

Utilizing Visual Literacy as A Communicative Discourse in the English Classroom: A Case Study

Nicole Haddad

Abstract—When utilized within a classroom space, visual literacy can prove to be an effective communicative tool, particularly in instances where there may be language barriers. Visual literacy can play a substantial part in eradicating these barriers in its application of symbol to word, and thus symbol to meaning, so as to allow for the coalescing of a non-English speaking student into an English classroom. Visual literacy's presence in an English classroom proves its ability to modify modes of communication, making the acquisition of meaning accessible to all persons involved, thereby providing opportunities for varied interpretations of mainstream English to allow for the inclusion of non-English speaking students. Visual literacy demonstrates that it deserves a place in the English classroom, and could work to benefit both the English teacher and the non-English speaking student.

Index Terms—Communication, discourse, education, language, linguistics, semiotics, syntax, visual literacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Visual literacy is an omnipresent and universal discourse, written, communicated and read in multiple contexts. It is presented through varied modes, such as street signs, graphic novels, advertisements, and through *mis-en-scène* in movies as well as in theatrical productions, acting as an independent representation, inviting the potential for differing inferences.

Aside from being a signifier, it provides opportunities for communicative benefits in the intersecting with Education, particularly in the field of English. Kress [1] describes this communication not as the equivalent of words, rather as a form of grammar in itself. This is to say that visual literacy is a form of standalone discourse, and does not stem from a mode, but has modes stemming from it, thus acting as a precursor to languaging through images.

Saussure [2] states that this languaging is a form of written image, hinting that the reader of this image may interpret a form of syntax, an arrangement of words, from the semiotics, the signs and symbols they are viewing, further illustrating visual literacy's presence and its ability to display, communicate, and provide opportunities for varied interpretations.

These abilities are pertinent to the teaching of English, as the world we live in is known to be multilingual, multicultural, multimediated, and at times, heteroglossic [3]. This means that society is filled with multiple viewpoints, with the assembly of meanings varying based on the many

forms of comprehension. Given this, the teaching of English must be adapted to suit our world and its varying contexts, considering the persons we teach come from all forms and walks of life, cultures, experiences and understandings. In the same way that the world is adaptable and provides for the harmonious thriving of these persons, so too must the communication to, from, and within these persons.

Visual literacy thus holds the potential to provide additional ways of sharing, ingesting, and expressing modes of thought.

II. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

A. Visual Literacy

Visual literacy is described as the ability to interpret meaning through graphic stimuli, composing of depictions or representations of familiar objects, and provides an alternative way of knowing, promoting higher order thinking and problem solving [4]. If anything, visual literacy provides means for thinking laterally, given there is a stimulant that entices the viewer to embark on said thinking. Essentially, it is a form of communication delivered through signs and symbols, and can prove to be mimetic: a form of imitation [5]. This is to say that because visual literacy is mimetic, it is ontogenetic universal, in that it is an inborn gift which manifests itself in most every human being, from a young age [5].

Humans begin communication with making sounds, and develop an *active vocabulary*, which then progresses into being represented by drawings. These drawings are then means for the plotting and connecting of images to ideas, which then is followed by the connecting of these images and ideas to sound, or phonics, derivative of phonemes, the act of sharing language formulations built on representations of ideas [6]. In essence, the developing human uses visual literacy as a communicative tool to aid their ways of speaking, thinking, and understanding.

It is said that the process by which forms are pulled from memory and transmuted into image is not characterized as thinking [6], however it is a means of the output of thought. If thought is represented linguistically, and thought is represented artistically, both of these representations will sustain the effects of being malleable, in that what is initially represented will not be carried in its initial form from representation to viewer. This form is never limited to the image, or the narration [7]. It is in this sense that visual literacy is standalone, and an additive in the process of the acquisition of concepts, and can offer the viewer more fluidity in ideation than text, in its structural display, can.

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Nicole Haddad is with the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Australia (e-mail: nicolehaddad1991@gmail.com).

B. Sign, Signifier, Signified

Saussure [2] states that when language is reduced to its essentials, it is a nomenclature; language, in this sense, yearns for the need to apply corresponding terms to things. To communicate, then, in language, is to share the corresponding terms representing things, in order to express the represented thing. This communication is performed in languaging through signs.

A sign, though, is not limited to a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound [2]. This means that visual literacy could have a complexity in its surrounds, in that a representation may contain many links: the sign links to its corresponding thing, and a sound is applied to articulate this link. The complexity is expressed further when one takes into account that the sign does not always link to the singular corresponding thing, which means then that the applied sound of articulation could differ. It is in this sense that visual literacy is ubiquitous, for its many interpretations are not limited to the singular locale of thing. For example, if an image of a ruler was to be shown to two persons: a student, and a mathematician, the ruler, or the sign, will signify something different for each person, so what is signified will differ. In the case of the former person, they may think of the ruler in a practical sense, in that they may use it to create straight lines. In the case of the latter, however, the ruler could come to represent many things in the contexts of mathematics, such as timelines or measurements. While the former may think of the ruler in practicality, the latter may think of it numerically. The sign therefore will mean something different to varied persons in varied contexts, causing a complexity. In this case, the sign is open for multiple interpretations, which is a commonality in the exploration of visual literacies.

However, one must keep in mind that though a sign is open to multiple interpretations, the sign can be identified similarly, if it is that the sign is natural [2] within a society. Take an example involving a symbol of a book. To a scholar, it could come to represent knowledge. To a writer in the same society, it could come to represent stories. But both scholar and writer will name the sign a 'book'; in the example of the ruler, it can be considered by the mathematician to conceptually differ, such as seeing it as a tool, rather than the student seeing it as an instrument. In another society, another scholar could come to interpret the book as power, and another writer may interpret it as a deadline. This is to say that the meaning of the sign will also differ from society to society. Visual literacy, then, is fluid.

C. Educational Deixis

In the study of Linguistics, deixes come to represent expressions whose prototypical function is to contribute to definite reference [5]. The term 'deictic' comes from the Greek, 'to show directly' [5], which means that deictic expressions demonstrate their object.

If one were to apply deictic thought to educational spheres, one would come to find that the concept of representation can be better acquired if students are guided to the concepts in rapidity, so as to allow time for them to generate their own interpretations of these concepts.

It is said that the deictic field consists of the combined

dimensions of space, time, person, perception, discourse, and perspective [5], meaning that languaged exchange can vary because of these combined elements. Take the example of two teachers with the same lesson plan, and differing classrooms. There will be many factors constituting the inheriting of knowledge between these two classrooms, as the two teachers, though they have the same lesson to deliver, will deliver them in varied ways inherently because of these factors. Specifically, the time of day in which these lessons are taught could vary, playing a different effect on the students in these two classes. The lessons delivered could vary in nature, depending on either of the teachers' teaching styles. The classroom could play an effect, if the class is an open-space classroom, or a dull classroom compared to a brightly colored classroom with visual signposts hung on its walls or from its ceiling. In addition, the discourse shared from teacher to class can vary depending on the students within, or the teacher themselves and the ways in which they communicate, or the classroom expectations they have, or may not have in place.

These factors will change the nature of the delivery of these lessons, thus the deictic dynamics in each class will alter, even if both teachers set out to achieve the same outcome with the same lesson plan taken into consideration; the classes may reach the same outcome, but their journeys will be significantly different.

Visual literacy has the ability to play a part in these contexts, through symbolism. Symbolism is defined as the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them in a direct manner, nor defining them through overt comparisons with concrete images, but by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of open, unexplained symbols [8]. This means that through interpreting symbols, the reader is exercising their ability to be a deictic thinker, a thinker who associates thing one to other things, which inextricably both link to thing one, as well as define it in their individualized perspective. This is beneficial in the classroom, particularly in the English classroom, where multiple viewpoints are welcomed, but not always reached.

Students struggle to draw meanings from certain contexts, and now educators are beginning to recognize the value of using multimodal texts to teach meaning-making through symbolism [9]. This is of importance, as thinking laterally is a trait that all students should hold, for if they do not, they are constrained to adopting the thoughts and beliefs of their teacher, and all those around them, instead of crafting their own based on what they come to know from what they are taught. This is the same with the interpretation of a symbol. Students need to autonomously, within the realm of guidance, form their own beliefs so as to come to their own conclusions. It is said that facts and right answers are not enough, for it is imperative for students to also employ what they know as steppingstones to their own discoveries [10]. This means that while it is valuable to be factual, it is even more valuable to think further than what is true, or what is false.

It is said that the written is for one to think, yet art is for one to use [11]. The combination of both, thus, can prove to be quite powerful to the student. This is why visual literacy has been described as an *additive*; it is not in the interests of visual literacy to be the dominant form of literacy, rather a

form of literacy, and one accessible to all learners.

In the case of deixis, however, visual literacy can create the link between reference and ideations, and can encourage an expanse of ideations rather than a singular idea, in the openness of its interpretation. It should be in the interest of the teacher to create an educational space which allows for the interpreting of visual deixes, in an attempt to ensure their learners think laterally and in individualized ways.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Research Brief*

While on my first round of school placement as a pre-service teacher, I was exposed to varied pedagogical methods I could utilize to maximize students' potentiality in the learning of English. I came to notice that in a particular instance, one student was uncooperative during English classes. Upon inquiry with the classroom teacher, I came to find the reasons why, and I decided to implement the use of visual literacy as a way of attempting to get the student to contribute. The result of this led me to recognize the benefits of visual literacy within an English classroom.

B. *Student A, Student B and Student C*

A mainstream third-grade English classroom was observed over a period of three weeks. It was noted during these three weeks of observation that a particular student, who will be referred to Student A, was seated, motionless and speechless during most of the day. Student A would not partake in any classroom activities, and would not contribute to classroom discussions. Student A was hypothesized to have a learning difficulty, however that hypothesis was inconclusive due to the fact that Student A's competency was never tested. In addition, it is worthy to note that despite this hypothesis, the classroom's teacher aide's focus peculiarly never was drawn to Student A.

Upon further investigation, through verbal exchanges with the teacher of the classroom, it was known that Student A had just moved to Australia from China, and their family was too poor to afford them a place in a specialist Chinese school that would ease them into the acquisition of the English language. The teacher of this class, in the meantime, thought it best to keep Student A in their classroom without any language support, regardless of the fact that Student A had no conception of what was going on around them. The teacher thought it to be a consolation that Student A would be seated with Student B, a Vietnamese student, so that they could communicate with one another. Unbeknownst to the teacher, however, it was discovered that Student B could not effectively communicate with Student A, simply because of the language barrier evident to the students, but not the teacher; student B could not speak Chinese, and merely communicated in signs and gestures.

It was observed that Student A momentarily flicked through picture books from the classroom library. Student A would scan over the text, and take some time observing the images within. They would repeat this throughout the day, with English tasks piling up in front of them.

In order to try to integrate Student A into the English

language while they waited to be transferred to the specialist Chinese school, Student A was placed in an experiment created for this paper. They were trialed over the course of the following two weeks, and partook in basic phonic and visual literacy activities.

Through conversing with Student B, it was found that Student C was in fact a Chinese speaker, and in the same dialect as Student A. Communication henceforth was made through Student C to Student A.

C. *Visual Literacy Experiments*

Student C, over the course of two weeks, was able to communicate activity ideas to Student A.

The first was an activity wherein Student A was given a sheet of illustrated everyday objects starting with each letter of the alphabet. Student A was required to replicate the given sound that each letter made, was given the Chinese translation of the sign of the everyday objects, and had to trace the English word. After these were complete, Student A was shown ways in which each of the words were pronounced in English, and attempted to pronounce them.

In the second activity, Student C was asked to help Student A make any connections from their life to any of the picture books in the classroom library. Student A took their time to find one, and they returned to their desk with Joanna Cole's *I'm a Big Sister*. It was hence discovered that Student A was able to make the connection to the fact that they were the oldest sibling to a younger brother. Student A was then assisted to read the words, connecting the sounds they discovered in the first activity, in order to learn and identify words and their meanings, and was taught how to connect certain key words to key parts of the story, for example, when the word 'brother' appeared, the picture of the baby boy was pointed out to Student A for them to make the connection.

This was a breakthrough in the activity, as it was only until after Student A was able to personally connect to the book that they were immersed in the activity. The first activity, in juxtaposition, was not all too well received, as Student A may have found it arduous to memorize several objects and the way they are written and spoken.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In taking extra measures to ensure that all students had a fair and equal opportunity to learn, it was discovered that Student A was not benefitting from attempted conversations with Student B, who spoke a different language to Student A. This made initial communication organized by the classroom's teacher unrealistic, and difficult, which then contributed to Student A being left out of classroom activities. By investigating further, it was found that another student, Student C, could speak the same language and in the same dialect to that of Student A. Student C then took Student B's place in communicating necessary activity tasks that this paper explored. After this exchange, Student A was able to communicate, and partake in coming to understandings.

Student A benefitted from being exposed to visual literacy. They were able to make connections from sign, to sound, to meaning, and in the span of two weeks, learned English-related phenomes in order to sound out letters of the

English alphabet, and eventually, some words. In addition to sounding some words out, Student A was able to make connections to the words, displaying their ability to draw inferences from symbols, albeit the fact that they were in an English mainstream classroom, and they were not speakers nor readers of the English language. Despite this truth, Student A, after being exposed to two visual literacy experiments, demonstrated a student's ability to progress in a linguistic space with the aid of visual literacy.

It is said that we are always speaking, even if we do not utter a single word aloud, but merely listen or read [12]. This is to say that while Student A may not have appeared to be active in the classroom because of the multiple language barriers they were faced with, they were still thinking. It is therefore the job of the educator to practice inclusivity in a more ethical manner so as to ensure this thinking is productive, and relevant. In the act of two simple differentiated activities, this paper was able to demonstrate that a student behind the hurdle of a language constraints, was able to make connections and feel as though they are a part of their cohort, albeit for the short amount of time they would spend within it.

The teacher, in this instance, must have thought literature, in all its delivery, to be pertinent only to the English language. The teacher failed to understand, however, that literature is a conglomeration of ideas, wrapped up in a form [13]. These ideas are not limited to a singular language, nor are they only tied to the idea of literature itself. Visual literacy allowed for Student A to connect to *a* literature, whereas the teacher wanted Student A to connect to *the* literature, meaning that there was no room for varied interpretation or communication of the English discourse. The teacher thus displayed a preference to constraining students to working in replication to her desired educative outcomes, in parallel lines, rather than allowing for educative divergences [13]. This restricts and limits the student, and this was certainly the case with Student A, in that Student A was forced to assimilate in the mainstream English classroom until they were no longer required to be there, despite their obvious inability to speak, read or write in English. It was therefore found to be more rewarding for Student A when they were *immersed*, rather than assimilated.

It is said that one is not able to exercise intellectual activity without the help of the imagination [14]. Student A's imagination was impaired by their teacher's inability to properly cater for their individualized needs. Chen [15] states that there are four ideals for the supportive classroom:

1. A positive attitude towards children's first languages and their contribution to the classroom
2. Frequent opportunities for classroom interaction between the teacher and the individual child
3. Planned opportunities for meaningful interaction between peers
4. Bilingualism and biculturalism as overall objectives

Ideal 1 was not met, as the teacher failed to acknowledge Student A to the extent where Student B was not the correct lingual fit needed by Student A for general and basic communicative purposes.

Ideal 2 was also not met, in that Student A was merely left under the care of Student B, who, though they tried to

communicate, was ultimately unable to due to the language barrier.

Ideal 3 calls for meaningful interaction between peers, but was not met due to the fact that there was a language barrier between Student A and Student B.

Ideal 4 calls for the need for bilingual support through a transitional approach, which was ultimately not offered to Student A—it would seem that the teacher was merely waiting for time to pass, whereby Student A would eventually end up in the Chinese specialist school.

All four ideals were met in the two activities performed with Student A, with the help of Student C. Ideal 1 was achieved in that Student A was able to have their actual language acknowledged by being paired with Student C. Ideal 2 was achieved by Student A receiving one-on-one interaction for this paper in the process of the two activities. Ideal 3 was achieved in the simple act of pairing Student A with Student C instead of with Student B, and ideal 4 was met in that Student A was exposed to learning activities which were inclusive of *both* Chinese *and* English, and not just English alone. This meant that biculturalism was catered for, too.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

It has been found, hence, that visual literacy could contribute means for the creation of a metalogue, a discourse space allowing for all participants within to adopt an open disposition to learn with and from one another [15]. Metalogues hence open the possibility of utilizing what the other is without; in this case, Student A is without the language that Students B and C are accustomed to. Hence, the metalogue adopted from visual literacy strategies, or the incorporating of the picture book and the translation of its symbols, benefited Student A.

Visual literacies can count as metalogues, as within them, multiple forms of communication of meaning can be exchanged, resulting with the acquiescing of a singular meaning; in the case of Student A, Student C was able to provide lingual means to create a communicative discourse, opening the possibility for the transferal of understanding, despite the language barriers; this was aided with the help of visual literacy, in that symbols were used to transfer meaning through a field of varying languages, converging into a shared understanding. This could come to mean that if visual literacy strategies are incorporated, English classroom settings can, potentially, successfully house both English and non-English speakers, granting both of these learners a means of shared communication, as well as a mode of understanding.

An English classroom that houses a metalogue could also come to achieve Chen's four supportive classroom ideals [16], particularly the ideal wherein a positive attitude is shown towards a student's first language, as well as their contribution to the classroom, despite the dominant language in that classroom. This is to say that visual literacies break down dominance of a language to cater to diverse speakers. To welcome another language into an English classroom is to accept English as *an* language, not *the* language, hence highlighting the importance of communication, rather than a particular language. Visual literacy thus allows for one to

adopt a mode of communication, despite the language barriers in their direct vicinity, enabling them to immerse themselves in conversation and the understanding of key concepts, albeit *sans* the knowledge of the initial language of communication.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Visual literacy, when utilized in a classroom space, can prove to be an effective communicative tool, particularly in instances where language barriers are in place. Visual literacy, in this case, plays a substantial part in eradicating the barrier so as to allow for the coalescing of a non-English speaking student into an English classroom in its ability to help build understanding based on its transferal of symbol to word, symbol to meaning, and meaning to understanding despite the languages involved. It is an omnipresent and universal discourse, which can be written, communicated and read in multiple contexts. It presents opportunities for communicative benefits in the intersecting with education, particularly in the field of English.

Visual literacy's presence and its ability to display, communicate, and provide opportunities for varied interpretations demonstrates that it deserves a place in the English classroom, a space where communicative finessing, expressing and growth is fostered. In an ever-developing, heteroglossic world, visual literacy holds the potential to provide additional ways of sharing, ingesting, and expressing modes of thought, particularly at times where the expression of such modes are hindered by certain factors.

This paper has come to find that visual literacy ultimately allows for the harmonious communicative thriving of all persons, in multiple contexts. It has also come to find that once a teacher is open to the idea, visual literacy allows for the catering for students with additional needs within a classroom.

As a pre-service teacher, the exploration of ways in which this can be achieved can be experimented with, and performed, and these explorations can be used to inform future and current teachers, as well as my own future practice. It is imperative that these explorations are taken into account, as multiple perspectives in education can prove to be beneficial to both teachers and students, as well as both of their experiences in the sharing and communication of a variance of epistemological contents.

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Nicole Haddad was born in 1991 in Melbourne, Australia. She received her B.A. (Hons) in literature and visual arts from Victoria University, Australia, 2016.

She attends varied literature conferences, sharing her research around the intersecting of English, literature and the arts, specializing in education, visual literacy, linguistics and trauma studies. She currently researches communicative visual discourses, and their place in the

English classroom.

Ms. Haddad is a member of the Golden Key International Honour Society, and is finalizing her first academic publications. She is currently studying her M.Teach. in English and visual arts and design at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and aims to pursue her Ph.D in the near future.