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TEACHING WITH MULTIMODAL TEXTS THROUGH A CRITICAL LITERACY LENS WITHIN AN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM CONTEXT
НАВЧАННЯ З МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНИМИ ТЕКСТАМИ КРІЗЬ ПРИЗМУ КРИТИЧНОЇ ГРАМОТНОСТІ В КОНТЕКСТІ КЛАСУ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ

This article explores the role of critical framing in selecting and using multimodal texts in an English as a Foreign Language classroom to engage students in the larger world and shed light on human experiences and contemporary global issues. Specifically, we invite educators to explore language and literacy practices using multimodal texts that can provide opportunities to examine implicit and explicit biases and power relations in the portrayal of global and cultural issues. We ground this discussion of cultural responsiveness in addressing pertinent contemporary issues using multimodal texts in critical literacy and multimodal semiotics within an English as a Foreign Language classroom context.

Keywords: critical media literacies, multimodal texts, culturally-responsive pedagogy, English language learning, EFL.

У цій статті досліджується роль критичного фреймінгу у виборі та використанні мультимодальних текстів у класі англійської мови як іноземної, щоб залучити студентів до більшої спільноти та пролити світло на людський досвід і сучасні глобальні проблеми. Зокрема, ми запрошуємо викладачів досліджувати практичне використання мови та грамотності за допомогою мультимодальних текстів, які можуть надати можливість дослідити приховані та явні упередження та відносини влади у зображенні глобальних і культурних проблем. Ми обґрунтовуємо це обговорення культурної залучення у вирішенні актуальних сучасних проблем, використовуючи мультимодальні тексти в критичній грамотності та мультимодальній семіотиці в контексті вивчення англійської мови як другої.

Ключові слова: критична медіаграмотність, мультимодальні тексти, культурно-чутлива педагогіка, вивчення англійської мови, EFL.

Globally-Oriented Language Teaching and Learning

In 2023, educators around the world are facing the tremendous challenge of responding to the unprecedented geo-political tensions, social and political unrest, the rise of autocracy and dictatorship across the world - all against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurasia Group, 2023). By definition, language learning is globally-oriented (Johnson, 2018), and being multilingual enables students to engage with international communities at home and abroad. Given the unmatched influence of the English language as a medium for global communication (Xue & Zuo, 2013), English teachers world-wide stand on the frontline of connecting their students with international communities that represent humanistic values. Many open-access

resources in English encompassing various information modes reflect the diversity and complexity of contemporary lived experiences and cultures that educators must critically consider and account for in the curriculum and within asset-based, student-centered pedagogies. Although the multimodal resources available have an immeasurable potential to educate, include, and represent (Anderson et al., 2017; Archer, 2014), they risk essentializing human experiences and inadvertently contribute to cultural, language and other forms of oppression in the absence of intentionality and criticality (Strekalova-Hughes & Peterman, 2020). With over 60% of the 10 million most popular internet sites published in English (Bhutada, 2021) and two billion consumers of social media predominately using English (Ségal, 2021), English language teachers need to be particularly aware of forces that produce and reproduce social inequalities in multimodal texts and teach their students to evaluate each text critically.

In this manuscript, we examine the role of critical framing in selecting and using multimodal texts in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom to engage students in the larger world and shed light on human experiences and contemporary global issues. Specifically, we invite educators to explore language and literacy practices using multimodal texts that can provide "mirrors" and "windows" into multicultural experiences (Bishop, 1990) and dismantle a "single story" (Ngozi Adichie, 2009) in the portrayal of global and cultural issues. We ground this discussion of cultural responsiveness in addressing pertinent contemporary issues using multimodal texts in critical theory and multimodal semiotics within an EFL classroom context.

The Role of Critical Media Literacy Instruction in English Language Development

Following the principles of critical pedagogy outlined by Freire (1994), planning culturally-responsive lessons using open-access resources entails evaluating multimodal texts for power relations, curricular justice, and cultural depth. Therefore, we assert that intentionality in selecting textual resources for teaching English as a Foreign Language necessitates a conscious effort to critically examine dominant ideological models and embrace the complexity of disparate human experiences. Even lauding of cultural practices in various modes of information may imply assumed

superiority of the "Western" way of life because such praises highlight other countries' similarity to universalized values of the "West" versus "East."

Applying criticality to analyze multimodal texts for intrinsic biases and engaging in critically framed classroom discussions to expose the relations of power in texts is both a cultural and linguistic practice that has deep consequences for promotion of social justice and equity. In addition, planning language production and comprehension activities that invite and include student voices is a pedagogical task of paramount importance. Research indicates that students feel invisible when teachers neglect opportunities to tap into students' experiential and cultural diversity (Booth et al., 2003). However, critical literacy instruction that involves multimodal texts facilitates student-centered learning in an EFL classroom and makes textual analysis more authentic and relevant for the students (Meyrer & Kersch, 2022).

Multimodality refers to making meaning by bringing multiple modes (or units of meaning such as text, color, image, sound) together to be more than the sum of their parts (Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2003). In doing so, one can convey meaning or understanding in the most apt way (Kress, 2003). Furthermore, including multimodal texts and projects allows students and teachers to push back on traditional notions of what counts as literacy practices within a classroom, countering well-establish power dynamics inherent to the systems of education (Stewart, 2017). This shift in the power dynamics is critical for EFL learners as multimodal literacy practices are likely to provide more possibilities for leveraging students' strengths, their lived experiences, and sociocultural knowledge that are often ignored or unseen in traditional literacy practices (Ajayi, 2011).

Integrating critical media literacy instruction into an EFL classroom challenges traditional approaches to language instruction and provides students with additional analytical tools, vocabulary, and metalanguage to notice multimodal elements and to describe, critique and create authentic multimodal texts. Scholars have long-touted the benefits of including multimodal texts (defined broadly) for EFL instruction (e.g., Bezerra, 2011; Liu & Qu, 2014). For example, Sakulprasertsri (2020) worked with 10 EFL teachers in Thailand who collectively had over 300 students, finding that including multimodal texts in their courses improved learning and engagement

significantly for students. The ways in which the texts are designed are essential. In their study examining multimodal textbooks for EFL students, Liu and Qu (2014) found that creators need to consider students' English proficiency and the interplay of the modes for ultimate intersemiotic complementarity to engage the learner.

As all texts are human-designed, they are imbued with bias and represent the experiences of the author(s) and larger societal influences that the authors align with and support. Martikainen and Sakki (2021) illustrate this connection through their rhetorical and visual analyses of the Finnish media coverage of the response to COVID-19 in Finland and Sweden. When examining the role of visual and semiotic resources and their interplay in the recontextualization of the health crisis in the two countries, the authors highlighted Finnish media's ingenuity in using multimodal complementarity to demonize COVID-19 policy in Sweden while propagating the Finnish national health strategies as superior through a purposeful selection and ordering of powerful rhetoric, images and elements of visual design. It is therefore essential that students critically examine biases and inequalities of power as they relate to multimodal text production and interpretation   to engage with the texts and world more meaningfully. Thus, we assert that critical media literacy (CML) is essential for all consumers as they begin to navigate and understand the implicit and explicit biases within texts. According to Share and colleagues (2019):

- CML promotes an expansion of our understanding of literacy to include many types of texts, such as images, sounds, music, videos, games, social media, advertising, popular culture, and print, as well as a deepening of critical analysis to explore the connections between information and power (p. 8).
- For those working with multimodal texts, understanding the ways in which the modes serve to explicate ideas together, whose voices are present, whose are missing, the social and political importance of those elements in tandem.

Interrogating and Reinventing Multimodal Texts

Kellner and Share (2019) developed a set of conceptual understandings to open spaces for criticality around texts, which we take up here. The framework provides probing questions to critically examine the authors, intentions, and implicit/explicit bias of texts. Doing so provides insights as to the social implications, politics of

representation, and power dynamics within and around that text. We use Kellner and Share's (2019) framework to demonstrate how to prompt critical responses from English Language Learners and guide them in the development of more equitable perspectives while bringing into the learning process their own lived experiences and cultural identities.

To briefly illustrate these complex interrogations, we examine the digital, multimodal text "The evolutionary advantage of the teenage brain" (https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/evolutionary-advantage-teenage-brain) where authors Murdock and Wheelock (2020) biasedly discuss the seemingly innocuous neuroscience of brain development during adolescence using print-based text, audiovisual media (e.g., embedded YouTube video), memes, GIFs, and references to popular culture. This multimodal text may be compelling to EFL learners in part because of the non-linguistic semiotics (images and sounds) present (Yi, 2014). The audiovisual components serve as embedded scaffolding to enhance comprehension by building connections between linguistic forms and meaning. The multimedia article also provides multiple, non-linear points of entry, as learners may begin by reading the text, reviewing the visuals, or viewing the video, reflecting an opportunity for differentiated instruction.

Questioning *who are all the possible people who made choices that helped create this text* can provide insights as to the motivations, bias, and social contexts in which the article was created. In the text hosted in the news section on a university's website, there is a distinction between the "author" (Murdock) and "video creator" (Wheelock) though both appear with a university-affiliated email. Questioning *how was this text constructed and delivered or accessed* positions the reader to review the content critically to better understand the intent of these authors. Despite the university affiliation of the authors and website, the article does not seem intended for academic audience, as it includes accessible language, humor, cultural references, and the aforementioned multimedia not typically found in academic publications. Therefore, the reader can surmise a layperson audience intentionality based on the multimodal construction of the text. This audience would also be of a certain age and culture, as discussed next.

We can further interrogate this article with the questions *How could this text be understood differently* and *What values, points of view, and ideologies are represented or missing from this text of are influenced by the medium?* Throughout the article, the authors utilize memes and GIFs that portray characters from *Star Trek*: Spock is the personification of the prefrontal cortex in the brain (i.e., logic and caution), and Captain Kirk represents the limbic system (i.e., emotions and impulsiveness). The authors' choice of characters highlights how culturally entrenched multimodal texts may be, reflecting the values, preferences, and assumptions made regarding readership. These references may enhance understanding if learners have experiences or background knowledge with *Star Trek* but may also pose a challenge for learners who are unfamiliar with the references, reflecting potential generational and cultural differences.

Opening spaces for readers to question the ideologies in the text as well as *whom this text advantages and disadvantages* can elicit insights from learners that are informed by their lenses, experiences, and backgrounds. Teens are positioned as out of control animals by the adults who created this article, even being compared to chimpanzees, clearly positioning them at a disadvantage and reflecting the ideologies of the authors (and perhaps even the university). In a critical classroom, students may consider how this text may read if created by different authors to reflect other cultural references and ideologies.

Culturally-responsive Multimodal Literacy Practices

In this manuscript, we argue that in the era of cultural and linguistic globalization, critical multimodal literacies provide unique affordances for English language teaching and learning. Multimodal texts often possess embedded scaffolding for language development through the combined use of text and non-linguistic semiotics while providing affordances for culturally responsive practices that focus on students, their experiences and cultures. Critical media literacies can open spaces for EFL learners to go beyond grammar and vocabulary acquisition and explore and redesign communications in the global community. By participating in CML practices, students are engaged in student-centered language learning that can lead to authentic and culturally-responsive language competence.

Encouraging readers to critically examine how texts could be understood differently based on contextual factors and students' culture (e.g., age, funds of knowledge, socio-political position) as demonstrated above, prompt students to read the world by increasing their sensitivity to discourses that promote inequality and reinvent texts to be more equitable from the position of their own experiential and cultural diversity (Ajayi, 2015; Freire, 1970). Furthermore, in building culturally responsive teaching within the EFL classroom, including multimodal texts has the capacity to bridge the gap between the in-school literacy practices with out-of-school literacy practices when situated within students' lives and their connections to local and global communities (Tan & Guo, 2009). The implication includes intentionality of EFL practitioners in the selection, creation, or recreation of multimodal texts within instruction taking into account learners' interests, aspirations, lived experiences, and cultures.

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