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# Comic Heroes or Saviours? Constructing Alternative Identities in a Social Critical Approach to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

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**Summary.** Current educational systems primarily focus on the verbal and logico-mathematical aptitude of students, thus neglecting the cultivation of visual literacy and critical literacy skills, although the ubiquity of images in school textbooks necessitates the inclusion of a 'visual grammar' meta-language in educational practices. The aim of the present paper is to present a teaching intervention for the teaching of literacy in English through the implementation of critical multimodal literacy principles in order to bridge the gap between schooled literacy and out-of-school literacies. The participants in the intervention are eighteen sixth grade students of an EFL classroom in a state primary school in Thessaloniki who managed to 'deconstruct' the depiction of superheroes/heroines in comic books or action movies, in an effort to represent them in a more humane and mundane way, where their superpowers are summoned to the advantage of a society in need. The overall organization of the instructional intervention is built on an *introductory phase*, a *main phase* and a *follow-up phase*. The analysis of the students' compositions relies on the application of the principles of critical visual literacy and the results display that, through the process of scaffolding, the students can reject dominant representations of power and reconstruct cliché identities by re-exploring pre-existing roles. The end result, that is the classroom calendar compiled by twelve multimodal texts, manifests the students' skilful utilization of both visual and verbal semiotic resources in a balanced way, with a view to transmitting their social messages taking into account the broader social, cultural and political context within which power relations and social roles constantly evolve and are constructed.

**Keywords:** EFL teaching, popular culture, social identity, visual grammar, multimodal texts

## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher faces many challenges concerning the approach of the new material to be taught, the design of the syllabus and the topics to be tackled, while also taking into account the unique social identity and discursive practices of each of his/her students which they bring along during their twelve-year stay at the Greek school. According to Pahl

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and Rowsell (2005, p. 54)

“[...] every home brings with it identities, dispositions, stories, objects, artefacts, memories, languages and resources. This implies a *wealth* model of literacy by which families’ **cultural capital** can be drawn upon when planning schooled literacy practices”.

A similar point of view is expressed by Hilton (1996) when she claims that children do not come to school as ‘*tabula rasa*’, therefore their interests, cognitive and emotive experiences and predispositions for learning should be seriously taken into account, thus trying to bridge the gap between decontextualised learning practices and practices stemming from their own socio-cultural environment.

With the advent of new literacies and Multiliteracies, where technology and access to the mass media, multimedia and electronic hypermedia has become the *sine qua non* in instruction, adhering strictly to the school textbooks frequently fills the children with dissatisfaction and discontent, in particular since they are obliged to take state standardized tests which do not promote higher order thinking skills and increase stress levels, even though the most significant requirement for success in these tests is rote learning. Furthermore, English language teaching in Greece is highly exam-orientated since the acquisition of a language certificate is usually the focal point of concern for both parents and teachers even during the early years of students’ instruction in the foreign language. Accordingly, the state-mandated curriculum does not promote critical or visual literacy skills, since –apart from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade English textbook, the state-mandated textbooks are focused on teaching students decontextualised linguistic skills for the sake of joining school practices with success in the “State Certificate in Language Proficiency”, also known as the KPG, an acronym for Kratiko Pistopiitiko Glossomathias (Anastasiadou & Tiliakou, 2014).

### *Literacy as social practice*

According to Pahl and Rowsell (2005) literacy should not be perceived as a neutral collection of skills developed through teaching and learning of language, nor should it be confined to the coding and decoding of texts outside of context. In the social perspective of literacy in New Literacy Studies, language is taken as a social practice (Baynham, 1995; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Street & Street, 1991), while the ongoing sociopolitical context favours the configuration of ideologies and power relations, thus suggesting that literacy is not autonomous, but ideological (Street, 1993). Accordingly, selection from a variety of texts so as to enable the political, dialogic and dynamic nature of language to emerge fosters critical thinking and active participation on the part of the students.

Freire and Macedo (1987) argue that critical reading is not limited to a pure act of decoding the written word, but presupposes and is intertwined with the knowledge of the real world. Consequently, since language and reality are interconnected in a dynamic relationship, critical reading of a text would not be feasible unless the relationship between text and context is clearly recognized.

Through the adoption of critical literacy strategies, the readers of texts assume a critical stance, seek through analytical reading and critical thinking the social realities represented or silenced in the texts, and simultaneously actively participate in the reading process by disputing and rejecting established power relations (Evans, 2004; Molden, 2007).

In this view, critical literacy transforms teaching into a ‘political act’ (Berlin, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Hannon, 2000; Kress, 1994; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; O’Brien, 2001), where literacy practices vary according to social context, cultural norms and discourses regarding, for example, gender, religious beliefs, age and social class. Consequently, the active/critical stance of the readers of texts and dispute of the pre-existing norms facilitates the examination and questioning of power relations and paves the way for a pedagogy of

literacy inextricably linked with the critical negotiation of recently emerging pluralistic forms of citizenship and of multisemiotic textual worlds (New London Group, 1996).

### *Integrating popular culture in the classroom*

The uncritical polarization between literary and media/popular texts exhibits the inability to recognize areas of overlap and cross-influence between them (Whitley, 1996), although semiotic and cultural analysis of neglected media texts would prove that the discourse employed to negotiate meanings in these genres can be equally sophisticated and complex as that of literary texts (Dyson, 1997; Gee, 2009; Millard, 2004; Whitley, 1996). For instance, Harry Potter films and books are addressed to an expert audience, since the plot is quite complicated and requires close attention to the unfolding events in order to unlock the hidden and bleak mysteries which thrill young children and adolescents alike. Another instance of popular media texts is the X-Men film series, where the jargon required to decode the plot of the films is highly sophisticated and specialized, and although adults might find it very hard to comprehend, children adopt this specialized vocabulary while engaging in social practices among their peers (Gee, 2009), for instance while playing games in the playground, sending text messages, chatting on the internet, etc.

This comes in concert with what Street and Street (1991, p. 143 as cited in Street, 2009, p. 340) ponder upon in a paper written for one of the key edited volumes in the *Ethnography of literacy tradition of the last decade*:

“Among all the different literacies practiced in the community, the home, and the work-place, how is it that the variety associated with schooling has come to be the defining type, not only to set the standard for other varieties but to marginalize them, to rule them off the agenda of the literacy debate? Non-school literacies have come to be seen as inferior attempts at the real thing, to be compensated for by enhanced schooling”.

As a consequence, there is substantial evidence to reinforce the assumption that conventional and widely accepted boundaries between non-school literacies and school literacies should be bridged, so as to facilitate the development of the different social identities of students alongside the emergence of the ‘self’ as *social actor/agent*. In order to achieve this goal, students should interact with a wide range of texts and familiarise themselves with the appropriate discourse as this is systematically articulated within more popular genres.

### *Purpose of the study*

Taking as a point of departure the theoretical angle that language is not a neutral human practice, EFL teaching approaches instruction in reading and writing consistently with the sociocultural and ideological contexts where students acquire their initial linguistic and social experiences while practising their out-of-school literacies. According to Kress (1995), English is the subject where ethics and arguments of social, public morality are constantly at issue, therefore English is a comprehensive, multidimensional curriculum revolving around 1) communication, 2) notions of sociality and culture, and 3) values, taste, and aesthetics.

In this light, the general aims of the present study are twofold. First, to refrain from curricular mandates adhering strictly to the exclusive use of the English textbook, since most English textbooks broaden the gap between out-of-school literacies and school literacies. In this context, bringing the popular genre of comic and action movies into the classroom enables the students to deconstruct the depiction of superheroes in comic books or action movies and to reconstruct their identities in a more humane and mundane way. Second, to enhance students’ critical and visual literacy skills by blending the verbal and the visual mode in a balanced way, thus allowing popular texts to transform into meaningful semiotic resources which enable the students to perceive the world in alternative ways within the broader sociocultural context.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants in this study are eighteen sixth grade students of an EFL classroom in a state primary school in Thessaloniki. The school is located in a suburban area in Thessaloniki and some of the students come from a very low socioeconomic background. A significant percentage of the class population are bilingual and two of the students (one male and the other female) are Roma. The sociocultural and linguistic diversity of the student participants provides ample ground for conducting research on how students can acquire literacy skills and also on how they learn to speak/write in English outside the state-mandated curriculum.

### *Material of the research*

The materials used in the study consisted of: (a) a calendar page, the upper part of which was blank, whereas the lower part consisted of empty squares to be filled with the dates of each month, (b) a task included in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade English textbook designed by the Greek Ministry of Education, asking students to identify what famous cartoon heroes can do, (c) twelve (12) compositions produced by the students based on an adaptation of the above task in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade English textbook, and (d) the video recording of the students presenting their results in class.

Part of the lesson was also covered by thorough discussion in the target language of their favourite cartoon or action movie superhero/heroine. During the discussion, the students explained which particular traits of superheroes/heroines attract them when they read comics or watch action movies. Apparently, the ability to fly, which is a super power that Superman and Storm from Marvel comics have, was their favourite.

### *Design of the teaching intervention*

The present study was conducted within a sociocultural framework for which action research was implemented, since the classroom was shaped to achieve a social or political goal (Stotsky & Mall, 2003), namely to portray superheroes/heroines as helpers who offer their valuable and powerful assistance to a society in need. The overall organization of the teaching intervention is built on an *introductory phase*, a *main phase* and a *follow-up phase*. A more detailed description of each phase is provided in the sections that follow.

### *Introductory phase*

The *introductory phase* was kindled by a task included in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade English textbook, according to which, the students were expected to match famous cartoon heroes/heroines with actions highlighting their ability to run, fight, fly, etc. in the superlative form. Taking into account the level of the students and their competence in the English language, the task was adapted not only to improve their linguistic skills, but also to promote and enhance critical thinking. Therefore, in accordance with the standards that had been set for the students, the introductory phase commences with the following incentive question: “*If there were superheroes in the world how would they be able to help humanity?*”

The above question motivated independent thinking and enabled them to reflect on the importance of constructing social identity through unconditional offer. Following this, a brainstorming activity helped elicit students’ answers as to how heroes could offer their services to the community and to people in need. Some of their suggestions included:

- The rescue of a school/forest/church from a big fire
- Helping children who are being bullied at school
- Visiting hospitals to entertain and offer gifts to sick children
- Helping wild animals hunted by poachers
- Offering help to homeless people

- Recycling/ cleaning beaches and parks
- Volunteering to help elderly people

Unexpectedly enough, the students' responses exceeded the number of anticipated answers for the full year calendar. In fact, more than twelve answers were proposed in response to the question set by the instructor.

### *Main phase*

The objective of the classroom intervention was to enable students to deal with multimodal/multisemiotic resources of meanings in a critical way by deconstructing the role of superheroes/heroines in comic books or action movies, since their usual representation favours the projection of stereotypes where superpower is always portrayed through images of violence and eternal fights with cruel and ruthless villains, who, however, also make superheroes/heroines lose their sensitive and weak side, thus serving as negative role models, although children seldom become aware of this fact.

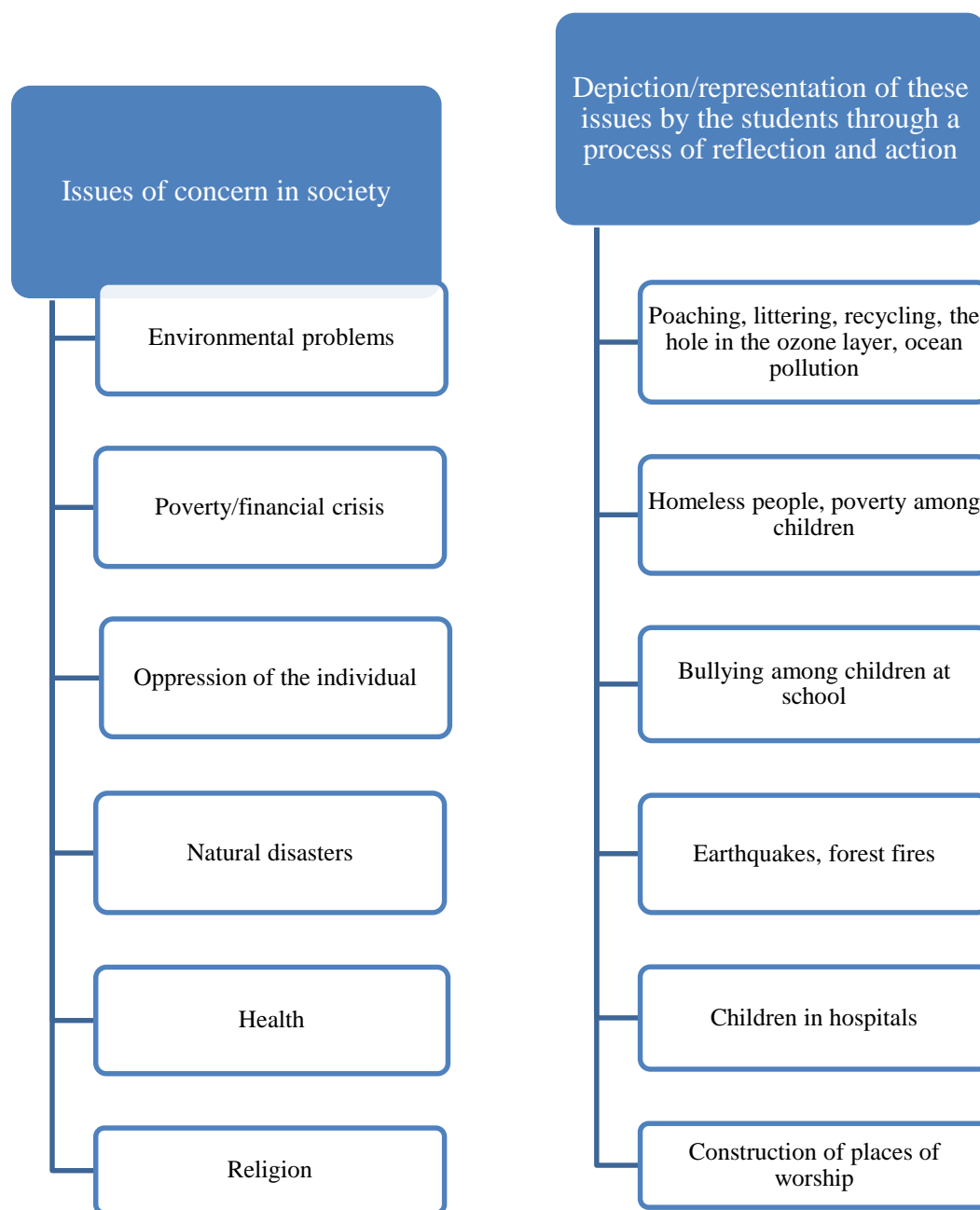
During the *main phase*, a template of a calendar page was given to the students which would be used for their own compositions. Work was conducted in pairs so as to improve interpersonal relations and collaboration among students. The students chose their partner based on a simple criterion, namely the classmate they felt more comfortable to work with. Since there are eighteen students in class and the calendar consists of twelve pages, some of the students were asked to work on more than one page. Following this step, the name of each month was written on a slip of paper and then placed in a basket. The students closed their eyes and pulled a paper out of the basket, thus being assigned the month they were going to work on. Some students insisted on preparing the "June" calendar page with a view to discussing World Environment Day celebrated on 5<sup>th</sup> June and then suggesting how planet Earth can be protected. Some others insisted on being assigned the "December" calendar page, because they wanted to show their compassion for poor children who do not get any presents during Christmas festivities. In order for conflicts to be avoided, the same basket was used as an aid to conduct a lottery. While students were working on their respective calendar page, the instructor assumed the role of a facilitator who offered help with the vocabulary but also suggested how the characters could be sketched out effectively.

Based on the ideas elicited during the brainstorming activity in the *introductory phase*, the students then proceeded to the visual articulation of their original thoughts for the composition of the calendar pages.

In Figure 1 the cells on the right-hand column represent how the students visually articulated the heroic deeds in their compositions, for instance, Pink Panther participates in a beach recycling project or Batman acts in the service of religion by saving the Easter eggs from a destructive earthquake.

### *Follow-up phase*

The *follow-up phase* included video-recording of the students while they were presenting their compositions in the target language that is English. Upon completion of the class calendar, the outcome was shown to the other sixth grade students and then it was publicly displayed in the staff room. This way, the communicational framework of the project was clearly defined and the students realized that their accomplishment was not merely for the sake of fulfilling the teacher's expectations, since it would be visible to the entire school community (Vasquez, 2004). Furthermore, the *follow-up phase* included feedback from the teacher concerning the end result, in addition to the evaluation of the teaching process which was provided by the students.



**Figure 1** Correlation of social issues and the representations of the superheroes engaged in heroic activity for the full year calendar

## Results

The following section focuses on the critical multimodal/visual analysis of the compositions produced by two out of the nine pairs of students participating in the intervention, based on the assumption that they constitute the most representative samples with respect to the construction of humane identities of superheroes/heroines, tested in

everyday, realistic situations where their superpowers are summoned for the benefit of society in need.

The analysis of the students' compositions in the present study relies on the principles of 'visual grammar' by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) – in the light of a critical literacy point of view – taking into account the way in which the semiotic options of students reflect specific socio-ideological values and positions concerning the identity construction of the compassionate and charitable 'non-human' who offers his/her mercy to those human beings bearing up under trials emerging from the current socio-political situation, in particular the financial crisis.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) visual images and visual 'products', such as paintings, photographs, diagrams, posters, etc., are constructed within a specific socio-cultural context and are defined by their own culturally related grammar. In short, taking as a point of departure Michael Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978), Kress and van Leeuwen argue that a theory of visual communication, which they term '*visual grammar*', rests on the ability to represent events and happenings of the world including the people experiencing them (*representational/ideational function*), to comprehend interpersonal/social relations (*interpersonal function*) between the producer of a sign and the receiver of the sign and to interpret compositional arrangements allowing beliefs and ideologies to emerge through the ways texts cohere (*textual function*). Therefore, the blend of 'heroic' and everyday reality is efficiently depicted via the implementation of intermodal synergies, so that the intended messages in the students' compositions are manifested in concise visual representational practices complemented by meaningfully cohesive and functionally effective verbal utterances which actively engage the receivers with the social profound meanings inherent in the texts.

### *Analysis of the students' compositions*

As far as the visual element of composition A is concerned (Figure 2), the interaction of the two represented participants, that is the homeless person and the snowman, starts from the extended arm of the snowman towards the homeless person who is crouching on the pavement. This is a *unidirectional transactional action* where a vector –the imaginary oblique line joining the outstretched wooden arm of the snowman and the homeless man – connects the two participants, the *Actor*/snowman and the *Goal*/homeless man. On the other hand, the *Goal*/homeless man does not return this act of generosity physically through a reciprocal gesture, but only verbally by saying "Thanks!", thus implying the scepticism by which the human population has been seized regarding the motives of those who help. The *Goal*/homeless man has been placed on the left-hand side of the image, thus acting as information 'Given', representing the social reality the recipients of the message are already familiar with; the world suffers from the financial crisis. The *Actor*/snowman is the 'New' element in this structural representation by being placed on the right-hand side, thus displaying new visual information for the reader/viewer of the message, who is required to pay special attention. The saviour, in the face of the snowman, relieves the hardship of this homeless man by offering his scarf.

With respect to the *gaze* of the two participants, despite the absence of eye contact between the represented participants, it is a '*demand*' picture since the homeless person – as portrayed by the text producers – directly addresses the viewers, thus shaping a kind of pseudo-interpersonal relation through which he 'demands' the attention of the viewer and evokes his/her compassion and empathy. On the other hand, due to the fact that the snowman does not have real eyes but buttons, his gaze cannot be clearly defined. However, the nose points to the homeless person resulting in the formation of a second vector which consolidates the effort of the snowman to support the homeless man and sympathise with him.



Another important detail concerning the spatial arrangement of the two participants is that the *Actor*/snowman has been foregrounded whereas the *Goal*/homeless man is in the background. Furthermore, the snowman, the non-human with a consciousness, has been portrayed as oversized compared to the homeless person, thus highlighting his physical and emotional superiority as signs of reinforcement of the superhero identity. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), this element in the composition is called *salience* and it is crucial in order to attract the viewer's attention to varying degrees.

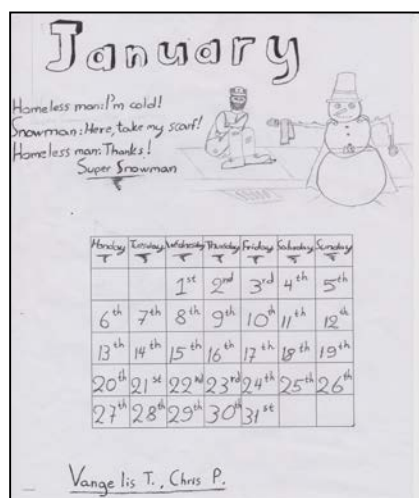
This interaction between the homeless person and the snowman has been placed in a particular *Setting*, the streets, alluding to the difficult economic situation of a significant number of people, not only in Greece, but all over the world. Furthermore, the homeless man has been placed in front of the sewers, thus alluding to the destitution he has been reduced to due to the financial crisis and the wretchedness following from this situation. This can also account for the choice of *oblique angle* for the representation of the homeless man, since he is detached from our own world which does not resemble this bleak reality. On the other hand, the snowman has been depicted from a *horizontal frontal angle* in order to involve the viewer with respect to the problematic issue of the financial crisis. Furthermore, through the choice of the *frontal angle* the snowman, the superhero, encourages the viewers of the image to take action by realizing that what is being viewed is part of their own world, therefore they should not be detached and stay indifferent, but assume responsibility and not expect superheroes to redeem people from poverty and misery. All in all, two viewpoints are encoded in composition A through the choice of different angles, thus allowing the viewers to identify with either one.

Taking into account the modality markers defining a picture, this particular image would be placed on the low end of the scale with respect to *colour saturation* due to the absence of colour. A similar effect is achieved through the absence of a background for the viewers to focus on the represented participants, since they carry the informational load of the transmitted message. On the other hand, what seems to increase the modality of the image is the elaborate detail used for the *representation* of the two participants, for instance the patches on the clothes of the homeless person, his unkempt beard or the buckle on the snowman's belt, where the initials **SS** stand for **Super Snowman**, or the knots on the branches of the tree representing the arms of the snowman. In this sense, this image is abstract in terms of *colour* and *(de)contextualization* markers, but naturalistic in terms of the marker of *representation*.

One final point that should be made about composition A is that for the arrangement of the visual and verbal components the *horizontal axis* has been used positioning the verbal text (Appendix A) on the left, since the conversation taking place between the homeless man and the snowman can be considered as information 'Given', in the sense that without the visual representation it would have been a very ordinary dialogue between two people, not necessarily a poor and a rich person, but also between a mother with her daughter, two friends, etc. On the other hand, the visual text has been positioned on the right as information 'New', because this scene is unrealistic, not only because snowmen do not talk or move, but also because it is customary for human beings to put their scarves around the necks of snowmen in real life, in films and books. In terms of size, both texts are equally distributed on the page. Still, the salient element of the page is the drawing which could have existed on its own, without being complemented by the verbal information, since the message transmitted to the reader/viewer does not require any clarification through the accurate use of vectors and gaze.

The second composition that is going to be analysed is the December calendar page, since it is also about poverty and neediness, although apart from the elements they have in common, the representation of the social situation differs from composition A in many respects. As with composition A, the super heroine in the image of composition B has been placed on the right, suggesting that aid coming from a non-human is 'New' information,

something that the readers/viewers of the visual text are not familiar with. Additionally, due to the fact that the heroic attributes should be emphasized, Santa Claus fairy is bigger in size than the rest of the represented participants, and has also been placed higher than the young children in the image since she has been elevated with the help of the wings, thus giving an impression of superiority and exaltation. Two of the young children, the one with the orange dress and the green jumper, have been depicted from a *high angle* since they are depicted as small and insignificant subjects when seen by the viewers of the image, a fact which enhances the element of poverty and hunger emphasized in the verbal text, a detail which, however, is not portrayed in their attire. This depiction consolidates the position of the young children as 'others', as non-members of our own world by virtue of their inferiority in terms of their social and financial situation. This notion of 'otherness' is also intensified by the choice of *long shot* to portray the represented participants and enhance the idea of *social distance* between the receivers of the message and the represented participants.



**Figure 2** Super Snowman: Compassion towards homeless people

According to the principles of 'visual grammar', the image can be interpreted as a *Circumstance of Accompaniment*. More specifically, there are four distinct participants in the image who, however, are not connected by vectors, apart from the young girl with the purple T-shirt who seems to be joined to Santa Claus fairy with the wand, as if she has been chosen to receive the grace of the heroine. The Santa Claus fairy is depicted frontally and three young children accompany her in a *Setting* that cannot be clearly defined, since it could be the living room of a house, a hospital lobby, a school classroom, etc. No participant is doing something to another participant, therefore, it can also be interpreted as an *analytical* picture, where the distinct elements that constitute the drawing –the Christmas tree, the presents under the tree, the Santa sack, the stockings hanging at the window –contribute to the festive atmosphere emanating from the picture and offer to the viewer/reader of the visual text descriptive information about this time of year rather than about what fairies do.

For practical reasons, i.e. the desire of the text producers to expand the drawing on the upper part of the calendar page, the verbal text has been displaced, although it is quite crucial for the comprehension of the visual message, which otherwise could have been used merely as a Christmas card or a drawing in a children's notebook accompanying a text about Christmas. It is worthy of remark that in composition A the linguistic text did not have a similar function, because the detail in representation narrowed down the open-endedness of signifieds. This collaboration of the visual and verbal semiotic system shows how both modes can work together very effectively for the production of a coherent multimodal text characterized by *intersemiotic complementarity* (Royce, 2002). Consequently, the viewers and

readers of the multimodal text realize that what is represented in images and what is represented in the linguistic text complement each other to communicate the intended message and the effect of this *intersemiotic synergy* produces a result which, as a whole, exceeds the sum of each modality contribution (Royce, 1998 as cited in Unsworth, 2006).

The content of the verbal text (Appendix B) directly addresses the readers, who are encouraged to help poor children in the world, through the use of the modal verb 'should' ("*We should help poor children in the world*") and the imperative as a closing statement ("*Help poor children, help all the world*"). A similar effect is achieved through the *gaze* of both Santa Claus fairy and the children who directly look at the viewers of the image from a *frontal angle* and involve them visually in the situation as if salvation depends on them, too. The gaze and the frontal angle in this '*demand*' picture are used as emphatic devices similar to the modal verb 'should' and the imperative in an effort to seek the viewer's help and recognition.

From the point of view of composition, it has already been mentioned that in terms of *information value* the information that is 'Given', that is the Christmas tree which signals the beginning of this festive period of the year, has been placed on the left, whereas the Santa Claus fairy in the role of the heroine, whose powers have been summoned to help poor children, has been placed on the right, taking the place of information 'New'. As far as *salience* is concerned, Santa Claus fairy attracts the viewer's attention through her open wings, her size compared to that of the children, and the fact that she has been elevated, so that her superpower, namely the ability to fly, can be highlighted. Furthermore, the magic wand creates a strong vector with the young girl with the purple T-shirt and the top of the Christmas tree, thus uniting the 'non-human' world with ordinary human beings and earthly pleasures. Finally, it should be noticed that the composition also involves *framing*, since an imaginary dividing line could have been placed vertically to separate the left part of the drawing from the right part. The left zone with the tree and garlands could have existed on its own as a plain representation of Christmas, thus signifying earthly pleasures and season's festivities taking place all over the world in December. On the other hand, the right zone is dominated by the presence of Santa Claus fairy who takes us to the realm of the non-human, although she is surrounded by young children. The blank space between the tree and the scene with the other represented participants acts as a powerful framing device to disconnect the two worlds, without weakening the overall effect of the composition as a whole, though.

One final remark concerning the image of composition B should be made with respect to the colours. Colours are dynamic and influential semiotic resources used as motivated signs to express the intentions of the sign makers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002, 2006; Nodelman, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2011). It goes without saying that from the wide range of semiotic affordances offered via colour analysis, the complexity of the relation between the signifier and the signified as well as the intended viewer of an image is culturally specific and ideologically charged. In this composition, pink and green seem to be the dominant colours. Green is a significant semiotic choice since it is associated with hope and with rare exceptions, like silver and red, it is the traditional colour of Christmas trees. In this composition it has been used extensively, not only for the representation of the Christmas tree, but also for the curtains, the jumper of one of the children and quite a few of the squares in the calendar grid. As for pink, it has been chosen for the dress of Santa Claus fairy, thus automatically signalling a tone of femininity which is stereotypical in Western culture, for instance it is the colour chosen when girl babies are born and the formal dresses that Barbie dolls usually wear. This shows that the text producers –both female– have been widely affected by popular culture and cultural stereotypes and pink has also been chosen to colour the top squares on the calendar grid to signify their feminine social identity. All in all the composition conveys an air of 'femininity' inherent in the choice of vivid and lively colours and also an ambience of festivity, signalling the cheerful and merry atmosphere of the Christmas holidays.



**Figure 3** Santa Claus fairy: Offer of gifts to poor children in the world

The final remarks regarding both compositions as a whole revolve around the information value of top and bottom, namely what has been positioned as the 'Ideal' and the 'Real' in concrete zones so that the reader/ viewer of the intended messages draws concrete information from the constituent elements spatially arranged in the visual or bimodal composition. As has already been mentioned, during the *main phase* a template of a calendar page was given to the students to enable them to design their compositions. In composition A the Ideal, the upper zone of the image, is realized through the image/ language blending, since apart from the visual interaction of the homeless man and the Snowman, the dialogue precedes the visual text. As for composition B, the Ideal is realized only through the use of image, since their visual text is not as concise as that of composition A, therefore more space was required. What is represented in both compositions, however, is an ideal image of everyday reality where social problems can be eliminated due to the aid of superheroes. The zone of the Real which presents more specific and down-to-earth information uses a plain, everyday calendar to mark days as they go by, still playing partly a symbolic role concerning the passage of time when interpreted intersemiotically, since we all hope that the future can be promising and bring changes in the lives of all those who suffer.

## Conclusion

In the words of Gunther Kress (Kress, 2000, p. 337), the essence of multimodality can be summed up as follows:

"It is now impossible to make sense of texts, even of their linguistic parts alone, without having a clear idea of what these other features might be contributing to the meaning of a text".

The present study proves that through the functional interaction of the visual and verbal mode, the students developed a metalanguage applicable for the design of their own intermodal meanings in order to communicate specific versions and ways of viewing social reality, constructed variously by the texts which they encounter. As designers of meanings/signs they particularly relied on the interpersonal relations established with the viewers/readers of their multimodal texts, utilising the 'visual grammar' metalanguage to a

satisfactory degree for the transmission of profound social messages and the balanced attribution of power to male and female 'superheroes/ heroines'.

Furthermore, the analysis of their compositions, demonstrates that contextual knowledge can be effectively encoded and communicated through textual coherence in both modalities, since the purpose of the study was to enable the students to exhibit both critical and visual skills, through which the idea of active citizenship would be substantiated, but also to evaluate their linguistic skills in this meaning-making bimodal process. Apparently, the students' verbal texts demonstrate accuracy in their use of grammar, syntax and vocabulary, which to a certain extent was facilitated by the instructor, and also skills in the production of a variety of genres. The texts analysed here are examples of conversation and persuasive speech articulated for the purpose of social reform, similar to those speeches found in political protest marches. Among the texts not analysed in the present study, one can also find small poems, reports, short bios of the superheroes, etc.

Finally, the instructor took into account prior knowledge of the students so as to enhance literacy motivation and productive literacy practices with a view to facilitating the 'deconstruction' of cliché depictions of superheroes in comic books or action movies and the 'reconstruction' of a superhero's profile in mundane, realistic situations. Consequently, 'space' was created to attain a transformative pedagogy through 'fusion' of popular culture and schooled literacy (Millard, 2003) and to refrain from curricular mandates, oriented primarily towards the cultivation of literacy as a neutral and technical skill. Through this 'fusion', it is revealed that EFL teaching does not only revolve around language teaching, but affective and social factors are also taken into account so that an EFL classroom enhances independent learning, critical thinking and autonomous text production, demonstrating a complex and strong sense of social identity.

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## Appendix A

### *Conversation between the homeless man and the snowman*

Homeless man: I'm cold!

Snowman: Here, take my scarf!

Homeless man: Thanks!

## Appendix B

### *Text encouraging citizens to offer help to poor children in the world*

We should help poor children in the world. They are poor and hungry. They are cold and need a home. Santa Claus Fairy brings the gifts for Christmas night. Clothes, food, toys and books to help them with their education. Help poor children, help all the world.

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