

Multimodal Teaching Proposal in an English as A Foreign Language Subject

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Abstract:

XXI century society has a multimodal nature and it is referred as 2.0 era, in which the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is essential. This implies that tertiary education needs to be adapted to this context and, therefore it is necessary to highlight multimodal teaching in University classrooms thanks to Power Point or Prezi presentations, the use of videos or social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, the use of google tools, etc. This article intends to be a contribution to highlight the importance of multimodal teaching in higher education. It describes some activities that promote multimodality used in the subject English Language V of the degree in English Studies at the University of Alicante. The selection of activities is determined not only for its multimodal nature but also because they contribute to the acquisition of competences that are essential for the labour market. In addition, a survey was prepared in order to know students' opinions about a teaching proposal based on multimodality. The results of the survey show that students consider that multimodal teaching facilitates learning and increases their motivation. Moreover, multimodal teaching contributed to the acquisition of different social competences.

Keywords: *Multimodality, society 2.0, teaching-learning process, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), higher education*

1. Introduction

It is well known that university education has undergone thorough a renovation in recent years. The changes that have taken place have been marked by the principles proposed by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These changes have affected the methodology, the evaluation, the renewal of the contents, the roles played by teachers and students in the teaching-learning process, competency-based education, among others (Benito & Cruz, 2005; Bueno González & Nieto García, 2009; López Noguero, 2005; Martínez Lirola, 2007; Pereyra-García. Sevilla & Luzón, 2006; Ramos, Chiva & Gómez, 2017; Sánchez, 2006). We concur with Zabalza (2011) that the methodology is the curricular component that has more impact on teaching.

In general, traditional teaching has focused on the written language and other modes of communication (image, music, etc.) have played a minor role in the teaching-learning process (Coffin, 2012). In this sense, the tools offered by the 2.0 society can contribute make the teaching-learning process more practical and adapted to the social demands. For this reason, it is necessary to promote the use of virtual platforms, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (hereafter ICTs) and any tool that enhances a multimodal teaching so that teaching is as effective as possible and it is adapted to the changes required by the XXI century (Ames Ramello, 2019; Cuartas Álvarez, 2020; Martínez Lirola, 2019). Following Zammit (2019, p. 49): “In classrooms, where students are taught to understand and create multimodal texts, a shift is required in the discourse through which curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are realised”.

The changes made in today's society and in the University thanks to the demands of the EHEA do not make feasible that teaching is monomodal, i.e., focused on a single mode of communication; on the contrary, the use of multimodal resources is promoted in the teaching-learning process so that students can learn using different resources. Moreover, the new demands request that the teaching-learning process is not centered on teachers, as was common in traditional teaching, whose role was essentially dictating notes while the students assumed a passive role consisting mainly taking notes passively.

The main objectives of this article are the following: to make teachers aware of the importance of multimodal teaching in university classrooms, to describe some activities employed in order to encourage multimodality in an English language subject paying attention to the competences that students will acquire doing the activities and to know students' opinion on this type of education by analyzing a survey.

After this introduction, this article is divided in the following sections: the section that follows provides the theoretical framework of this work focused on multimodality; the third section describes the context, participants and methodology used to conduct this study. The fourth section presents some multimodal activities; then the results of a survey prepared in order to know the opinion of university

students on multimodal teaching are offered (see appendix 1). Finally, the article ends with a discussion and some conclusions based on the study conducted.

2. Theoretical framework

One of the key features of the twenty-first century is the multimodal nature of modern societies (Lemke, 2012). We are surrounded by multimodal texts in which the image is increasingly important when communicating meanings. A multimodal text combines different modes of communication (written, images, diagrams, etc.) to express its meanings, following Baldry and Thibault (2006, p. 21): “[...] multimodality refers to the diverse ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resource systems are both codeployed and co-contextualised in the making of a text-specific meaning”.

Kress and van Leeuwen’s work (2001, 2006) has been crucial to develop the theory of multimodality. In addition, there are other authors that have contributed to develop the said theory (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Bezemer & Jewett, 2010; Bowcher, 2012; Jewitt, 2009; Royce & Bowcher, 2007; Painter, Martin and Unsworth, 2013; Painter, 2018, among others). The various components of multimodal texts have a certain purpose, a function (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Martínez Lirola, 2010; Triviño Cabrera, 2018), that is, they are designed that way and not in a different one in order to achieve a certain objective that may be to persuade, to convince, to disclose information, etc. Each mode of communication is a semiotic resource that contributes to the development of meaning. In this sense, the image plays a key role in multimodal communication because its role is essential when capturing the attention of the audience (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010; Unsworth, 2010).

The application of the tools offered by multimodality to the teaching practices is not something completely new. However, the era 2.0 offers a variety of possibilities for multimodal teaching to be prominent through PowerPoint or Prezi presentations, the use of videos or social networks like Facebook or Twitter in teaching or using google tools, among others. In the words of Simpson and Walsh (2010, p. 37): “Now with interactive, multiple authoring and social networking facilities provided by Web 2.0 technologies, new pedagogic possibilities can be utilised in the classrooms”.

In this regard, in recent decades there have been language teachers and teachers of other disciplines willing to be creative and to innovate. In order to do so, they have incorporated into teaching practical activities and multimodal materials so that students could also increase their creativity, following Knox (2008, p. 140):

Multimodal perspectives on language and language education have only recently appeared in the literature on L2 teaching and learning. A brief consideration of the classroom practices of teachers and students shows very quickly, though, that multimodality is something that language teachers have understood intuitively for a long time.

We understand the classroom of any educational level as a multimodal context in which the use of different modes of communication contributes to make the teaching-learning process dynamic, creative and facilitator of student learning (Martínez Lirola, 2013a), following Martínez Lirola (2013b, p. 198): “[W]e understand the classroom as a multimodal learning environment in which modes of communication, different to language, are present to facilitate the teaching-learning process”. In this sense, modes of communication different from traditional texts are given importance in the classroom (Bearne, Clark, Johnson, Manford, Mottram & Wolstencroft, 2007; Knox, 2008; Molina & Alonso, 2016; Walsh, 2009; Yelland, Lee, O’Rourke & Harrison, 2009).

Consequently, students need guidance to enable make the most of the multimodal tools used in the classroom and to deepen on the meanings expressed by the different modes of communication. In this way, students do not only understand the meanings expressed in texts better but they also establish connections between the texts and the contexts that frames them, which help them go beyond the academic contents and contribute to develop their full potential (Livingstone, 2008, Merchant, 2009; Mulatsih, 2016).

In addition, multimodal teaching requires the development of different literacies, i.e., multiliteracies are requested in university classrooms. Simpson and Walsh (2010, p. 26), show that this term is not new: “Evolving from the theorising on the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), the term ‘multiliteracies’ was concerned with the many types of communication hended in new and different social and cultural contexts, and for both print and electronic texts”. In this sense, Unsworth (2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2010) has spent more than a decade paying attention to how the various modes of communication chosen express their meanings in the teaching-learning process.

3. Context, participants and methodology

Our study focuses on the University of Alicante, specifically in the core subject English Language V, which is taught in the third academic year. There were 91 students registered in the said subject in the academic year 2019-2020 (70 were female and 21 were male). Most of the students interviewed want to work as secondary school teachers in the future, hence this is the reason why this subject was designed not only for students to acquire an advanced level of English (level C1) but also as a subject that would facilitate that the students acquire skills as teachers through multimodal activities (see section 4).

English Language V is six credit-subject, i.e., students must receive 60 hours of lessons in the classroom and they must complete their training with 90 hours of individual and group work outside the classroom. The subject’s aim is to help students acquire level C1 by working on the different skills, i.e., speaking, listening, reading, writing and interaction. The subject was taught four hours a week: one was dedicated to improve writing; students had to work with different types of text to analyze their structure, their social purpose and the main grammatical and syntactic structures used so that these texts are effective (vid. section 4.1); the next hour

intended that students improved their oral skills. For that reason, students had to prepare an oral presentation and a cooperative debate on a topic of their choice. The third hour was devoted to grammar and exercises from the textbook were corrected every week. The fourth hour was used to develop a cooperative multimodal debate prepared by the same group that had presented the oral presentation in the previous class (see section 4.2).

During the first three weeks of the semester the teacher explained how to prepare effective oral presentations and debates incorporating multimodal elements. In order to do so, the teacher and the students worked with listening exercises from the textbook or fragments selected by the teacher so that students could answer some questions and check their understanding, videos about job interviews. Moreover, videos on current topics were also analyzed so that students could think about different social topics and improve their vocabulary on different semantic fields.

After that students had had some experience in multimodal teaching doing some activities that highlighted multimodality as the ones presented in the following section, a survey was prepared in order to ask students about certain aspects related to multimodal teaching anonymously (see appendix 1). We concur with Herrera and Enrique (2008) that the survey is a suitable method to know the opinion of university students on certain aspects of their learning process because the fact of being anonymous enables that the information obtained through the surveys is accurate. As appendix 1 shows, the said survey consists of 11 questions of different types (open, dichotomous and multiple choice). All the students registered in the subject completed the survey. Before offering the results of the survey in section 5 of this article, we present some of multimodal activities carried out in the subjects under study.

4. Proposal of multimodal activities

Due to the limitations of extension of this article in this section we will limit ourselves to present in detail two of the multimodal activities carried out in the subject under study (see Martínez Lirola, 2013a and 2013b for the description of other activities).

4.1 Analysis of multimodal texts: introduction to visual grammar

As noted in the previous section, one of the teaching hours was dedicated to working with texts so that students could improve their writing skills in English. Students were used to analyze texts in which the only mode was the written one, i.e., monomodal texts in which attention was primarily paid to the different parts of them, to the language used depending on the type of text and its function in society. The teacher devoted a session to present the main aspects of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) so that students could work with multimodal texts on social aspects.

Then, students had to put into practice what they have learned related to visual grammar; for that reason, the teacher selected several multimodal texts, particularly texts that consisted on advertisements in which women were represented. In this

way, gender was introduced in the teaching-learning process at the same time that students had to analyze the main linguistic and visual characteristics of the texts selected. Thus, students could develop their critical thinking by deconstructing the image of women in the text and observing several stereotypes in advertisements because women were represented: women are almost naked, showing most of their bodies. Moreover, in these texts the photographs of women are usually the most important element and they are used as an advertising claim.

After practicing with the texts selected by the teacher, the students were asked to be organized in groups of five or six people and select two multimodal texts on a topic that they were interested in. These texts had to be deconstructed following the principles of visual grammar presented in class. Once the texts were analyzed in the groups, two people were chosen in each group to present their work in front of the whole class. Then the group that presented the texts also had to prepare some questions about them in order to promote critical thinking in their classmates.

This activity was very useful and enriching due to the variety of the topics that students have chosen: ecology, travelling, education, marketing, health, diseases, among others. Moreover, this activity allowed to develop written skills, on the one hand, because a group had to deepen on the texts chosen and write down the analysis; on the other hand, oral skills because students had to present their analysis in front of their classmates and had to foster a debate on the topic of the texts. The fact that students had to select the texts freely highlighted various skills such as independent work and decision making, besides they had to reach a consensus on what two texts from the different collected by each group member were analyzed and presented.

4.2 The cooperative multimodal debate

The cooperative multimodal debate was based on the oral presentation of the previous class. This activity contrasts with that presentation because the oral presentation intended that students use formal language while the debate's main purpose is that students are able to promote interaction with the rest of their classmates and express themselves fluently taking in an informal way about the topic selected. Thus, all students who come to class have the opportunity to express their points of view on the topic developed in the debate.

In addition, another objective of the debate was to offer students the opportunity to work as if they were teachers having to pay attention to issues such as classroom management, promoting interaction in order to enable participation of all the students, divide the class into groups, ask students to express their opinions in front of the whole class, disagreeing respectfully, learn from the opinions of others, etc.

In fact, the cooperative debate was chosen as a teaching technique because it is very useful for enhancing creativity. At the beginning of the semester the teacher explained in the classroom different techniques to organize effective debates so that students did not see the debate as a collection of questions. In addition, various cooperative techniques were explained so that debates had a positive result and the objectives could be accomplished.

For example, some techniques that encourage cooperation, critical capacity and interaction, among other competences are the following: half of the class could be in favor and half against the topic that was discussed; the class could be divided into groups of five or six people in order to offer different definitions, to answer questions, etc. Each small group had to appoint a group leader or coordinator in order to also work on leadership; the said leader should be changed with each question so that each group member could assume this role and to become aware of the importance of having a good leader for groups to function well and achieve their objectives. Furthermore, some games could be used in the classroom so that besides speaking English the classroom was dynamic and was funny. For instance, the group that obtained the highest number of correct answers could win a prize. Thus further cooperation, competition is encouraged because students will need this competence in the labor market.

This activity contributes to make teaching multimodal because students used ICT for the debate to be effective in different ways: the use of videos to frame the subject of the debate, the use of Power Point or Prezi presentations to raise questions for the debate. Internet is used in the classroom in order to have access to different multimodal texts, to use videos from *youtube* or electronic dictionaries, among other resources. Students often brings real objects to class in order to promote interaction from them; sometimes they have been employed various multimodal texts on paper on which the image was the most outstanding element so that the various groups could develop their critical thinking skills to express their ideas on the texts under analysis.

5. Results: analysis of the survey that shows students' opinions about multimodal teaching

In order to know the opinion of students enrolled in the subject English Language V, a survey was prepared so that at the end of the semester the students could express their opinion on the multimodal teaching that took place in the subject anonymously. The results of this survey are presented in the following paragraphs.

100% of the surveyed students responded positively to the first question because they consider that multimodal teaching facilitates learning. The main reasons offered to justify their answers are: it is easier to learn and memorize with multimodal tools, this type of education is connected to real life and facilitates that attention is captured maintained in the topics under study.

91.93% responded positively to question two because they consider that multimodal teaching influences motivation to learn versus 8.06% that responded negatively. The answers are justified by explaining that it is easier to learn with multimodal tools, it is more dynamic and enjoyable and it helps to retain more information.

The same percentage, i.e., the vast majority of the students responded positively when asked whether they find it easier to acquire knowledge if teachers used PowerPoint or Prezi presentations, videos or pictures, among other multimodal materials in the classes. Students point out that multimodal tools indicate that these

teachers reinforce the message and the said tools are useful to outline the information and to present it in a clear and organized way.

It is interesting that again 91.93% shows that teaching with multimodal texts contributes to incorporate cultural components in classes because it helps students learn aspects of other cultures through texts and develop critical thinking. This is an essential competence in society so that students are aware of the importance of becoming part of an active and critical citizenship.

Question number five is an open question, therefore the answers are varied but they can be summarized with the following statements: multimodal texts help raise awareness of the composition of texts, they can foster creativity and active participation of university students in the teaching-learning process, they are useful to contrast with traditional teaching and to become aware of the importance of interdisciplinarity nowadays, and to observe the relationship between what is learned with multimodal texts from a linguistic perspective. Finally, more than half of the surveyed students show that working with such texts helps enhance their critical capacity.

In question number six, 80.64 % of our students said that images communicate as much as the written text whereas 19.35% offered a negative response. Again, the vast majority, 91.93 % answered positively when they were asked if they would like to learn more multimodal content in other subjects versus 8.06%, who believes it is sufficient with the multimodal approach offered in the subject English Language V.

When students were asked about other possible topics apart from gender (see the activity presented in section 4.1) they would like to analyze from a multimodal perspective, 50 % of students said that any other topic, 20% made reference to social topics such as racism or poverty, 20% specify that they would like to deal with political issues and the last 10% made reference to other topics such as education, the media and society, ecology and health.

Question nine was prepared to make students reflect on how they can use ICT for multimodal teaching. This question invites students to revise the main ICT employed in the subject and the answers are very clear: the vast majority, 93 % respond by referring to PowerPoint and Prezi presentations and the use of videos as these are the most used ICT in English Language V. 7% of students refer to the digital whiteboard, music or to use a blog with content related to the subject.

When students were asked if they would like to incorporate more tools of e-learning in the process of learning, 72.58 % said yes compared with 27.41 % who answered no. People who offer a positive response mention that use e-learning is better than learning theoretically because interaction and motivation are encouraged. People who give a negative response show that they do not consider it appropriate that e-learning is very important in their education; they also point out that teaching in the classroom can solve their doubts better.

Finally, question number eleven aims that students reflect on the competences that they develop when learning is multimodal. There are students that choose several

competences and that is why we offer a percentage: critical capacity (80.64 %), decision making (40.32 %), leadership (30.64 %), teamwork (46.77 %), autonomous learning (43.54 %) and in other competitions, one student mentioned that she/he has acquired the competence of speaking in public.

6. Discussion

The multimodal teaching proposal presented in this article is a contribution to the development of new pedagogies where there is a close relationship between the contents and competences taught in the classroom and the demands of society. In addition, the activities described contribute to make the classroom multimodal and to give students the opportunity to develop new skills and new literacies that will contribute to their integral development.

If the activities are prepared by groups (see section 4), apart from promoting the use of ICT, which is a core competence in the XXI century, they enhance cooperative work, which is another important and necessary competence for the work market. Thus, students will be aware that what you learn in the university classroom has a direct relationship with their future as a professional and with the labor market demands.

Multimodal texts are effective to introduce social topics such as gender in the English as a foreign language classroom (see section 4.1). Giving students freedom to choose multimodal texts on different topics contributes not only to bring different social topics into the classroom but to make students active in the teaching-learning process because the selection of texts based on students' interests make their contribution part of the programme. This has an effect on students' motivation because they can see that the materials they choose are taken into consideration. In addition, the variety of topics that students select gives vividness to the classroom due to the fact that they are current topics that are being discussed in social media. In this sense, they contribute to add social meaning to the classroom.

The different activities contribute to the development of critical thinking in different ways: students have to be critical when they select their multimodal texts, they also need to be critical when they express their opinions in the debates or when they interact in groups, etc. In this sense, the selected activities are also effective to promote interaction and cooperation in the classroom. These can be considered social competences that students can apply to the labour market and to their lives.

7. Conclusions

The classrooms at all educational levels can be a multimodal scenario that allow to carry out teaching practices in which multimodality can acquire prominence in various ways, such as the following: both teachers and students can promote the use of ICTs to carry out different activities in the classroom; the use of multimodal materials such as electronic dictionaries, videos, multimedia presentations or web pages, among others should be promoted in the teaching learning process; students need to be encouraged to prepare multimodal oral presentations and debates, etc.

In this regard, the various activities proposed in this article offer students the opportunity to learn by doing. In addition, multimodal teaching does not only give importance to different tools but also contributes to fostering creativity by giving students freedom to use different multimodal resources according to their personality and to the characteristics of the activity they have to prepare. Similarly, it helps to increase the motivation of students because they are able to take their own decisions and to be the protagonists of the whole teaching-learning process.

The fact of choosing different multimodal tools in the teaching-learning process enables students to develop different skills because they have to be familiar with different modes of communication. Moreover, they can foster the development of autonomous learning and contribute to the acquisition of different competences. In this regard it seems important to make explicit the competences that teachers want to develop in every moment of the teaching-learning process and their relationship with the demands posed by society 2.0.

The analysis of the survey shows that students are aware of the importance of multimodal teaching so that they learn in an effective way. They highlight that multimodality has a direct influence on their motivation to learn. Hence, they indicate that they would like to learn in this way in other subjects in order to acquire core competencies for the labor market such as leadership, critical thinking and teamwork.

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Appendix 1. SURVEY ON MULTIMODALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Do you think that multimodal teaching, i.e., one that incorporates different modes of communication (written, visual, musical, etc.), facilitates your learning?

Yes

If not, why?

2. Does multimodal teaching have an effect on your motivation to learn?

Yes

If not, why?

3. Is it easier for you to learn if the teacher uses Power Point or Prezi presentations, videos or images in class?

Yes

If not, why?

4. In your opinion, do you think that multimodal texts contribute to incorporate cultural aspects in the classroom?

Yes

If not, why?

5. What else can these kind of texts contribute to?

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6. Do you think that images communicate as much as the written text?

Yes

If not, why?

7. Would you like to learn more contents with multimodal materials (maybe in other subjects that are perhaps a little outdated)?

Yes

If not, why?

8. What topics besides gender would you like to analyse from a multimodal perspective?

9. In what way can Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) be used so that teaching is multimodal?

10. Would you like to incorporate more e-learning tools in your learning process?

Yes

If not, why?

11. What competences are the ones that you develop more when learning is multimodal?

- Critical capacity
- Decision making
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Autonomous learning
- Others (please, specify)