be separated as this would create an unnatural boundary. In the visual and verbal dyad, one is not superior to the other; in fact, they complement each other. This is pertinent to McKim's (1980) argument that 'the thinker who has a broad command of graphic languages…can find more complete expression for his thinking'. Thus, recognizing the value of the theories surrounding visual thinking and visual language (and their pedagogical implications), composition instructors are now applying elements of visual literacy in writing classrooms.

In the next section we summarise our recent experience in researching and teaching using non-verbal semiotic elements in the Department of Italian Language and Literature of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece.

4. Research and teaching-based data using non-verbal semiotic elements in the language classroom in higher education

Here we outline our recent teaching and research experience and the way it has informed our semiotic quest for the fifth element in foreign language acquisition (Christodoulou and Damaskinidis, 2011; 2012a; 2012b, in press): Firstly, reading videos using visual semiotic analysis; secondly, combining social semiotic and multimodal analysis in expanding the term 'educational microworld'; thirdly, presenting the implications of designing a visual literacy course for post-graduate students of a foreign language department; and fourthly, employing a technique called photo elicitation so as to elicit students' semiotic perspective of the contemporary Greek crisis.

The first example is our reading of videos, which was based on visual social semiotics (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001) as a tool kit for use in critical research, in the sense of the Frankfurt School aiming to enlighten the critical viewer about the inimical relationship of industry to culture. We examined Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) idea to extend the three Hallidayan (1978) metafunctions – ideational (representing ideas about the world), interpersonal (facilitating certain kinds of social and interpersonal interactions) and textual (combining ideas and interactions into meaningful texts) – to visual analysis, under the names of representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions, respectively. The project involved post-graduate students watching videos and asking visual semiotic

questions in a collaborative mode of teaching and learning with the aim of enhancing their visual literacy skills.

The students made a sincere effort to answer the questions, which provided a springboard for filmic analysis. Some questions required minor conceptual and syntactical modifications, while all the questions required further elucidation. The interview confirmed, and in a sense exceeded, our expectations of its contribution as a research tool. We consider the research subjects' performance to be slightly above the average; for example, they managed to provide some insightful and intuitive comments and balanced arguments. They contributed to the interview with their own comments and led the discussion to several related topics. In some cases, students could not use their own background knowledge in reading a video with a particular music theme. For example, although one student is an amateur musician (with his own band) he told us that he had never paid any attention to the music in the films he had seen. This suggests that users of multimodal texts do not always draw on all meaning-making resources in multimodal reading. This may also explain why the students, in principle, did not relate the music to the overall impact of the video.

The second example is taken from our exploration of the concept of an educational microworld as an interactive learning environment. Using as a case study a computer-based language activity in the area of teaching English for Specific Purposes, we demonstrated how a multimodal PowerPoint slide show (integrating pictures, audio and changing slides) could become an educational microworld in a specific professional context. By analysing each semiotic element as an independent meaning-making resource and examining how all modes are jointly used, we investigated the ways the users of this microworld (both teachers and students) use social resources for communicating meanings.

It was proposed that, apart from the professional group for which it was originally designed, this microworld could also be tailored to specific social groups, like immigrants or illiterate people, in the form of informal lifelong learning. Recently, there have been numerous attempts to transform the Greek school into a truly intercultural learning environment so as to accommodate the large number of immigrant children. An effective way to allow for the smooth integration of immigrants into school could be a cultural microworld, where the role of the users would be assumed by native Greek students and immigrants, who would take turns presenting the culture of their own country to the rest of the students. Moreover, Greek students could be asked to present the culture of the immigrants' countries and the other way around. The role of the teacher is crucial here in making sure that this presentation is an accurate and balanced account of the relevant culture. This is an instance where culture becomes an additional skill in foreign language acquisition. Yet, in order for it to become a true 'skill', in the sense discussed here, the teacher would have to have been trained how to integrate culture in the language classroom.

The third example is the design of an innovative course titled *Visual Literacy in Language Teaching and Learning* for students in the post-graduate 'Italian Language and Culture' programme. While the current curriculum of the programme offers a variety of courses to improve students' language skills for this specialization, its focus has remained relatively narrow. It is now apparent that changes primarily brought about by the use of video as a teaching material in the language classroom have created new opportunities for video as a tool to promote and enhance the study of non-verbal semiotic modes of communication in multimodal texts.

We have followed the 'new pedagogies of multiliteracies' (New London Group, 1996), shifting from the dominant print text and examining how literacy can be practised when analysing video, as a new form of multimodal text, in the new millennium. By employing this new concept of pedagogy, we aim to introduce a framework consisting of two elements, a systemic functional approach and multimodal discourse analysis to describe the activities of individuals as they identify, read and create new texts using a variety of semiotic codes.

Based on our evaluation of this course, one of the most interesting findings was our difficulty to explain two important aspects of visual literacy: why we need visual literacy skills, both as individuals

and foreign language teachers, and the concept of video as an autonomous type of (multimodal) text that is to be viewed, edited and analysed for pedagogical purposes. We frequently had to resort to parallelisms with other more traditional methods of teaching and learning in order to demonstrate this need. For example, the participants in a video were compared to the characters of a novel, or the different frames, shots, scenes and sequences to the unfolding of the plot. It has become clear that any tool for teaching visual literacy skills is dependent on background knowledge and theoretical concepts of the visual as a semiotic mode of communication, including systemic verbal-visual associations.

Our initial intention was to provide a very specific, and sharply defined, point of view regarding visual literacy, by means of a practical model applied to the analysis of a video. However, it became clear that this approach should be supplemented by other approaches in verbal-visual education. The findings reported here point to the need for further research towards gaining an understanding of how to aid the development of teachers and students' visual skills in language teaching and learning. Therefore, it would have been an exaggeration to call such SF-MDA a potential fifth element in foreign language acquisition, since we strongly consider students who lack formal education in visual literacy ill-equipped to be introduced to this model.

The fourth example is from a small-scale study where we applied the photo elicitation technique as a research method to get a visual semiotic perspective of post-graduate students' views regarding press articles on the contemporary Greek crisis. The intention was to identify a relationship between the verbal aspect of news articles and the visual message of the accompanying photograph. Photo elicitation, based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview, was combined with Barthes' (1964) commutation test to isolate important signifying qualities. An image-based questionnaire allowed for the open expression of students' dilemmas while providing concrete talking points. The focus of the discussion was the photos and their content, rather than the students themselves, which seems to have triggered confidence, leading subjects to reveal their attitudes and values. Thus, the questionnaire provided a stimulus for students to bring in the visual as a key aspect in verbal discussion. Verbal-visual dilemmas broadened students' perspective of their choices in making visual-verbal associations.

Despite the lack of formal standards for assessing visual literacy levels, evidence suggests that familiarity with the visual – the visual literacy level – varied among the respondents. For example, although one question required students to find a photograph to accompany a press article, thirteen visuals (out of twenty-four in total) were not photographs. These visuals were graphics, photographic collages, newspaper front pages, and students did not explain if their choices were made on purpose, or if they were the result of misinterpreting the question. This is circumstantial evidence that the students might not have had a clear understanding of the term 'photograph'. Although the questionnaire was not related to a foreign language activity, it illustrates the difficulties entailed when giving instructions for a language activity which is related to visual materials.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have tried to demonstrate the inherent difficulties in integrating the non-verbal element in foreign language acquisition on an equal basis with the four standard skills, that is, listening, reading, speaking and writing. Whether this effort will result in the naming of an entirely new fifth skill or in incorporating the non-verbal element in some complex way with the four standard skills is a question, we argue, that cannot yet be adequately answered.

Such an exploration would depend on a number of various factors. First, it matters which theoretical perspective or approach is adopted. For example, in the sphere of foreign language teaching and learning, the proposal for a fifth 'language' skill seems to be restrictive in scope and does not provide many opportunities for further research. On the other hand, in the wider area of education, visual literacy has started to earn a place as a distinct skill. However, we have to go back and reconsider the

questions we set earlier about what is visual literacy, who is considered visually literate, and how to measure visual literacy.

Finally, is it valid to look for a 'fifth' skill? Someone might also propose a sixth, a seventh or even a group of skills, and so on. There is no doubt that we need a great deal of theoretical brainstorming from a variety of theoretical perspectives and disciplines, even if these are not closely related to foreign language acquisition. The various educational institutes in foreign language teaching and learning may also have to reset their policies at an international level. In addition, and even more importantly, more experimental, research-based data are required because we cannot theorize without looking at hard evidence.

References

Abdel-Moneim, A. M. 2010. 'An exploration of teachers' integration of visual literacy in the Egyptian secondary English language classrooms'. *AJOT*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-33.

Barthes, R. 1964. *Elements of semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bernhardt, S. 1986. 'Seeing the text'. *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 37, pp. 66-78.

Brizee, H. A. 2003. *Teaching visual literacy and document design in first-year composition*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Brown, H. D. 2000. *Teaching by Principles*. USA: Pearson ESL.

Christodoulou, A. and Damaskinidis, G. 2011. 'Documentary readings: A visual social semiotic analysis of Stinger: A new weapon with an age-old history'. In T. Migliore (ed) *Retorica del visibile. Strategie dell'immagine tra significazione e comunicazione. 2. Comunicazioni*, vol. 2, Roma: Aracne, pp.1431-1442.

Christodoulou, A. and Damaskinidis, G. 2012a. 'The press briefing as an ESP educational microworld: An example of social semiotics and multimodal analysis'. *IMAGE*, vol.15. Retrieved 1 Sep. 2012. Available from http://www.gib.uni-tuebingen.de/own/journal/pdf/buch_image15.pdf

Christodoulou, A. and Damaskinidis, G. 2012b. 'Dilemmatic visual situations in press photographs: A photo elicitation-based semiotic perspective of the Greek crisis'. *10th Congress of the International Association of Visual Semiotics. Contemporary Dilemmas of Visuality*. Buenos Aires, Argentina, 4-8 Sep, 2012.

Christodoulou, A. and Damaskinidis, G. (in press). 'Designing a visual literacy course in language teaching and learning'. Selected Papers from the *1st International Conference on Semiotics and Visual Communication*, Department of Multimedia and Graphic Arts, Cyprus University of Technology, Lemesos, Cyprus, 25-27 Nov, 2011.

Damen, L. 1997. *Culture learning: The fifth dimension in the language classroom.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Halliday, M.A.K. 1978. *Language as social semiotics*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harmer, J. 2007. *The practice of English language teaching*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Heath, S. B. 2000. Seeing on our way into learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education,* vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 121-132.

Jewitt, C. & Oyama, R. 2001. Visual meaning: A social semiotic approach. In T. Van Leeuwen, and C. Jewitt (eds) *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, pp. 183-206. London: Sage.

Jewitt, C. and Kress, G. 2003. 'A multimodal approach to research in education'. In S. Goodman, T. Lillis, J. Maybin, and N. Mercer, (eds) *Language, Literacy and Education: A Reader*, pp. 277-292. London: Trentham Books.

Jin, S.-H., and Boling, E. 2010. 'Instructional designer's intentions and learners' perceptions of the instructional functions of visuals in an e-learning context'. *Journal of Visual Literacy, 29*(2), 143-166.

Kiraly, D. 2001. 'Towards a constructivist approach to translator education', *Quaderns, Revista de traducció*, vol. 6, pp. 50-53.

Kramsch, C. 2003. *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. 2006. *Reading images - The grammar of visual design*. London:

Routledge.

Love, K. 2008. 'Literacy across the school subjects: A multimodal approach'. In Unsworth, L. (ed) *Multimodal Semiotics: Functional Analysis in Contexts of Education*. London: Continuum.

Mayer, R. E. 2003. The promise of multimedia learning: using the same instructional design methods across different media. *Learning and Instruction,* vol. 13, pp. 125-139.

McKim, R. H. 1980. *Experiences in visual thinking*. Monterey: Brooks/Cole.

Moriarty S. E. 2002. 'The symbiotics of semiotics and visual communication', *Journal of Visual Literacy*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 19-28.

New London Group. 1996. 'A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures'. *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 66, pp. 60-92.

No Author. Date. 'How can visual literacy support English language teaching?'. Retrieved 10 Oct. 2012, from http://web.me.com/benwadham/DrEd/symposia/visual_literacy_-_suryanto.pdf

Vernier, S., Moral, G., Giusti, S., & Barbuzza, S. 2008. 'The five language skills in the EFL classroom'. Retrieved 6 April 2011, from http://bdigital.uncu.edu.ar/2647

E-mails: nata@itl.auth.gr, damaskinidis@hotmail.com