

ENERGIZING STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH MULTIMODAL TEXTS

Resky Januaryy

Graduate School, Sebelas Maret University, Indonesia

Email: kiky.january@gmail.com

Hanna Novariana Azizah Nima

Graduate School, Sebelas Maret University, Indonesia

Email: hana.novariana16@gmail.com

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Abstract

Teaching and learning process is an essential aspect of a successful English teaching and learning. Reading skill is one of the language skills in English which gives a huge input to the learner. Nevertheless, it is mostly found that reading material and its exercises examine explicitly of what have been learned. Recently, multimodal texts become more popular in educational aspect especially the use of multimodal text in the teaching and learning reading. Multimodal text is a text that contains semiotic mode which covers gesture, visual image, document, layout, music, architectural design, etc. This study interviewed 10 Junior High School students and 1 English teacher regarding the use of multimodal text in reading class. The design of the study was a qualitative descriptive study which investigates the use of multimodal texts in teaching learning process in Indonesia compare to other countries. This study is expected to have a deeper insight and significant contribution for the English pedagogy.

Keywords: Reading, comprehension, multimodal, text, visual, images

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, reading texts in the high school are often multimodal, meaning they incorporate a variety of modes, including images, hypertext, and graphic design elements along with written text (Serafini, 2011). Expanding the perspectives students use to make sense of these multimodal texts is an essential part of comprehension instruction.

Multimodal texts are inherently associated with digital technologies because in many digital texts, different modalities, aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic come together to construct meaning. Multimodal literacy is about understanding the different ways of knowledge representations and meaning-making, understanding discourse by investigating the contributions of specific semiotic resources such as languages, gestures and images, using various modalities such as visual and aural elements to create meaning and understanding how various modalities co-work to construct a coherent text. (Eksi & Yakisik, 2015). Other definition about

multimodality is stated by Kress (2010) as a framework that requires a collective interpretation of two or more scripts, visuals, videos, graphics, animations, sounds, music, gestures and facial expression for producing meaning.

Moreover, in educational contexts, more progress has been made in identifying strategies required to comprehend written text than in identifying strategies to comprehend multimodal texts. Research has shown that particular cognitive strategies such as visualizing, summarizing, asking questions, and predicting are successful in supporting readers' comprehension of written texts (Sweet & Snow, 2003). In conjunction with this body of research, pedagogical frameworks for teaching cognitive strategies have been proposed (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Santman, 2005). However, the visual images contained in multimodal texts, picture books in particular, require readers to use different strategies for constructing meaning than the aforementioned cognitive strategies. Unsworth and Wheeler (2002) asserted that if

readers are to understand how images represent and construct meaning, they need knowledge of the various visual sign systems (e.g., photography, diagrams, graphs, typography, illustrations) used in their production and interpretation. In addition, Dalton and Proctor (2008) noted that research is needed to develop a “more robust model of comprehension that reflects the dynamic nature of texts”. As students encounter multimodal texts with greater frequency, they and their teachers will need to develop a metalanguage for discussing the aspects of multimodal texts and the strategies used to understand them (Zammit, 2007).

Rose (2001) distinguished three modalities that can contribute to a critical understanding of images, namely, (1) technological—any form or apparatus designed to be looked at, (2) compositional—formal structures or strategies, for example color, spatial organization or content, and (3) social—the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image. Rose (2001) noted how some methodologies focused on the image in and of itself. This focus on composition, color, spatial organization, and light suggested an image’s expressive content or the combined effect of visual form and subject matter. Although she acknowledged, “visual images do not exist in a vacuum, and looking at them for ‘what they are’ neglects the ways in which they are produced and interpreted through particular social practices” (Rose, 2001), viewers still needed to consider what was presented or rendered in an image and the structures and modalities that were used in creating images before proceeding to interpretation and ideological analysis.

Research indicates that using multimodal texts contributes to students’ use of cognitive skills and increases their creativity, attention, participation and production (Callow & Zammit, 2012). Walsh (2010) suggests that the use of multimodal texts in language skills courses changes the nature of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The use of multimodal texts

not only changes in the process of teaching a class, testing and evaluation, participation in courses but also the roles of teachers and learners (Walsh 2010: 222). Introduction of hardware, software and the Internet does not guarantee technology integration to classrooms. The teachers need opportunities to make use of multimodal literacy in their own lives before integrating them effectively to their teaching practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). To this end, teacher training programs should involve knowledge and skills to integrate multimodal literacy to their practices.

The perceptual analytical perspective focuses on the literal or denotative contents of an image or series of images in a multimodal text, the elements of design, for example borders and font, and other visual and textual elements of these texts. Focusing on visual images, Beardsley (1981) suggested, “a picture is two things at once: it is a design, and it is a picture of (italics in original) something. In other words, it presents something to the eye for direct inspection, and it represents something that exists, or might exist outside the picture frame”. What is presented to the eye for “direct inspection,” or close attention to the literal aspects of an image, naming the visual elements of a multimodal text, and taking an inventory of its contents is the focus of the perceptual analytical perspective. Readers cannot interpret what has not been noticed or recognized. The first step in expanding readers’ interpretive repertoires is by calling attention to the elements and designs of multimodal texts that may at times be overlooked. What is being suggested here is the possibility of a denotative or pre-iconographical enumeration of the content of an image (Straten, 1994). In other words, readers create an inventory of the literal elements of an image or series of images in a picture book and use this inventory as the starting point for one’s interpretive processes. As Scholes (1985) suggested, noticing visual elements and interpreting what is noticed are sufficiently distinguishable processes for us to discuss

and teach them separately. In Stafford's (2008) terms, readers of multimodal texts need to increase their visual competence before they are able to become visually literate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading comprehension address the processes of generating viable interpretations in transaction with texts and readers' abilities to construct understandings from multiple perspectives, including the author's intentions, textual references, personal experiences, and sociocultural contexts in which one reads (Serafini, 2012). Meanings constructed during the act of reading are socially embedded, temporary, partial, and plural (Corcoran, Hayhoe, & Pradl, 1994). There is not an objective truth about a text, but many truths, each with its own authority and its own warrants for viability aligned with particular literary theories and perspectives (Rorty, 1979). Because of this, readers are empowered to revise traditional meaning potentials and challenge existing, hegemonic interpretations that pervade particular institutions (Luke, 1995). In other words, readers and viewers do not have to readily accept traditional representations of reading comprehension and instruction, rather they can disrupt commonplace interpretations and re-envision how these constructs are interpreted (Lewison, et al, 2002).

Nowadays people make meaning in a variety of ways, so the traditional notion of literacy should be extended beyond the confines of just being able to read and write. A contemporary definition of literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Hobbs, 1997). Media Literacy is an informed, critical understanding of the mass media. It involves an examination of the techniques, technologies and institutions that are involved in media production, the ability to critically analyze media messages and a recognition of the role that audiences play in making meaning from those messages.

Pennings (2002) gives a more specific definition of visual literacy: —Visual literacy is an emerging area of study which deals with what can be seen and how we interpret what is seen. It is approached from a range of disciplines that: 1) study the physical processes involved in visual perception. 2) use technology to represent visual imagery, and 3) develop intellectual strategies used to interpret and understand what is seen. Based on this definition visual images may involve body language, motion, two and three dimensional works of art, photographs and clipart, films and video, museum exhibits and dioramas, advertisements, illustrated written or verbal discourse, architecture, and visual reality experiences, and so on.

From these discussions we can see that visual literacy concern message or meaning construction. Visual literacy mainly focuses on the symbolic aspects upon which the meanings or messages are based. Just as reading and writing are essential to conventional literacy, the ability to construct meaning with images is a core component of visual literacy. The advance of technology has made it possible that the ordinary people are becoming increasingly professional visual designers, for instance, using software Photoshop to alter an image digitally, and thus given everyone the ability to join the artists and craftsmen in using visual images to express ideas and thoughts that have always been inside of us in visual forms. One point should be noted that when defining intelligence, we have come to value linguistic competence very much, and are not aware that visual competence actually precedes linguistic competence and we may say that language evolved through its connection to visual ability, visual literacy may help us to achieve the goal of linguistic literacy.

Multimodal communicates using semiotic resources across a variety of modes including visual images, design features, and written language (Jewitt, 2009). Visual images have modal affordances that support the depiction and communication of concepts and ideas in certain ways that differ from the affordances associated with written language

(Bezemer & Kress, 2008). What a particular mode, such as visual images, can communicate and represent has both limitations and semiotic potentials. In other words, written text represents ideas in different ways than visual images, and visual images and graphic design features work in different ways from written language (Kress, 2010). So we can see that every semiotic mode is a meaning momentum or potential, and multimodality mainly focuses on the study of the interrelationships between various communicative modes, no matter whether they are visual or auditory, words or image. It is a complex combination of meaning making activities that have undergone rapid changes in the contemporary social, cultural, economic and technological context. Moreover, the concept of multimodality is a useful standard to measure and evaluate the diversity ways of meaning making.

Multimodal texts, which convey information by means of various modes such as visual images, written language, design elements and other semiotic resources, are more complex than written texts. According to Kress, different logics govern the mode of written language and that of visual image: written text is governed by the logic of time or temporal sequence, whereas, visual image is governed by the logic of spatiality, organized arrangements, and simultaneity (Kress, 2003). That is, meaning is derived from position in the temporal sequence of written text, whereas meaning is made from the spatial relations or grammar of visual images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). To understand the written language, temporal sequence or order in which words appear in a sentence is very important. In visual images, the position, size, and composition of the contents of the image play a significant role in the meaning making.

Multimodal discourse analysis is to analyze how several or all of the different semiotic modes intertwine together to create a unified text or communicative event. The premise of multimodal discourse analysis is that in many domains of contemporary

writing, textual structure is realized, not by linguistic means, but visually, through layout, color, and typography both at the level of the —clause and at the level of —discourse. Actually multimodal discourse analysis has become a new trend in the studies of discourse analysis, for it focuses upon the complete communicative aspects of discourse that emerge within interaction. There are many ways to do multimodal discourses analysis, such as content analysis, conversation analysis, social semiotic analysis and so on (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). And different perspectives can be taken to analyze them, for example, layout, modality, typography, color, genre, discourse, style and so on are the angles we can choose to do multimodal discourse analysis.

METHOD

This research applied qualitative descriptive method which using purposive sampling technique. Ten junior high school students and one English teacher were selected to participate in this study regarding to their experience in the use of multimodal text in teaching and learning process in the classroom.

This study aimed to investigate the use of multimodal texts in teaching learning process in Indonesia compare to other countries. The researchers interviewed the teachers regarding to the teaching learning process in the classroom using some multimodal texts whether it can help students to comprehend the reading text or not. The students were also asked several questions about their opinions in the use of multimodal texts in helping them understand and comprehend the text.

RESULT/FINDINGS

The research of this study revealed some findings related to the use of multimodal text in teaching and learning process in the classroom especially reading skill. Several questions were asked to ten Junior High School students regarding their experiences in learning process using multimodal text.

The following descriptions are the questions and answer of the students.

1. *Q1. Do the teachers provide an interested reading text which consists of graphs, pictures, figures, etc?*

In this questions, ten students answered that the teacher sometimes provided reading texts which consist of graphs, pictures, figures, etc, but sometimes teacher just gives reading texts from the textbook which some of them do not consist of interested pictures. From the students' answer, we can come to the statement that the teachers already use the multimodal text even though it does not use in every meeting the students learning reading skill.

2. *Q2. Do you feel more interested reading a text which provides some pictures? Why?*

Ten students in this question argued that they feel more interested reading a text which provided some pictures. Most of the students answered that the text which provided some pictures are more interesting and encouraging them to read the whole text from the beginning till the end to find out the topic, main idea, or the content of the text. Otherwise, some students only focus on the pictures and try to guess the main idea or the content of the text without reading the whole passages.

3. *Q3. In your opinion, is a text which provides some pictures will help you find the topic? Please explain.*

8 out of 10 students argued that a text which provides some pictures can help them find the topic of the text easier than the text which does not contain pictures. In the other hand, 2 students argued that the text which provides some pictures does not help them to find the topic. It is just the same with the non-pictures text.

4. *Q4. Do you try to guess/predict the main idea using pictures, graphs, or figures provided? Please give a brief reason.*

8 out of 10 students argued that they try to guess or predict the main idea of a passage using pictures, graphs, or figures provided because they think that pictures represent the main idea of a passage, whereas 2 students don't agree that pictures, graphs, or figures can help them to guess/predict the main idea of a passage. They argued that they have to read the whole passage carefully rather than merely look at the pictures provided to help them finding the main idea.

5. *Q5. Do you just focus on the pictures, passages, or both? Why?*

8 out of 10 students argued that they focus both on pictures and passages in comprehending a text, whereas 2 students argues that they only focus on the passage or text and ignore the pictures in comprehending or understanding the text.

6. *Q6. Do the pictures, graphs, symbols help you to understand or comprehend the passage or whole text? Why?*

8 students argues that pictures, graphs, and symbols can help them in understanding or comprehending the passages or whole text, they said that it gives prior knowledge to the students in order to comprehend the text, whereas 2 students argued that pictures, graphs, and symbols can't help them understanding or comprehending the passages or whole text because in order to comprehend the text they have to read the whole text carefully.

Those are the answers from students who have been interviewed by the researchers regarding their experiences in learning reading using multimodal text. From the interview result, it can be concluded that students already have experiences through

multimodal text especially in reading class. Most of the students argued that pictures, graphs, or figures provided in the text can help them to guess the topic, main idea, etc. because it can represent the content of the text. It is in line with pedagogical frameworks for teaching cognitive strategies that have been proposed (Beers, 2003; Burke, 2001; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Santman, 2005). They stated that the visual images provided in multimodal texts require readers to use different strategies for constructing meaning than the aforementioned cognitive strategies. The similar finding also revealed by Unsworth and Wheeler (2002) who asserted that if readers are to understand how images represent and construct meaning, they need knowledge of the various visual sign systems (e.g., photography, diagrams, graphs, typography, illustrations) used in their production and interpretation.

Other answers from students also reveal a finding that they can guess or predict the content of the text by looking at the visual images. The visual images can represent the content of the text. It is in line with Beardsley (1981) who suggested, "a picture is two things at once: it is a design, and it is a picture of (italics in original) something. In other words, it presents something to the eye for direct inspection, and it represents something that exists, or might exist outside the picture frame". What is presented to the eye for "direct inspection," or close attention to the literal aspects of an image, naming the visual elements of a multimodal text, and taking an inventory of its contents is the focus of the perceptual analytical perspective.

Furthermore, in this research, an English teacher was also involved in the interview regarding their experiences in teaching reading using multimodal text. The questions and answers are as follows:

1. *Q1. When you teach reading skills in the classroom, from what source the text you are going to use is taken from? Why?*

In this question, the teacher answered that most of the texts that she uses to teach

were taken from the textbook which provided by the school. In addition, she sometimes takes other texts as supplementary materials which apt with the curriculum to create various ways in teaching learning process.

2. *Q2. What are the considerations that you take into account when you choose a text for teaching, especially reading?*

The teacher answered that before choosing a text for teaching, she has to consider whether the text is suitable for the students' level or not. The text that is going to be taught in the classroom must be matched with the students' level. Another consideration is the text must be apt with the curriculum standard. The last consideration but has paramount role is the text must be interesting to the students.

3. *Q3. Are those texts containing some visual images?*

She argued that sometimes the texts contain some visual images and sometimes no.

4. *Q4. Do you agree that a text which contains some visual images will be more interesting to the students? Why?*

The teacher definitely agreed that a text which contains some visual images will be more interesting to the students especially for the Junior High School level. It can attract the students to read the text because they are curious of what is the content of the text.

5. *Q5. Do you agree that a text which contains some visual images can make the students easier to comprehend or understand the passage or the whole text? Why?*

She agreed that the text which contains visual images can make the students easier to comprehend a particular passage

or whole text because they have already got some particular images that represent the text main idea that they've already have prior knowledge before reading the text.

6. *Q6. Do you agree that a text which contains some visual images can help the students to guess or predict the main idea of the passage or text? Why?*

She said yes. The students can guess or predict the main idea of the passage because pictures which provided in the text usually represent the content of the text.

7. *Q7. Do you think that a text which contains visual images can help the students to develop their reading skills? Why?*

The teacher answered yes. Because it can help the students building the knowledge of the text even though they don't know the meaning of every single word provided.

8. *Q8. Do you think that giving a text which contains visual images can help the students in developing their comprehension in reading? Why?*

The teacher agreed that giving a text which contains visual images can help the students in developing their comprehension in reading. It is one of the strategies to attract the students to find the main idea and specific information from the text by looking the visual images provided.

The answers from the teacher revealed some findings related to teaching and learning process in the classroom through multimodal texts. Reading materials in the classroom are often multimodal especially in the Junior High School. It is in line with Serafini (2011) finding who states that, "reading texts in the high school are often

multimodal, meaning they incorporate a variety of modes, including images, hypertext, and graphic design elements along with written text". Multimodal texts are found to be more interesting to use in the classroom activities.

The same research also described in Sefarini's paper (2010) who found that reading and interpreting of multimodal texts enriches the literary and visual experience and allows readers to bring multiple perspectives to their interpretive repertoires. She concluded that the challenges facing readers and teachers alike demand that she expand the analytical tools she bring to bear in the process of interpreting visual images and multimodal texts. Simply teaching elementary readers to visualize, summarize, and predict will force them to only consider the written textual elements of the texts they encounter in the society in Arizona. And move from a typographic era dominated by the printed word to a post-typographic epoch dominated by the visual image and multimodal texts, the analytical tools and interpretive repertoires need to expand to support readers in next times. To increase the methods and perspectives brought on multimodal texts expands the interpretations generated, and allowed readers to challenge the messages presented in visual images and multimodal texts.

In another similar paper "*Visual Images Interpretive Strategies in Multimodal Texts*" by Liu (2013) found that making sense of visual images in multimodal texts may pose a challenge to the readers in China, which requires them to get familiar with art, media, and semiotic theories. How the images affect them in order to explore the meaning of images and to recognize that they are produced the meaning of the story. And the traditional comprehension strategies will help expand the perspectives by readers to draw on literate when shifting from a word-dominated typographic era to a post-typographic era dominated by the visual images and multimodal texts.

Both of these papers above found the challenges in reading multimodal text in two different countries. Moreover, multimodal text can attract students to read and comprehend the text easier than the text which don't provide any visual images. It is stated by Callow & Zammit (2012) that using multimodal texts contributes to students' use of cognitive skills and increases their creativity, attention, participation and production. Those findings are similar to the finding of this study which found that the use of multimodal texts especially visual images in teaching and learning process could activate the students' creativity, attention, participation, and production.

CONCLUSION

On a final note, the research suggests the use of multimodal texts which contains visual images and other elements in teaching and learning process in the classroom as various ways in teaching especially in teaching and learning reading. By these findings, teachers are expected to learn more about the elements in multimodal text and how it can influence the teaching learning circumstances in the classroom. As the result, many teachers have been using multimodal texts but don't know about it and how much it can influence the teaching learning process. Furthermore, this study is expected to develop the students' creativity, attention, participation, and production and also suggests schools to provide many multimodal sources in the form of textbooks or supplementary materials.

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