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Multimodal literacy: Meaning negotiations in political cartoons on the refugee crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the topic of multimodal literacy with particular reference to how the analysis of political cartoons can be applied as a critical reading learning activity in English lessons in secondary and higher education. Despite the proclamation of a multimodal turn in the wake of ubiquitous digital communication, educational institutions in general still focus mainly on the modes of spoken and written language. Consequently, students often cannot develop the necessary competences enabling them to become critical readers of the multiplicity of multimodal texts which they encounter throughout their lives. Therefore, multimodal literacy should be integrated into the curriculum. This article demonstrates how political cartoons can be used in the English language classroom to develop students' multimodal literacy. A template for close reading activities is proposed and applied to a cartoon on a current topic, i.e., the refugee crisis, in an exemplary analysis. In addition, possible follow-up activities, integrating further cartoons, are sketched.

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1. Introduction: the multimodal turn of communication

With the advent of the digital age, a “visual or pictorial turn” of communication was proclaimed and, rather recently, a “multimodal” turn has been announced (Jewitt, 2011, pp. 3–4). Educational institutions, however, still focus mainly and often exclusively on the verbal modes, i.e., spoken and written language. The consequence of this is that people are being disempowered “by handicapping them as critical readers of the majority of texts to which they are routinely exposed throughout their lives” (Chandler, 2007, p. 225). Besides, English language learning (ELL) textbooks usually contain multimodal resources. They must be fully understood in order to be used effectively in class. Moreover, “[m]ultimodal practices in ELL classrooms often foster greater student participation, freedom to communicate, collaboration and negotiation of meanings” (Ajayi, 2012, 17). It is thus highly desirable that TESOL professionals take an intensive interest in multimodal communication as well as pedagogical and didactic means to develop their students' understanding of the various modes of communication and their intersemiotic interplay (Royce, 2002, p. 192). Multimodal literacy and how it can be taught should therefore be part of the curricula for English in secondary and higher education. This article wants to demonstrate how political cartoons can be used as frameworks for teaching multimodal competence in these contexts.

Different semiotic modes, especially nonverbal ones, interact with each other in a cartoon and jointly generate the meaning of the artefact. Just like language, multimodal artefacts can be analyzed as discourses or texts which contain “systems of knowledge and belief”, constructions of “social identities”, “social relationships” (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 64–65

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quoted in; Fill, 2010, p. 156) and ideologies. All of this is particularly true for political cartoons. They usually address prominent societal issues and debates, and assume the role of commentator and critic.

A selection of four cartoons on the refugee crisis in Europe and their potential use in English lessons in secondary and higher education will be explicitly discussed in this paper. The cartoons will be analyzed as multimodal texts. The contributions of the different modes to the meaning-making process will be explored, popular stylistic means will be identified, and it will be shown how they function in the different modes. Moreover, recurring themes will be identified and discussed. The main learning objectives are a better understanding of:

- (1) the different kinds of modes, especially those that are nonverbal,
- (2) the process of meaning-making,
- (3) the functioning of recurring stylistic means in different modes,
- (4) their creative and ideological potential, and
- (5) the overall construction of a multimodal artefact, i.e., in this case, a political cartoon.

2. Literature review and classification of political cartoons as multimodal artefacts

Research on multimodality typically investigates how meaning is generated through the interplay of different semiotic resources, which are often called “modes” (e.g. Kress, 2010, pp. 27–28; Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016, p. 3). Bezemer and Kress (2016, p. 7) define modes as “socially shaped, culturally available *material* resources” or “*means* (...) for making meaning”. Modes are always combined, i.e., used “in *ensembles*” (Bezemer & Kress, 2016, p. 7), and they have “different potentials for making meaning” (Kress, 2010, p. 79). Examples of modes are written and spoken language (verbal modes); pitch, intonation, speech rhythm, typography (paraverbal modes); and images, body language, traffic signs and color (nonverbal modes). Political cartoons, which are the object of this investigation, are multimodal artefacts, which always consist of a drawn image (which sometimes contains a series of images), and may also contain a short text.¹ An image in general constitutes a complex nonverbal mode in that it embeds many other nonverbal modes, such as angle, space, color, body language (if people are depicted) etc., and they can all contribute to the overall meaning (Machin, 2007). Political cartoons as multimodal artefacts minimally consist of an ensemble of nonverbal modes and maximally of an ensemble combining nonverbal modes, the verbal mode of written language and the paraverbal mode of typography. The different modes jointly create the meaning of the political cartoon.

3. Research questions and goals

The major research questions addressed are: How can a political cartoon be used:

- (1) to teach how different modes interact in meaning-making, and
- (2) to expand students' critical reading abilities?

The framing questions for the critical reading activities in the classroom are: Which modes are used in the cartoons and how do they interact to create meaning? Which meanings feature prominently in the cartoons? How are they constructed? Which themes are dominant? Which narratives of the refugee crisis are told? Which alternative stories could have been told?

The basic goal of the paper is to show how political cartoons can be used as a critical reading learning activity in English lessons in secondary and higher education. For this purpose, an exemplary, detailed multimodal analysis of a political cartoon will be carried out and possible follow-up activities with further cartoons will be outlined. The underlying assumption is that the students have no previous theoretical knowledge of multimodality. The major learning objective is to familiarize the students with the potentials of different modes for meaning-making, especially the non- and paraverbal ones. Moreover, their awareness of the manipulative potential of multimodal forms of communication will be increased.

4. Material and methods

A template for close reading activities of political cartoons is developed in this article that can be used by English teachers in secondary and higher education to develop their students' multimodal literacy. It is based on an inductive approach and detailed in an exemplary analysis of a political cartoon on a current topic that has dominated societal discourse in Europe these last few years: the refugee crisis. Variations and useful follow-up activities to train students' competence in multimodal analysis and critical reading will be sketched by integrating some more cartoons.

To identify suitable materials, I used an electronic archive of political cartoons which can be accessed on the Internet (<http://www.politicalcartoons.com>). The database was searched using the search options “All Artists”, “Location: All”,

¹ For a more detailed description of the genre of political cartoons see, for example, Tehseem and Bokhari (2015).

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