

Multimodality in the EFL classroom Multimodalidade na sala de aula de inglês

Fábio BEZERRA¹

Abstract: *Due to the increased multimodal nature of communication in today's globalized and culturally diverse world (Christie, 2005), it is paramount to devote attention in the classroom to how semiotic resources (van Leeuwen, 2005) other than verbal language have been used to create identities and to position people socially, especially for the fact that the school plays – or should play – a vital role in people's individual, social, cultural and political development. In this paper, I contextualize the work with images and present metalanguage from the Grammar of Visual Design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) in order to enable teachers to develop activities to foster their students' 'multimodal communicative competence' (Royce, 2007; Heberle, 2010). Besides, I carry out analysis of a movie poster so as to put the theory presented into practice.*

Keywords: *multimodality; classroom; grammar of visual design; multimodal communicative competence*

Resumo: *Devido à crescente natureza multimodal da comunicação no mundo globalizado e culturalmente diverso de hoje (Christie, 2005), é fundamental que dediquemos atenção na sala de aula à maneira como recursos semióticos (van Leeuwen, 2005) além da linguagem verbal têm sido utilizados para criar identidades e posicionar as pessoas socialmente, especialmente pelo fato de que a escola desempenha - ou deveria desempenhar - um papel vital no desenvolvimento das pessoas nos âmbitos individual, social, cultural e político. Neste artigo, contextualizo o trabalho com imagens e apresento metalinguagem da Gramática Visual (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) a fim de capacitar professores para desenvolverem atividades que promovam a 'competência comunicativa multimodal' de seus alunos (Royce, 2007; Heberle, 2010). Além disso, analiso um cartaz de filme com o objetivo de colocar a teoria apresentada em prática.*

Palavras-chave: *multimodalidade; sala de aula; gramática visual; competência comunicativa multimodal*

1 Introduction

In our globalized and culturally diverse world, “communication is increasingly multimodal” (Christie, 2005, p.123), hence the importance of devoting attention in the classroom to how semiotic resources (van Leeuwen, 2005) other than verbal language have been used to create identities and to position people socially, especially for the fact that the school plays – or at least should play – a vital role in people's individual, social, cultural and political development.

In this context, more actions should be taken to foster students' 'multimodal communicative competence' (Royce, 2007), which involves “the knowledge and use of language concerning the visual, gestural, audio and spatial dimensions of communication, including

¹ I'm currently in the last year of my doctorate in English and Applied Linguistics at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC) and my PhD in Linguistics at the University of Sydney (cotutelle).

computer-mediated-communication” (Heberle, 2010, p. 102) besides the other communicative competences described by Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980).

Thus, this new reality demands immediate actions from all of us, teachers and students, in order to develop a better understanding of how verbal language and images construe representations of our experience and relationships between social actors as well as how these are brought together in a textual manifestation as a cultural construct (Bezerra, Nascimento & Heberle, 2010; Motta-Roth & Nascimento, 2009, p. 320). It should also be emphasized that the work with multimodal texts in the EFL classroom can be used to develop not only students’ reading skills, but also their writing, speaking and listening competence, which could help consolidate a holistic approach to the teaching of the four skills (D’Andrea, 2010).

Facing this challenge, the New London Group² published an article in the Harvard Educational Review, where they present “a theoretical overview of the connections between the changing social environment facing students and teachers and a new approach to literacy pedagogy that they call ‘multiliteracies’” (1996). In this new pedagogy, the following four components are suggested for the work with the students: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice.

Situated practice refers to the need to approach whatever meaning-making resource from the starting point of the personal experiences of students so that they can locate themselves in relation to the study to be done, especially for the fact that “meanings belong to culture, rather than to specific semiotic modes” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.2). This term is actually closely related to Gee’s discussion of ‘situated meaning’, where he states that “meaning is always situated in specific sociocultural practices and experiences” (2000, p.195).

Overt instruction would be the moment to provide students with the metalanguage to carry specific investigations. This is exactly the main objective of the present paper, since the analysis carried out is done by using the metalanguage proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in their visual grammar, which we must teach our students in order to provide them with the tools to understand that “certain images and ideas about the world are favoured or presented as ‘normal’, while other possibilities as excluded, either implicitly or explicitly” (Callow, 1999, p.2).

Critical framing is fostered by having students interpret the contextual background and values which inform whatever social practice and its related text. In other words, students are engaged in the activity of critically deconstructing what is given to them, whether in the form of

² For information about the New London Group and access to their seminal article on multiliteracies, see http://www.static.kern.org/filer/blogWrite44ManilaWebsite/paul/articles/A_Pedagogy_of_Multiliteracies_Designing_Social_Futures.htm#11

written texts, images, sound etc. Therefore, being literate “means being able to understand, enjoy and critique the kinds of messages that these images convey” (Callow, 1999, p.2).

Transformed practice is the idea that students, having learned how texts of various kinds are constructed, start designing their own practices based on the new knowledge in the same or in new contexts. This is the moment when the teacher will really have the chance to see just how much students could demonstrate an appropriation of not only the metalanguage which was taught, but most importantly of a new mindset towards the reading of varied texts, which is especially important in such a fast-changing world, where many of the texts presented to students in textbooks are non-linear (Christie, 2005).

2 The grammar of visual design

Taking all the aforementioned points into consideration, especially the one about the situated practice, as “visual language is not (...) transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.4), I aim to demonstrate the usefulness of the categories for the analysis of images described in the Grammar of Visual Design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For that matter, I analyze a movie poster used to promote the motion picture *Sex and the City*, since it is based on the homonymous world famous³ TV series (Bezerra, 2008) and has been strongly advertised by the media. Besides that, this can also be seen as an example of how to use different genres in the EFL classroom, which may contribute to making the work with another language more relevant for the students in the ‘new communicative configuration’ that permeates the learning environment nowadays (Lange, 2010).

Before starting the analysis, it is important to have an overview of the metalanguage used, for it “facilitate[s] systematic attention by teachers to the multimodal nature of texts in developing critical literacy practices” (Unsworth, 2001, p.72). It is important to state, though, that it is the teacher’s responsibility to consolidate their knowledge of the categories used for analysis by doing additional readings (see References).

Even though all meaning-making processes have always been multimodal, “not much attention has been paid to the meanings of regularities in the way image elements are used” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.1). This is due to the longstanding misconception that images are transparent representations which do not require instruction to be understood. It is precisely one of

³ ‘Sex and the City’ is viewed in the following countries, as informed in Wikipedia – The Free Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_and_the_city): U.S.A., Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Philippines, Lithuania, Latvia, Denmark and Hungary.

the aims of a project for multiliteracies that students should have a chance to be introduced to descriptions of images, and other semiotic resources, in much the same way that their verbal literacy is fostered in schools.

Therefore, in the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose a more systematic approximation of the image in a tri-functional perspective, as in Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, of which their work is an extrapolation. In other words, they develop visual analysis having the following three metafunctions as realizing meanings: the representational, the interactional and the compositional.

2.1 The representational metafunction

The representational metafunction concerns how participants and objects as well as events (processes) and their associated circumstances are realized, which may be done through narrative or conceptual representations.



Figure 1

The *narrative representations* concern *actions, reactions, thought* and *speech*. Actions and reactions are represented by the presence of a vector connecting the participants. In actions, the vector departs from the actor and is directed towards the goal, in the case of the bear's left arm touching the other bear in Figure 1. In some images, the vector can be bi-directional, with both participants being at the same time actor and goal, which would be the case if both bears were touching each other.

In reactions, the vector is formed by the eye line, that is, one participant (reactor) is looking at another (phenomenon), or both are looking at each other (bi-directionality). In Figure 2, for instance, some people are foregrounded and we see that they are gazing at something. It is also important to add that



Figure 2



Figure 3

actions and reactions can be either transactional or non-transactional, depending on whether or not both represented participants can be seen by the viewer. Thus, in Figure 2, it is a non-transactional process of reaction, since we do not see what those people are looking at.



Figure 4

Now, turning to thought and speech, one must know that the former is depicted by the use of a thought cloud (Figure 3) and the latter by means of a speech balloon or bubble (Figure 4), both being connected to the participants (senser and sayers, respectively) also by a vector.



Figure 6

The *conceptual representations*, in turn, refer to images that either classify (covert or overt taxonomy), show part-whole relationships (analytical structured or unstructured) or attribute/suggest values (symbolic). In Figure 5, we see a covert representation of types of car. It is covert because it is not overtly stated in the image what it is classifying. In Figure 6, the focus is only on part of an aircraft (its engines), while in Figure 7 the golden hue arguably adds a symbolic value of wealth to the city. I do not extend on these categories in the present paper, since they are not found in the posters analyzed. However, for further information, see Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).



Figure 5



Figure 7

2.2 The interactional metafunction



Figure 8

The interactional metafunction refers to the interrelation between the image and the viewer. This relationship can be analyzed in terms of interaction (contact), social distance, attitude, power and realism. *Contact* can be defined as either demand or offer, depending on whether or not the represented (human, human-like or animal) participant is looking directly at the viewer. Figure 8 is an instance of offer. In the case of a demand, there is the construal of a stronger relationship.



Figure 10

Also, such gaze directed at, or away from, the viewers can be further emphasized by the participant's facial expression. *Social distance* may happen in one of three levels: intimate (close shot), social (medium shot) or impersonal (long shot). In Figure 9, we see a long shot. *Attitude* may either show involvement (frontal angle) or detachment (oblique angle – as in Figure 10), that is, it depends on whether or not the frontal angle of the represented participant and the viewer coincide. *Power* may be attributed to the represented participant (low angle), to the



Figure 9

viewer (high angle) or there may be a sense of equality (eye-level view). Finally, *realism* is measured by how color, context, depth, detail and light interplay, with low modality as a representation located away from a naturalistic view in a continuum, which happens, for instance, in black and white images.

2.3 The compositional metafunction

The compositional metafunction has to do with the distribution of the elements and information in the image, that is, “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.176).

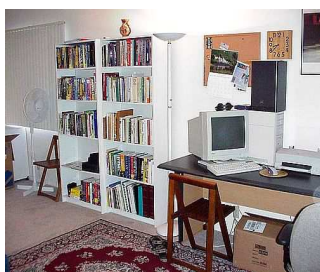


Figure 11

Three elements are analyzed in the compositional organization of images: information value, framing and salience. When dealing with the *information value* in the image, we observe the layout in regard to the left-right, top-bottom and center-margin positioning. In this perspective, while what is located on the left-hand side of the page is taken as given information (like books in Figure 11), the right-hand side brings the new information being introduced to the viewer (computers in Figure 11).

Also, while the bottom of the page represents the real information, that is, what the viewer identifies as more concrete, the top part brings the ideal, what is supposed to be aspired to by the viewer. The layout may also foreground a central positioning, giving prominence to certain elements, while having others as a marginal surrounding structure.

Besides information value, an image also has *framing*, which can be strong or weak, depending on whether the elements are shown as being connected or disconnected. Finally, we can also analyze *salience* in the image, by identifying which factors may give prominence to specific elements in the image, which can be done, for instance, through the use of relative size, color and foregrounding (like the glass of wine in Figure 12).



Figure 12

3 Analysis

Having contextually situated the analysis and presented the metalanguage needed, we can now focus on the poster chosen for the present paper (Figure 13). In this analysis, I aim to demonstrate how the knowledge of the metalanguage can help the reader be aware of the classificatory and constitutive nature of both language and images, which, hopefully, can be a step towards having more teachers designing activities including the analysis of images in the classroom based on sound terminology and theory.

In this figure, I bring not only the movie poster, but also a summary of the points discussed, so as to provide an overview of the image construal.

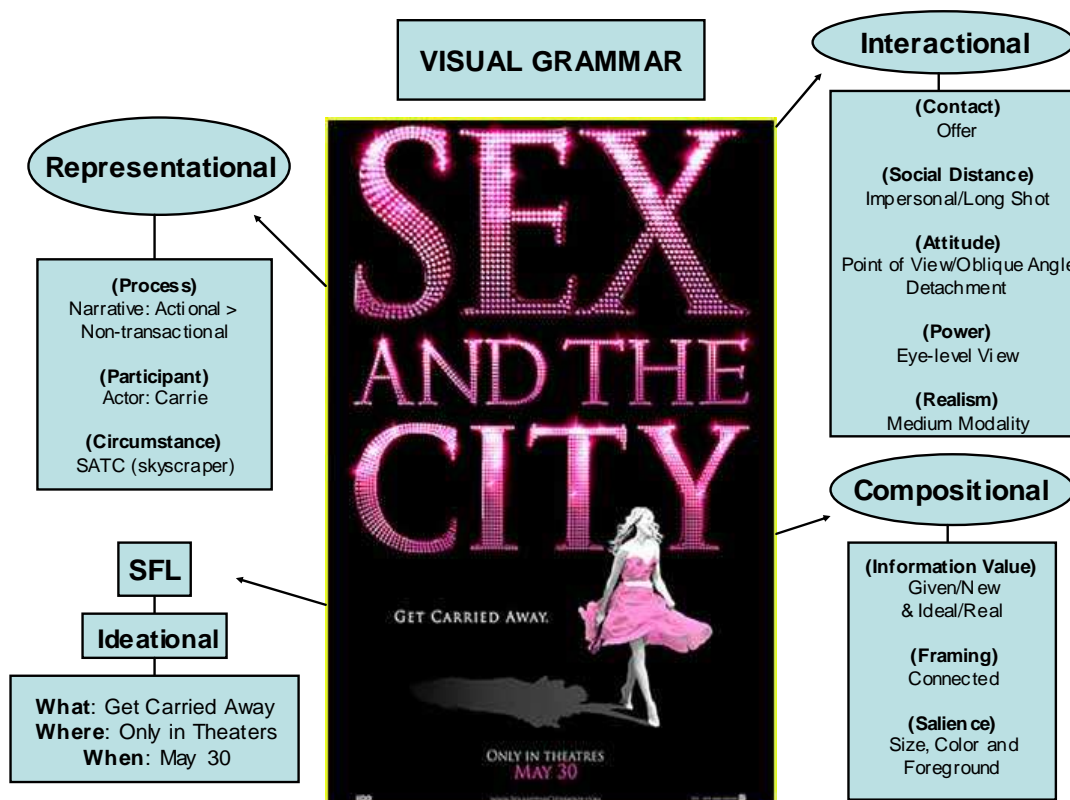


Figure 13

In the poster of Figure 13, there is a narrative representation of an actional process, as can be seen through the vector formed by Carrie's dress and legs, showing her (actor) walking; however, this action is non-transactional, since we don't see any other represented participant (goal). The name of the movie (Sex and the City) can be seen as a circumstance of location, especially for its relative size in comparison to Carrie, which suggests an idea that it might be a skyscraper behind her, being integral to a glamorous and sparkling city. This focus on the action is also corroborated by a transitivity analysis (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) of the verbal language used in the poster: *Get*

Carried Away – Only in Theatres – May 30. There is the use of a material process aiming to entice the viewer into watching the movie by a play of words with the main character's name (Carrie). This way, a choice of action is being given to the viewer, but while watching the movie, this action is consequently passed on to Carrie, who will then carry us away throughout the narrative. However, it is highlighted that this encounter can only happen in theatres and on a specific day, which are the circumstantial elements of the event.

Looking at the interactive meanings construed in the image, we note that there is not eye contact with the viewer, which suggests only an offer. This offer being the possibility of seeing the movie and having the opportunity to be carried away. This invitation is done from an impersonal distance, as it is depicted in a long shot. This point is also reinforced by the detachment created through the oblique angle between Carrie's body and the viewer. However, this detachment is softened by the fact that there is an equal relation of power, created by the eye-level view, which makes sense as the creator of the image probably wanted to foster proximity with the movie audience. What calls attention, though, in this poster is the fact that there is use of medium to low modality, as the representation of both Carrie and the city is not done in a very naturalistic manner (both are placed against a black artificial background), which, as a matter of fact, does not seem to work in favor of the portrayal of Carrie as a real woman who goes through the same ups and downs as many others. Although we can highlight this possible contradiction, there is also the fact that it might be important for the success of the movie to show its main character as someone to be admired precisely for the fact that she represents something the audience may aspired to be like, which is actually done compositionally.

Therefore, in a compositional perspective, we see Carrie on the right-hand side of the poster and the play with her name in the clause *Get Carried Away* on the left-hand side, suggesting that even though Carrie is someone we are already familiar with, she always has something new to present, either in her appearance or in her life. The place where Carrie is inserted – the city – is located at the top (the ideal) of the image, since New York City (where the story in the movie takes place) is a much sought-after destination for its glamorous and sizzling life style. However, the information about the movie itself (where and when it can be seen) is given at the bottom of the poster, indicating that this is a real element, on which viewers can rely. The weak framing of the image shows Carrie and the city completely connected, which is further indicated by the use of the color pink in the name of the movie (the city skyscraper) and her dress, also suggesting a mixture of romance and modernity, as the shade of pink used is really strong and bright. Also discussing the salience in the image, we can notice that, even though Carrie is smaller in comparison to the name of the movie, she is foregrounded. However, this foregrounding is not so salient, which may be

understood as the portrayal of Carrie as an integral part to the city and vice-versa, a fact which was strongly emphasized in the TV series of which the movie is a continuation.

In sum, we see the interconnection of the three metafunctions towards a representation of Carrie as a woman who both acts and represents new things to come, which are to be seen by those who will eventually watch the movie. The city of New York is portrayed as a glamorous and shining place, basically through the use of relative size, color and light, that is, through compositional elements. Again, it is worth stressing that the representation of Carrie and the city in a medium to low modality seems to have been an element of contradiction in the whole message conveyed by the poster, for a higher modality could have added to the idea of bringing the viewer closer to her and the circumstance where she is situated. However, this fact is somehow softened by the use of other representational, interactional and compositional resources.

4 Final Remarks

In conclusion, it is important to bring forth once more the need for systematic actions towards the preparation of teachers to work with multimodal texts in their classes (Heberle & Meurer, 2007), especially for the fact that, as previously put, our students will undoubtedly have increased contact with texts which not only use varied semiotic resources, but whose access has also changed, including to a greater extent the computer-mediated technologies.

Additionally, it is vital for teachers to be constantly reviewing their practice so as to keep up with the new challenges, not only in regard to the myriad of semiotic resources and media available in today's society, but also in respect to the role of the English language in the new world order (Salles & Gimenez, 2010) and to their role "to prepare [students] to function effectively in such contexts" (Ur, 2010). Therefore, the ultimate aim of this paper has been to provide teachers with some theoretical basis and related metalanguage as well as to demonstrate that the work with multimodal texts can be not only stimulating, but most importantly emancipating.

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E-mail:

fabes10@yahoo.com.br