

Teaching visual grammar and social issues in an English language course: an example using multimodal texts on immigrant minors from a Spanish newspaper

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## **Abstract**

Our society has become more technological and multimodal and, consequently, teaching has to be adapted to the new changes. For this reason, this chapter shows the importance of teaching visual grammar in an English language course at University level so that students are able to read and analyse multimodal texts in general and visuals in particular. This chapter proposes the teaching of social issues using multimodal texts from the press so that students understand how the press creates meaning through different visual and linguistic choices

In order to do this, students in the last year of the degree English Studies at the University of Alicante (Spain) were provided with some examples of multimodal texts related to immigrant minors from the local newspaper, *Información*, a daily publication in the city of Alicante. Once students were introduced to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, they were asked to analyse the texts in groups in order to observe the importance of visuals in the construction of meaning; this activity was part of their evaluation with a portfolio. The analysis using visual grammar shows that the texts under analysis portray an image of immigrant minors as weak and dependent on people from the main group, which perpetuates their status as marginalised persons.

## **Key words**

Multimodality, visual grammar, immigrant minors, newspapers, teaching social issues, portfolio.

## **1. Introduction**

We live in a multimodal society in which visual texts are part of our daily lives. This makes it necessary that these kinds of texts become part of the teaching-learning process, which involves changes in communication and in the definition of literacy. Multimodal texts have been used in teaching practices intuitively for a long time. Knox (2008: 140) states that: "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."

The theory of multimodality has developed through the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), and other authors, like Baldry and Thibault (2006), Jewitt (2009), and Royce and Bowcher (2007) have contributed to our understanding of how different ways of communication create meanings through language, image, graphs, sounds, gestures, etc. According to Kress (2010: 1), "Each mode does a specific thing: image shows what takes too long to read, and writing names what would be difficult to show. Colour is

used to highlight specific aspects of the overall message. Without that division of semiotic labour, the sign, quite simply, would not work. Writing names and images shows, while colour frames and highlights; each to maximum effect and benefit”.

Newspapers use many examples of multimodal texts in order to illustrate their pieces of news, and these can be used in teaching practices. Using texts from the press gives students the opportunity of working with authentic texts that deal with the main social issues of our society. The press has the power to transmit the said issues in one way or another, which invariably has an effect in the readers’ ideology and opinion. For this reason, it is essential to analyse authentic texts from the press in the classroom in order to help students understand how texts create their meaning and develop their critical skills. In this sense, text analysis goes together with understanding the socio-economic context that frames texts.

Immigration can be considered to be a global issue. In the last few decades, Spain has received immigrants from many different countries, and immigrant minors especially started to come in the late 1990s. Choosing texts related to immigration in general, and immigrant minors in particular, to work in the classroom will allow students to observe some discriminatory attitudes towards people from other cultures that highlight the differences between ‘us and them’, between citizens of the main group and immigrants. In this sense, students can observe social and cultural aspects through text analysis because “the classroom offers tangible ways of interpreting contemporary culture; it is an excellent forum for teaching discourse analysis and for making students aware that there is a complex world there to be analysed” (Fernández Martínez, 2011: ix).

Since authentic texts are used to illustrate issues of power and meaning construction, this chapter draws primarily on a theoretical paradigm known as systemic functional linguistics (henceforth SFL), of which Michael Halliday is the chief exponent (cf. Halliday 1998a, 1998b; Halliday and Mathiessen, 2004; Halliday and Martin, 1993; Halliday and Mathiessen, 1999) and the Sydney school genre analysis (Martin, 1992; Martin and Rothery, 1993; Martin and Rose, 2007, 2008). SFL and Genre Theory are text-oriented approaches, which have social justice and social commitment in general in their agendas. Therefore, texts are approached from a critical perspective and therefore SFL “calls for reflection on the place of text in academic literacy research and development” (Coffin, 2012: 2).

One of the main objectives of this chapter is to make students analyse some texts relating to immigrant minors from a local newspaper in order to observe how the minors’ image is created. The focus of this study lies on the representation of less powerful groups by media, specifically on immigrant children, which is very pertinent in the current political and historical context. The analysis portrayed in this chapter intends to highlight that the different choices found in media texts influence and manipulate the way in which immigrant minors are represented in such a way that the readers’ values, attitudes and ideology are affected.

This chapter is organised in the following way: section 2 contextualises the study by referring to the course in which the research was done, and justifies the teaching of visual grammar; section 3 deals the data and the method of analysis; section 4 concentrates on the main visual characteristics the different photographs dealing with immigrant minors analysed by students have. Finally, section 5 offers the discussion and conclusion of the chapter.

## 2. The context of the research: teaching visual grammar in a language course

*English Language IV* is a core one year subject taught in the last year of the English Studies degree at the University of Alicante; its main focus is that students master the four skills in English (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Most students want to be high school teachers or work as translators for international companies. During the 2011-2012 academic year there were 90 students who matriculated, but of these, 40 were abroad as Erasmus students and, therefore, did not study the subject in Alicante.

The subject was taught four hours each week (one theoretical and three practical): the theoretical lecture was devoted to teaching different aspects that helped students to improve their writing skills, which included aspects such as cohesive devices, types of theme and thematic progression, etc. The teacher decided to include an introduction to the analysis of a multimodal texts as part of the theory (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) so that students were able to analyse multimodal texts in general and visuals in particular, and they could write critically about them. The three practical lectures consisted on 1) a revision of grammar, 2) the presentation of an oral presentation of a topic of students' choice in the classroom to observe that students had done some research on the topic they had chosen, and to show that they were able to explain it using different multimodal tools (videos, power point presentations, songs, etc.), and 3) the preparation of a debate in the classroom of the same topic of the oral presentation so that students could improve their oral skills.

As explained in the previous paragraphs, multimodality and visual grammar were introduced as part of the theory of the course. In addition, we 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 Baldry and Thibault's words (2006: 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".

Traditional literacy has concentrated on written language, whereas other modes of communication, including visuals, have been backgrounded. However, the increasing prevalence of texts-as-objects which use more than one mode of meaning-making (multimodal texts) and multimodal communication raises the necessity of enabling readers to question the texts they are exposed to in their daily life. Therefore, it becomes necessary to develop new literacies in order to decode the meanings in these texts. For this reason, it is necessary to analyse "how the modes of image and writing appear together, how they are designed to appear together and how they are to be read together" (Kress, 2003: 61).

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006: 177) pays attention to the way the page is composed by analysing its 'saliency', i.e., the most outstanding element in a composition through its size, colour, etc., its 'framing', i.e., the presence or absence of frames that present elements together or apart, or 'information value', i.e., the place in which elements appear in the text, those that appear on the right or at the top having more importance.

The evaluation of *English Language IV* was through a portfolio that consisted on the following catalogue of products each semester (Martínez Lirola 2012): writing an essay analysing a multimodal text that dealt with a global issue (20%), the preparation, presentation and participation in a group oral presentation and debate (20%) and a grammar exam (10%). In the portfolio students had to include all the analyses of the different multimodal texts done during the semester. Some of the analyses and the essays were in

groups, as the one presented in this chapter. Students were asked to write one group essay and two individual essays each semester in order to practise before they wrote the essay that was worth 20% of the final grade.

There were two groups of students (A and B) with 25 students matriculated in each group. They were asked to be organised in groups of five people to prepare the oral presentations and debates as well as some of the written activities of the subject that were part of the portfolio. This chapter focuses on the group essay assignment which students wrote at the beginning of the second semester in 2012 analysing some multimodal texts related to immigrant minors in a local newspaper (see Sections 3 and 4) in order to put into practice what they have learned on visual grammar and in order to be critical and deconstruct the ideology behind these texts, i.e., main group's superiority, stereotypes and prejudices on immigrants. By doing so, interdisciplinarity was introduced in the subject since it was not only visual grammar that students had to apply for the analysis, but also ideas related to how communication and media texts work.

### **3. Data and methodology**

The teacher collected all the pieces of news related to immigrant minors published in 2011 in the regional newspaper, *Información*, which, as mentioned above, is published everyday in Alicante. There were 19 pieces of news on minors in total. Students were organised in five groups of five students each, and each group had to select one piece of news and analyse the multimodal text (i.e., the written text and the visual). Due to the limitations of space in this chapter, the analysis presented here will concentrate only on the photograph of the piece of news selected, following the main characteristics of visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) presented in class. The choice of a local newspaper in Alicante is not random because this city is significant in the presence of immigrants and, moreover, it is important that students are able to use texts in their local context in order to understand their context of situation better.

Having SFL and Genre Theory as theoretical frameworks due to the importance they give to teaching with authentic texts so that students can see the relationships between texts and context, students had to analyse the photographs selected paying attention to its position in the page, to the place of immigrant children in the photographs, to the participants' roles and to the use of vectors and colours in order to deconstruct how the photographs had been created. In this way, students could understand the meanings that go together with each visual choice. In this way, students had to interpret the texts as "consisting of multiple, interacting textual levels that make their meaning through the constant interplay of smaller and larger textual units" (Baldry and Thibault, 2006: 54). The following section offers a summary of the main characteristics that students described in each photograph; it also includes some similarities and differences among them.

### **4. Analysis: approaching the visual representation of minor immigrants in a sample of a local newspaper**

The visual analysis that follows shows that the visual characteristics of images can alter or influence the way in which meaning is perceived or interpreted by readers (Baldry and Thibault 2006; Crespo and Martínez Lirola 2012; Martínez Lirola, 2006, 2010; O'Halloran and Smith 2011; Unsworth 2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Ventola and Moya 2009), which has

consequences in understanding a global issue such as immigration in general or immigrant minors in particular.

The following analysis is based on the ones offered by the different groups of students matriculated in the subject *English Language IV*. Once the analysis was done, they gave it to the teacher so that she could check their writing and the visual analysis. Once the teacher gave each group feedback, there was a debate in the classroom on the representation of immigrant minors in the press so that students could link their written essay to a speaking activity. The analysis that follows is based on the different analysis (see appendices with the five multimodal texts), and it tries to offer the main similarities and differences between the five texts analysed.

As regards the position in the page, only one of the 5 texts (see text 1) appears at the top centre of the page, the other four appear at the bottom of the page, and mainly on the right. Although the right is the position of new information, the fact that these texts are very small and appear at the bottom shows that they are not given importance in the page. In this sense the position and size of most of the photographs in the newspaper's page can be considered dysphemistic (see below for the explanation of the term in this context). However, we should also bear in mind that the image in text number 1 is quite big and appears at the top of the page and in the centre, which can be considered a prominent position. All the texts are read from the right to the left, i.e., from the position of new information in the visual to the position of given information. All the photographs are framed, which implies that the different elements found belong together but the frame is not very strong, in Kress and van Leeuwen's words (2006: 203): "The stronger the framing of an element, the more it is presented as a separate unit of information".

Immigrant minors are foregrounded in the texts analysed because they appear in the centre of the image in texts 1, 3 and 5, and on the right in text 2. It is only on text 4 that the minor appears on the left, the place of given information but the vector between the civil guard's hand (*Guardia Civil*) and the child's face clearly connects both parts of the visual. However, the fact that there are people from the main group of society (Spanish population) in the five texts deprives of importance the adult immigrants represented in the visuals. Moreover, three out of the four women (texts 1, 3 and 4) appear on the right, i.e., in the position of new information, which highlights their presence in the images, as van Leeuwen (2008: 28) states: "Representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended". It is outstanding that only in text 5 there is a man of the main group who belongs to the NGO Red Cross accompanying the minor immigrant who appears foregrounded, whereas in the other four it is women who appear accompanying the minors who arrive. The outstanding presence of women goes together with the idea of women being connected with activities that involve taking care of other people.

Presenting participants in each of the photographs not looking at the camera is construed by the author as a *dysphemism* (i.e. the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself). The fact that all immigrants (except the minor who is foregrounded in text 5) in the multimodal pieces of news fail to look directly at the reader does little to encourage a positive view of immigrants, who seem to be ashamed of their situation; what is more, the fact that the immigrant in text 4 is behind the immigrant child, and therefore his face is hidden, implicitly supports this person's social exclusion insofar as he is represented apart from the main group, and consequently, not integrated in society. The contrary effect is

created in text 5 in which the minor looks directly at the audience, requesting an explicit answer from them.

Another dysphemistic characteristic has to do with the position of immigrants on the left and the different women and the man who help immigrants appear on the right, i.e., in the highlighted position in visuals (except on text 2 and on text 5) and they belong to the majority group, either to *Salvamento marítimo* (texts 1 and 2), NGOs (text 3 and 5) or the Security forces such as civil guards (*Guardia Civil*, text 4).

As far as the roles that social actors are given to play in representations (van Leeuwen 2008: 32), there is no doubt that immigrants are represented as “patients” (goals) of the actions and people from the main group are presented as the “agents” (actors). As a matter of fact, the representation of these immigrants in need of help or medical care implicitly transmits the view of immigrants or immigrant minors as a burden on society and social welfare, as in the case of the children represented in all the texts under analysis. In addition, this representation of immigrants as people who avoid contact with the readers, which is a common feature in the texts analysed, tends to contribute implicitly to their social exclusion. In this sense, the minor foregrounded in text 5 is an exception, although the minors in the background are also represented looking down. This may lead the reader to deduce that immigrant minors feel ashamed of their situation: they feel inferior to the main group and that is the reason why they are not looking at the reader.

The different human beings represented appear joined by vectors. For example, in text 1 it is outstanding that it is the baby that joins the world of immigrants represented by the black woman on the left and the world of the Spanish society represented by the woman on the right, whose left hand appears on the baby as a vector that establishes a clear union with the baby and his mother. There are also vectors between the heads of the three participants in the image, and consequently, there is no doubt of the union between them. In texts 2, 3, 4 and 5 there are also vectors between the heads of the different participants represented and through the arms of the white women (a man in text 5) and immigrant children, as it is especially clear in texts 3, 4 and 5. There is a very clear vector between the head of the immigrant child foregrounded in text 5 and the participants represented in the background (two young boys with their heads covered, and an adult who belongs to the main group are clearly distinguished). These vectors have the purpose of establishing a union between the world of the main group and that of immigrants as it happens in texts 2, 4 and 5. However, in text 3 we observe that the vectors between the black woman’s head on the left and the white woman’s head in the centre marks a difference between the reality of immigrants and the main’s group reality. As it happens in text 1, the child that appears between the two women establishes a connection between both realities.

As regards the use of colours, only text 1 is black and white and texts 2, 3, 4 and 5 are in colour. There is a clear contrast between the background of the images and the immigrants that appear in them because texts 1 and 4 show a dark background; in text 2 it is blurred and therefore the main participants in each photograph, including the immigrant minors are clearly distinguished. Texts 3 and 5 have as a main element in the background an orange boat used in order to rescue the minors who have just arrived, since orange boats are normally the ones of *Salvamento Marítimo*. The use of colours is also dysphemistic and marks a difference between the two worlds already mentioned. For example, in text 1, the white woman wears a white T-shirt, which contrasts with the dark clothes of the woman on the left and with the dark blanket that covers the baby in the centre of the image. There is cohesion in the use of colours because the baby’s clothes are white and therefore his clothes

and the dark blanket have the two predominant colours of the two women represented, one representing the group having power and the other representing the group in need. In this sense, the baby has the purpose of marking the differences between the two women represented in the visual. In addition, his purpose is also to establish a connection between immigrants and the Spanish society, which is indicated by the fact that the baby covers part of the body of the two women represented. The veil that the black woman wears covers part of her face; it points out that she is ashamed of her social situation and that she belongs to a different culture. Therefore she is presented as different to the woman on the right.

In text 2 we observe a contrast between the black skin of the baby and the white skin of the woman holding him. In this case, the baby is covered by a red blanket, which contrasts with the woman's white T-shirt and globes. In contrast with text 2 in which the child is sleeping and the woman looks nowhere, text 4 offers an image in which there is interaction between the child and the civil guard (*Guardia Civil*) because they look at each other. This unity is reinforced by the above mentioned vector that joins the woman's arm with the baby's face and by presenting their heads at the same level. It is also outstanding the contrast between the white skin of the woman on the right, her blond hair and the black skin of the child, the adult holding her and their black hair. Moreover, the pink clothes of the baby also contrast with the dark shirt of the adult holding her.

Certainly, texts 3 and 5 are the most colourful ones of the different texts analysed. Apart from the colours, text 3 is also outstanding because it shows three shots clearly distinguished and a clear contrast between the image's background and the people represented. In the foreground we observe a black woman and a member of the well-known NGO, The Red Cross (*Cruz Roja*), carrying two children. In the middle distance, there are two policemen who give their backs, and in the background there are other people who are helping or observing those who are being rescued. In this sense, participants are active when they help or they are passive when they observe without taking action. The majority of the participants represented look at the end of the photograph, at the place where the rescue is taking place. It is only the black woman in the foreground and the two immigrant children that do not look in that direction, probably trying to forget the traumatic part of the rescue.

Text 5 shows two shots: the two foregrounded participants are bigger than the ones in the background and they are also highlighted by the colours of their clothes since the man wears an orange jacket and the child is covered by a red blanket (notice that as mentioned before, the baby in text 2 is also covered by a red blanket), which contrasts with the dark one found in text 1. In this sense, the colours of these two participants cannot be considered dysphemistic because the bright colours used (orange and red) attract the audience's attention to them, which contrasts with the grey and white of the clothes of the people represented in the background.

Regardless of where immigrant minors are placed, they can be considered the most salient element in the visual texts analysed: they appear in the centre in texts 1, 3 and 5, on the right in text 2, and on the left on text 4. They are given more attention through their light clothes in texts 1, 3 and 4, by the red blanket covering them in texts 2 and 5 or by being carried by adults showing that they are vulnerable. In this sense, the most salient element is crucial in the creation of meaning, following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 201) "[...] salience can create a hierarchy of importance among elements, selecting some as more important, more worthy of attention than others".

The different texts analysed show immigrants doing nothing because the images correspond to the very first moment of arrival of immigrants to the Spanish coasts. This fact, together with their presentation as weak and dependent on help is dysphemistic and does not favour social inclusion or the idea of citizenship in which immigrants and the Spanish population have the same duties and rights. On the contrary, people who belong to the main group appear doing their job and helping the immigrants in their rescue. In addition, the images analysed evoke feelings of pity and compassion and therefore the differences between 'we' and 'they' are highlighted.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Working with multimodal texts from the press allows to us establish a connection between the subject and real life, in which multimodality is present on a daily basis (on TV, in advertising, in social networks, etc.). Introducing visual grammar in an English language courses, using multimodal texts in the teaching-learning process and asking students to analyse this kind of texts, connects the activities done in the classroom to develop their language skills with what is taking place in society. Moreover, this makes students see the connection between multimodal discourse and the society that frames it; consequently, they learn through texts that deal with social issues that might affect their daily lives. In addition, working with the said texts allows the acquisition of competences necessary as future professionals, such as, critical thinking, application of theoretical concepts to the analysis of an authentic text, capacity to write, read and speak in English, etc.

The analysis presented in the previous section shows that immigrant minors are connected with stereotypes of dependency and subordination to the main group of the population because the texts analysed highlight the differences between immigrant minors and Spanish citizens (Amador Baquino 2009; Pedraza 2007; Retis and García 2010). The previous section also shows that, in general, the press does not study in depth the reasons why minors come to Spain nor the situation of their families or the socio-economic situation of their countries because most of the news analysed concentrate on the journey of minors in small boats (*pateras*), in the shipwreck of the said boats or in the moment of arrival to the Spanish coasts. The pieces of news on immigrant minors that belong to the newspaper *Información* precise the number of immigrant minors who arrive in small boats and they are pieces of news related mainly with the moment in which immigrants in general and immigrant children in particular arrive and they are rescued by people from NGOs or the social security forces.

This chapter has shown that the texts create reality by the way immigrant minors are represented through the visual characteristics. In other words, by analysing the photographs it has been established a relationship between media and society, between the visual characteristics and power, and between the multimodal texts analysed and ideology. By doing so, the different visual characteristics of each text can be explained as responding to the way in which a social issue, in this case the arrival of immigrant minors to Spain, is seen by the main group, which is the one that creates the pieces of news and is the one having power.

The analysis has pointed out that the press, and in particular the newspaper *Información*, has power to create the pieces of news related to immigrant minors in a determined way, which has an effect on the way readers perceive these minors. For this reason, readers have to be critical with the image of immigrants in general and immigrant



minors in particular, portrayed by the press in order to avoid stereotypes and attitudes of subordination towards minority groups.

To change this situation, the press should also offer pieces of news that explain the reasons why immigrant minors migrate, i.e., to deepen into the social situations of their countries of origin so that readers are not just persuaded to have a negative image of them by just reading negative pieces of news. Moreover, teaching about a social issue such as immigrant minors is crucial to make the young generations aware of other cultures, different social realities, the power of the press and the importance of developing critical skills that allow a better understanding of global issues in general and of immigration in particular.

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