Blogging: A multimodal perspective

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This paper documents how children embed multimodality in their journal entries using blogs. Multimodality is the combination of semiotic modes that may include spoken language(s), written language(s), static or moving images and music. Each of them generally offers opportunities for the construction of meaning. In this research, a case study approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of multimodality and meaning-making. The data is collected using classroom observations, textual analysis of similar journal topics posted by the participants, and informal interviews, or, online responses to the comments posted by the teacher, to the pupils in their entries which take the form of blog posts. Findings of this investigation suggest a need to redesign learning to allow everyone to cope with multimodality as a new form of literacy.

Keywords: multimodality, blogging, journal entries, semiotic modes, engagement

Introduction

The ubiquity of digital technology has transformed the way people work, learn, play and even communicate. While previously a text comprises mostly printed words, the definition has since then been extended to include several dimensions which moves away from the notion that language is the dominant mode in meaning-making work. Hence, in view of this, the study attempts to account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies by investigating multimodality in the journal entries of children.

Research Focus

The aim of this paper is to investigate how multimodality is represented in the journal entries of children. However, for this research, only the conjunction of images and texts were analysed as these are the representational modes that are often used by children (Sutherland-Smith, 2002).

Bearing in mind that children receive information multimodally (Bearne, 2003), the paper sought to argue for a shift towards the new literacy pedagogy by understanding the following questions:

- How do children make use of multimodality to add an additional layer of meanings in their journal entries?
- What do the images and text mean to them?

Theoretical Framework

For the analysis, two conceptual frameworks were used. The first drew on distinctions offered by the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce's model, between icons, indexes (indices) and symbols. To illustrate these concepts briefly, consider any pictorial image of a rabbit. According to Peirce (1955), this picture would be an icon if it mimetically represents a rabbit. However, if the image refers to the idea of the white rabbit, as purity, then it would be regarded as an index. On the other hand, if the image of the rabbit represents a company's trademark, then it would be considered as a symbol. In all, the three categories posited by Peirce are not separate or distinct because they "represent the world simultaneously in various degrees" (Danesi, 1994). Hence, knowledge of this classification provides a language to talk about the various types of visual representation.

Additionally, since all images are polysemic, open to endless interpretations, thus, a linguistic message has to be associated with the image. Hence, for a framework to describe children's interpretation of images and text, the distinctions presented by Roland Barthes, a French philosopher, linguist and educator were used. According to Barthes (1977), the relationships between text and image could be bifurcated as anchorage and relay. In anchorage, the text elaborates the image by directing the reader through the signifieds of the image. Nonetheless, it is possible for the image to elaborate the text such that the image forms an illustration of it. Meanwhile, in relay, the text and image are in a complementary relationship and they are "fragments of a more general syntagm" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) such as in comic strips and films. Of the two, "anchorage is most frequent function of the linguistic message" (Barthes, 1977). Nevertheless, in meaning-making, any permutations of image-text relation could exist depending on the semiotic choices that best fit the message.

Literature review

Kress (2000) found that students used different kinds of representational resources, to write their Science report. When they were instructed to explain a plant cell that they had observed, they communicated their ideas visually and linguistically through the 'orchestration of semiotic modes' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) with each mode contributing to the overall meaning. In another study, Hull and Nelson (2005) argued that the expressive power of multimodality resides in the semiotic relationships between and among different modes. While different semiotic modes attempt to encode similar content, they might not convey similar meanings for, each mode perform "different communicative work" (Jewitt, 2009) in a multimodal ensemble. In view of the subjectivity involved in multimodality, Bearne (2009) created a framework to analyse multimodal texts using analytic categories such as image, language, sound, gaze and movement. From the three examples that she studied, she found that the seven-year-old children used a combination of modes to express themselves. While the analysis were done separately for image, sound, gaze and movement, it was acknowledged that different modes work together to make meanings (Kress, 2003) as children think 'multidimensionally' (Bearne, 2005). Clearly, had language alone been used to gauge the rhetorical success of the text in this study, much learning would have been lost in making meanings.

Methodology

Research design and instrument

For this research, a case study approach was employed. Before embarking on the study, permission was sought from the school principal, and the intent of the study was explained. To comply with ethical principles (Cohen & Manion, 1994), the participants were informed that their journal entries would be collated for research purposes. They were assured that their confidentiality would be protected and that pseudonyms would be used in reporting the research data, to remain anonymous. The data are collected using field notes based on her classroom observations, textual analysis of seven similar journal topics posted by the participants, informal interviews.

Participants

The participants were three ten-year-old children in the same class. These pupils were chosen because they are regular contributors to the journal entries. Besides, each of them represents the low, middle and high proficiency group of pupils from a cohort of 240 ten-year-old children in a school.

Research Procedure

In the first few sessions, the pupils were given topics which are close to their experiences so that they would not feel daunted to write. After all the journal entries for the day have been posted onto the blogs, the teacher highlighted three interesting entries, asking each of the selected children to justify to the other pupils why he or she has included a certain image in the post. She then intervened in their meaning-making works to create greater semiotic awareness which are central to multimodal learning and development (Jewitt, 2008b). Before the children posted their entries, she showed them examples of how particular meanings could be constructed through images and text to communicate a specific idea, for three consecutive sessions. Subsequent journalling sessions ensued with the teacher initiating the topic, along with several guiding questions placed on the whiteboard, to assist the less proficient pupils in expressing their thoughts in the blogs.

Discussion of findings

From the selected journal entries, the three children combine modes to communicate meanings with rhetorical force. They express themselves visually using Peircian's 'icon', 'index', 'symbol' or by blending any of them together in the linguistic mode. However, analysis of the data shows that these children make use of multimodality differently in their journal entries, albeit given similar topic. It could be due to their awareness of the 'potential affordances' (Kress, 2003) of what a certain mode can or cannot do.

The children employed different semiotic choices, with the visual mode, being the dominant ones, to create particular meanings as in Table 1.
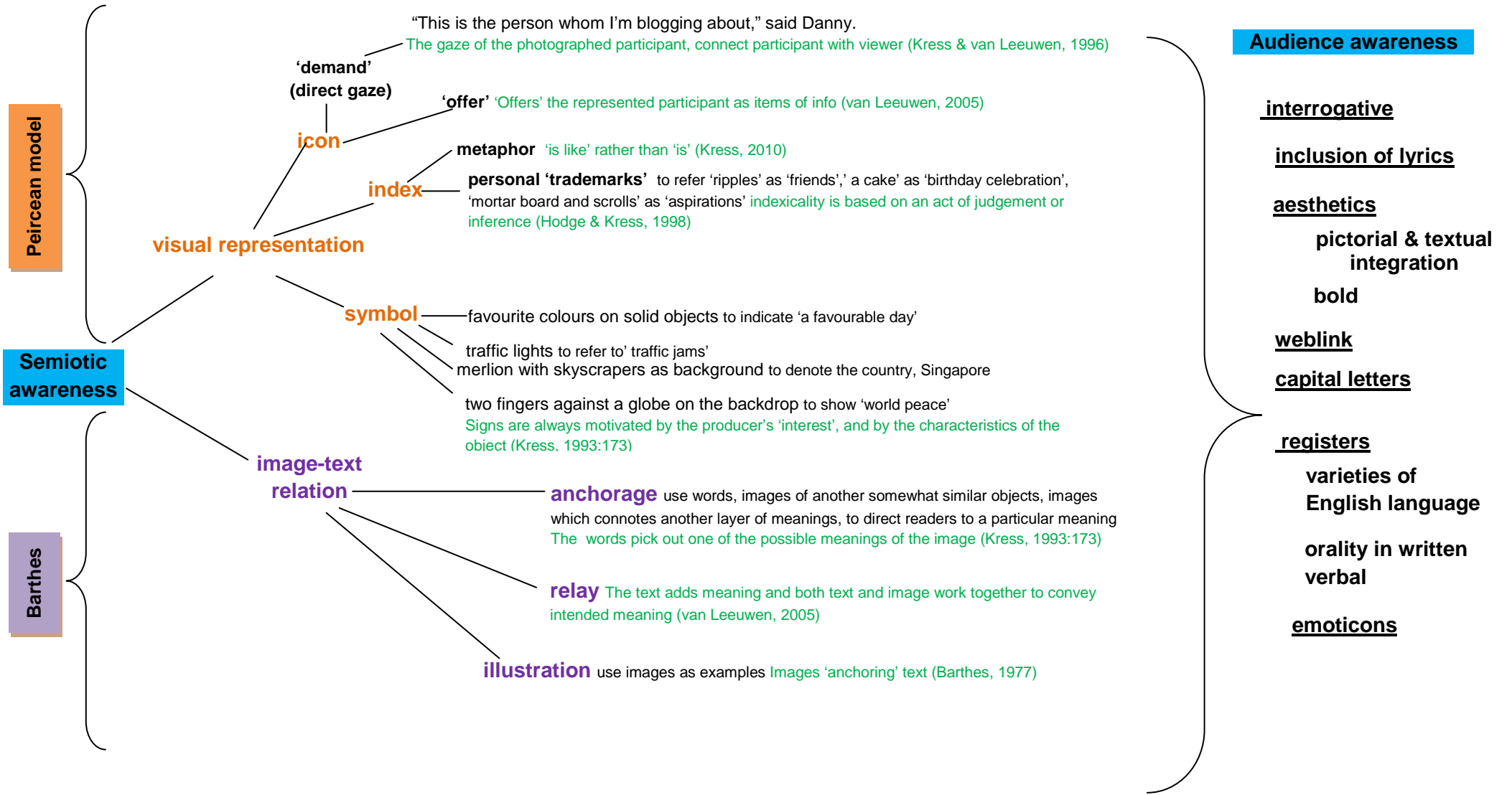
Primary data (Selected journal topics)	Codes (Inference/ Abstraction)				Discovery memos
	Modes/Pupils	Eileen	Ben	Danny	Eileen, Ben & Danny
1. What colour is Thursday?	Visual representation	Index	index	symbol	1) The three children use different modes in similar journal entries to create particular meanings.
	Image-text relation	anchorage	anchorage	anchorage	
2. My favourite song	Visual representation	icon ['offer' image]	icon ['demand' image]	icon ['demand' image]	2) They employ different visual representation modes but have common understanding of image-text relations as they make meanings.
	Image-text relation	relay	relay	relay	
3. A historical figure in Singapore	Visual representation	icon ['offer' image]	icon ['demand' image]	icon ['demand' image] symbol	3) Multimodal meaning-making enables linguistically at-risk children to express themselves well using other modes than written language
	Image-text relation	relay	relay	relay	
4. Just a little raindrop	Visual representation	symbol	icon	icon & index	4) Children tend to be skeptical of employing visual images as form of language representation.
	Image-text relation	relay	anchorage	anchorage	
5. If I had three wishes..	Visual representation	symbol, index	icon & index	icon, index	
	Image-text relation	anchorage	anchorage	anchorage	
6. Images & text	Visual representation	icon	icon	icon	
	Image-text relation	illustration	illustration	relay	
7. A picture story	Visual representation	icon	index	icon, index & symbol	
	Image-text relation	NONE	relay	NONE	

Table 1: Summary of semiotic choices made by Eileen, Ben & Danny

Secondly, although the children made different semiotic choices in their visual representation, they interpret the image-text relations in a similar way. (Refer to Figure 1)

Third, even if the semiotic choices vary according to particular meanings, all three children demonstrated authorial intent in some of their entries. This certainly shows that they have some sense of inter-semiotic awareness. However, the level of explicitness varies perhaps due to their experience in multimodal communication. In the entry, 'Images & text', Eileen employed mostly linguistic structures in standard English language. She used pronominal references, 'I' and 'you', and, added interrogatives to engage the readers. She even inserted emoticons to show them her contentment apart from using words to express her feelings. On the other hand, Ben aims to interact with his audience using a less formal variety of English language, consciously changing to orality in his written language to establish casualness, which is typical of bloggers. The fact that he applies 'bold' typefaces on all his entries suggests that he understood the visual affordances of written language and how it fits the needs of his reader

Figure 1: Tree diagram drawn from analysis of the journal entries of Eileen, Ben & Danny

Peircean model

Semiotic awareness

Barthes

"This is the person whom I'm blogging about," said Danny.
The gaze of the photographed participant, connect participant with viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996)

**'demand'
(direct gaze)**

'offer' 'Offers' the represented participant as items of info (van Leeuwen, 2005)

icon

metaphor 'is like' rather than 'is' (Kress, 2010)

personal 'trademarks' to refer 'ripples' as 'friends',' a cake' as 'birthday celebration',
'mortar board and scrolls' as 'aspirations' indexicality is based on an act of judgement or inference (Hodge & Kress, 1998)

index

visual representation

symbol favourite colours on solid objects to indicate 'a favourable day'

traffic lights to refer to' traffic jams'
merlion with skyscrapers as background to denote the country, Singapore

two fingers against a globe on the backdrop to show 'world peace'
Signs are always motivated by the producer's 'interest', and by the characteristics of the object (Kress, 1993:173)

image-text relation

anchorage use words, images of another somewhat similar objects, images which connotes another layer of meanings, to direct readers to a particular meaning
The words pick out one of the possible meanings of the image (Kress, 1993:173)

relay The text adds meaning and both text and image work together to convey intended meaning (van Leeuwen, 2005)

illustration use images as examples Images 'anchoring' text (Barthes, 1977)

Audience awareness

interrogative

inclusion of lyrics

aesthetics
pictorial & textual integration
bold

weblink
capital letters

registers
varieties of English language

orality in written verbal

emoticons

In sum, analysis of the journal entries suggest that children who have less control over linguistic structures perform well in constructing meanings in other semiotic modes, such as visual images. Hence, limiting assessment to written language may hinder the success of this group of children. To ensure that they are fairly assessed and all children are given the opportunity to acquire various forms of literacies, I would argue for a re-thinking of literacy pedagogy.

Implications for language pedagogy

In rethinking literacy pedagogy, it is necessary to consider how children can be taught to make semiotic choices that best fit their intended message. To begin with, the affordances of different modes and how they could work together or separately, in meaning-making, should be made explicit to them. For example, understanding what a visual image could offer that a text might not be able to do, or, knowing the impact a film might have, on a reader that might not be possible by reading a text. Having said that, teaching children to solely recognise representational demands are insufficient, to help them use 'language' meaningfully. There should be some guidelines to indicate their level of achievement in constructing meanings using various modes (Burke & Hammet, 2009).

While tracking progress in multimodal text is not the norm, it is crucial in order to shift towards new literacies. In the light of this, teachers need to develop their professional capital on multimodality. In essence, they need to work with one another closely to define a set of indicators for several dimensions of texts, which comprise visual, sound, voice, intonation, stance, gesture and movement. According to Vincent (2006), a tool is required to monitor the achievements of students who have adopted these alternative pathways to literacy. Arguably, it could be challenging to create such rubrics which takes into account the multimodal aspects of language because as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) pointed out, each mode has its own grammar and syntax. Therefore, to develop indicators which succinctly demonstrate a child's multimodal progression, teachers have to understand the grammar behind each semiotic mode thoroughly.

In all instances, teachers need to acknowledge and appropriate for themselves the demands of new literacy practices. They should be prepared to adopt the roles of a resource manager, co-constructor of knowledge and a design consultant (Larson and Marsh, 2005) so that they could effectively facilitate learning in the multimodal, electronic space. On hindsight, if the national curricular and assessment mode continues to demand language as a primary system, then most teachers may not even want to invest time thinking about a 'language' which attends to other semiotic modes, than the written mode (Moriarty, 1994). However, resistance to transform literacy pedagogy would place schools at a disadvantage because "new literacies, whether intentionally or unintentionally impact literacy instruction in classrooms" (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004).

Limitations

The findings may not be able to access designs that children use in a more dynamic kind of representational mode. While there are other modes such as moving images, which might allow them to make meanings, this study is limited to static visual images. Hence, future research might want to look into ways in which children combine modes, forming what Kress (2003) termed as 'transformation' (a reshaping of resources within a mode), 'transduction' (a shift of semiotic materials across modes) and 'synaesthesia' (the qualitatively new forms of meaning which occur through transformation and transduction) to obtain a richer understanding of multimodality and meaning-making works.

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, the multimodal character of literacy among children was discussed. Following the points of discussion, it may be claimed that the images and text worked together for an intended purpose in meaning-making. However, they may or may not be explicitly expressed even though the children have a sense of semiotic awareness. Conclusively, making meanings through multiple modes presents a need to redesign learning to allow everyone to cope with multimodality as a new form of literacy.

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