

The Fugue of the Five Senses and the Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

Selected Proceedings

from the 11th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society



editors:

Evangelos Kourdis
Maria Papadopoulou
Loukia Kostopoulou

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The Fugue of the Five Senses. Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

EDUCATION & SEMIOTICS



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Greek students' ability to retrieve information from EFL multimodal texts

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore Greek-speaking, elementary students' familiarity with multimodal texts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), which, besides language, consist of visual information, such as images, diagrams or other typographic features. In particular, it probed into students' ability to retrieve information from multimodal texts before and after a teaching intervention. Another aim of the study was to investigate the maintenance of comprehension gains after treatment withdrawal. The study, quasi experimental in design, involved an experimental group that received the teaching intervention and a control group that received no such training but participated in the pretest, posttest and follow-up measurements. The sample of the study consisted of 99, 11 to 12 year old, Greek-speaking EFL learners. The tool used to elicit the data was an informal reading comprehension test, which was constructed by the researcher and included a multimodal text. The results of the study showed that the performance of the experimental group was significantly improved in the posttest and follow-up measurements when compared to the performance of the control group. The above findings indicated that Greek elementary students are not used to working on multimodal texts in EFL, which require attention to all the available modes of conveying information in order to construct text meaning. The pedagogical implications of this study are further discussed and the need for further research is pointed out.

Keywords

Semiotic modes, **Multimodality**, **EFL Reading Comprehension**, **Reading Strategies**

Introduction

The advent of the digital era, the multiplicity of communication channels and the cultural and linguistic pluralism of contemporary societies have all led to reconsider the limits of literacy, which involved teaching and learning to read and write in printed forms, and create new kinds of literacies, Multiliteracies, which allow for a multimodal way of deriving meaning (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001; New London Group, 2000). The term multimodal involves a mixture of the various semiotic modes of communication in which the linguistic mode of meaning is associated with the visual (such as images, screen formats), the gestural (body language), the spatial (environmental and architectural spaces), or the audio mode (music sound effects) that individuals can combine to derive meaning, though one mode may prevail over the rest (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; New London Group, 2000). The process of meaning-making (designing) includes drawing on the available resources for meaning (the available designs), while the result of Designing is a new meaning (the Redesigned), which meaning-makers arrive at themselves (New London Group, 2000).

Reading in any language is a cognitively demanding task requiring the combination of many comprehension processes; reading in a second language (L2) can place even greater difficulties allowing for dual language involvement, language deficiencies, and inappropriate strategy use (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Comprehension emerges, when the reader uses a variety of reading strategies, extracts information from the text and combines it with prior knowledge (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Reading strategies are seen as deliberate and conscious actions characterized by intentions and selected goals, which can be explicitly taught (Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005; Psaltou-Joycey, 2010).

As a result of the technological development, the inauguration of the digital era, and the globalization, people, especially youths, are exposed to a variety of multimodal texts -both print and digital- such as comics, websites, video games, advertisements, and graphic novels that mainly involve a complex interplay of linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial elements (Kress *et al.*, 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Unsworth, 2001). Thus, meaning-making in written texts is an increasingly multimodal process (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Therefore, educators should reconsider their instructional approaches and draw on the multiliteracies pedagogy to familiarize students with the various semiotic modes to construct meaning during text interaction and meet the communicational demands of the era.

Based on literature review, it is highlighted that multimodality can boost literacy learning, especially among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, who may face extra difficulties in L2 reading, such as L2 linguistic deficiencies or first language (L1) involvement (Koda, 2005; Macaro & Erler, 2008), since it goes beyond language and promotes alternative ways to read and interpret texts (Ajayi, 2009). However, researchers

held that little attention has been paid to multimodality in L2 contexts (Dominguez & Maiz, 2010; Kress, 2000; Royce, 2007). While there are some studies that investigated the aspect of multimodality in terms of EFL text (e.g., Bezerra, 2011; Royce, 2002), EFL textbook analysis (e.g., Astorga, 1999; Chen, 2012; Song, 2005), teachers' views (e.g., Karchmer, 2001; Meskill & Mossop, 2000; Petrie, 2003), and students' interpretations (e.g., Ajayi, 2009; Early & Marshall, 2008; Walsh, 2003), there is a dearth of research on experimental studies involving explicit reading strategy instruction in multimodal texts. The concept of reading strategies has so far been associated only with texts in which language is the only mode (available design) to derive information (e.g., Aghaie & Zhang, 2012; Dabarera, Renandya, & Zhang, 2014; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Zhang, 2008) with the exception of Manoli and Papadopoulou's study (2013) that focused on teaching students how to use reading strategies in EFL multimodal texts indicating improvement in their reading performance.

In this context, the main aim of the study was to explore Greek students' ability to find information from EFL multimodal texts before and after a teaching intervention as well as a few months after intervention withdrawal. It was expected that:

- Greek primary students would not be familiar with deriving information from EFL multimodal texts
- their performance would be improved after the teaching intervention
- their comprehension gains would be maintained after intervention withdrawal.

Method

Research design

The study, quasi-experimental in design, consisted of experimental and control groups, a teaching intervention conducted only in the experimental group, and three measurements, a pretest, an immediate and delayed posttest measurement carried out in the experimental and control groups. To examine the immediate and delayed effects of strategy instruction on students' reading performance, quantitative data were collected through a researcher-constructed test administered to both groups before and after the teaching intervention as well as three months after the intervention withdrawal.

Participants

99 Greek students, 46 boys and 53 girls (aged approximately 11-12 years old), who came from four different schools in a provincial town of central Greece, Trikala, participated in the study. The students were attending the 6th grade of the state primary school –each school consisted of two classes– and were learning EFL (their language proficiency was A2 level according to the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001)).

Teaching intervention

The teaching intervention conducted only in the experimental group and lasted four teaching hours (approximately 40 minutes each hour) one teaching hour per week. It focused on promoting the use of reading strategies in multimodal texts, such as getting the gist (skimming) and locating specific information (scanning), and teaching students how to draw on both linguistic and visual modes to find information and answer comprehension questions. Namely, during the instructional sessions, the students were explicitly taught how to draw on diagrams, tables, maps, visual typography and words to identify patterns of meaning.

Four multimodal texts were given to the students during the teaching intervention. More specifically, the first text included two tables, the second text consisted of linguistic information, pictures and a diagram, the third text was a two-page extract from the comic *Asterix the Legionary*, and the fourth text was a floor map of the Victoria and Albert museum in London. Each text consisted of reading tasks, which were mainly multiple-choice, true/false and short answer-questions. Whenever students answered an item, they were asked to justify their choice providing evidence from the texts to avoid instances of guessing.

Data collection instrument

A researcher-designed reading comprehension test, which included a multimodal text and comprehension questions, was used as a pretest, posttest, and follow-up measure to explore the immediate and delayed effects of the strategy instruction on students' possible reading behavior change and improvement. The text consisted of a floor map of the British museum in England and some notes following the map, and was accompanied by three reading comprehension tasks that were designed to assess students' ability to combine information from both linguistic and visual modes. Namely, the students had to combine information from the notes with the corresponding number on the map, while also paying attention to the colors of the various departments of the museum (since each department was depicted by a different color on the map and in the notes) and then match all these pieces of information to answer the comprehension questions correctly. In addition, students had to apply the reading strategies of skimming and scanning in order to answer the questions efficiently. A combination of multiple-choice and short answer questions was used to check different aspects of multimodality indicating a preference for items that permit objective scoring (Hughes, 2003).

It should be mentioned that this test was part of a broader reading comprehension test that was constructed to promote reading strategy use and aspects of multimodality. The broader reading comprehension test consisted of one multimodal text –described above– and two linguistic texts that were used to probe into the use of the following reading strategies: activation of prior knowledge, development of graphic organizers, prediction, skimming, scanning, and contextual guessing and were part of a research project on the contribution of strategy instruction to Greek EFL students' reading performance.

Data analysis

In order to explore if EFL students' ability to derive information from multimodal texts had been affected by the teaching intervention, the quantitative data collected from the pretest, immediate and delayed posttests were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. In particular, the results of the study were based on the analyses of Repeated Measures of ANOVA, Further Univariate Analysis of Variance, and paired T-Test.

Results

To further explore the immediate and delayed effects of the teaching intervention on students' performance, a series of Repeated Measures of ANOVAs were conducted using the group (experimental-control) as the between subjects independent variable and the scores of the multimodal texts (ReadAP1, ReadAP2, ReadAP3) in the three different measurements as the dependent variables. The results of Repeated Measures of ANOVA indicated that the main effects of time, $F(2, 194) = 73.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .43$, and group, $F(1, 97) = 25.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$ were statistically significant, as well as the interaction between time and group factors, $F(2, 194) = 27.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$. Further Univariate Analysis of Variance with group as the independent variable has shown that the difference between the two groups was statistically significant only after the intervention in favor of the experimental group, $F(1, 98) = .02, p > .05, \eta^2 = .00$ (ReadAP1-pretest measurement), $F(1, 98) = 66.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .41$ (ReadAP2-posttest measurement), and, $F(1, 98) = 20.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ (ReadAP3-follow-up measurement). Concurrently, the application of paired T-Test demonstrated that difference in comprehension scores in the experimental group was statistically significant between the pretest and the posttest measurement, $t(49) = -12.28, p < .001$, between the pretest and the follow-up measurement, $t(49) = -10.29, p < .001$, and between the posttest and the follow-up measurement, $t(49) = 2.22, p < .05$. The means and standard deviations of the performance of both groups in the test (ReadAP1, ReadAP2, ReadAP3) in the three measurements of the study are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Performance of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Reading Test in the three Different Measurements

Group		Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
		ReadAP1	ReadAP2	ReadAP3
Experimental (n=50)	Mean	7.21	18.19	16.87
	SD	6.31	4.44	5.52
Control (n=49)	Mean	7.03	8.82	11.07
	SD	6.46	6.75	7.26

Discussion

The findings of the study indicated that Greek primary students were not used to working on multimodal texts in EFL, as their reading performance was significantly improved after the teaching intervention. In essence, the teaching intervention was effective enough to make a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and immediate post-test scores, which was, in fact, maintained in the delayed posttest measurement, verifying the initial research hypotheses. The results of this study were concurrent with Manoli and Papadopoulou's study (2013) that have also indicated improvement in students' ability to get information from multimodal texts and their overall reading performance after a teaching intervention focusing on aspects of multimodality and reading strategy use. In this way, it was found that teaching EFL students *how* to take advantage of the different modes (available designs) of a written text improved their ability to derive information from multimodal texts using reading strategies.

Overall, there should be a shift of interest from literacy in its traditional term to the development of multiliteracies to help students meet the communicational demands of the era (Kress *et al.*, 2001). As contemporary texts are designed in a highly multimodal way and the process of constructing meaning (designing) increasingly draws on a variety of semiotic sources (the available designs), the old basics of education, which mostly emphasized literacy, needs to be supplemented by multiliteracies, which allow for a multimodal way of deriving meaning (Kress *et al.*, 2001; New London Group, 2000). These suggestions are highly important for EFL students when trying to comprehend written texts, since they are frequently faced with linguistic difficulties (Koda, 2005; Macaro & Erler, 2008). Depending on other available modes of communication in a text besides the linguistic and using various reading strategies can help students derive meaning from texts, retrieve the desired information, answer comprehension questions efficiently and enhance EFL learning (Ajayi 2009; Early & Marshall, 2008).

Since most of the research on strategy training in a L2 mostly includes linguistic texts (e.g., Aghaie & Zhang, 2012; Dabarera *et al.*, 2014; Macaro & Erler, 2008; Zhang, 2008), this study breaks new ground in this field by exploring reading strategy use in multimodal texts in which the linguistic mode is intertwined with the visual one to help students construct meaning. After all, researchers supported that little attention has been paid to multimodality in L2 contexts, simultaneously, stressing the need to extend students' communicative competence beyond the traditional, linguistic view and emphasize multimodal communicative competence (Dominguez & Maiz, 2010; Kress, 2000; Royce, 2007). Of course, more research is needed to provide further evidence.

Conclusion

According to the results of the study, the performance of the experimental group was significantly improved in the posttest measurement, while the comprehension gains

were maintained in the follow-up measurement when compared to the performance of the control group. The above findings are very important for the literacy pedagogy, as they are indicative that instructing students to use reading strategies and take advantage of all the available semiotic modes of contemporary texts, which are highly multimodal, can help EFL students construct text meaning (Kress *et al.* 2001; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Unsworth, 2001). In this context, teaching in a strategically and multimodally aware manner helps students comprehend text content and further develop literacy (Walsh, 2003). Therefore, the semantic field of reading should be expanded in order to promote an active, flexible, strategic as well as multimodal way of approaching EFL reading materials.

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