

Understanding and Producing Multimodal Messages in Secondary School through Webquest

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1. Introduction

Technological developments offer us new ways to structure messages by making use of different semiotic systems. Therefore, the concept of reading has been stretched to make room not only for the written mode but also for the combination of modes such as the auditory and visual ones (Kress, 2004). This alteration in the traditional concept of reading has had an impact on the concept of literacy. Being literate implies that readers make use of different skills to perceive each composing element of a text and understand how the text elements are intertwined to create a unified coherent text.

In this paper, we will describe an activity that we have crafted to enhance students' ability to read and create multimodal texts and to understand that the composition of a text responds to the author's world view. To train students to craft and decode multilingual messages is a must for a literate citizen in the XXI century. This paper presents the results of a research project in which students were taught to deal with multimodal messages. We carried out a task with two groups of secondary school students between 15 and 16 years old. The task was divided into 4 main steps.

The first three steps were intended at exposing students to the process of analysis and decodification of multimodal political propaganda; the final production step focused on designing and producing multimodal texts. In a closing plenary session, students were encouraged to provide feedback on the success of the task and reflect on the social significance of critical thinking and responsible citizenship.

This activity was laid out in the form of a webquest, following the webquest model of Dodge and March (Sox, 2009) because it favours autonomous learning, inquiry- based learning, collaborative learning and a constructivist approach. Following Dörnyei & Ushioda's (2009:1) conceptualization of motivation, this webquest project fostered students' participation by relating new content with their own life experiences. Thus, students made use of different language skills to understand a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will enhance their cultural capital, their identity and their desires for the future. Thus, an investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner's own identity. (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009:4)

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Multimodality and New Literacies

Technological developments have changed the nature of the messages that are found on the Net; thus, these developments have also influenced the new conceptualization of reading. "Reading has to be rethought given that the commonsense of what reading is was developed in the era of unquestioned dominance of writing." (Kress, 2010: 17) Kress understands "[r]eading as taking and making meaning from many sources of information, from many different sign systems (...)." (Kress, 2010 : 17) In other words, readers will be exposed to a wide range of *multimodal* messages built from different composing elements that come from different semiotic

systems (auditory, visual and verbal modes among others) (Kress, 2010). These texts can be difficult to read since text- interpreters have to focus on multiple meaning making signs to deconstruct the main ideas of the texts. Students will also have to understand the dynamic essence of reading since nowadays authors become readers and readers become authors as technology allows quick answers to almost any message, giving birth to long chains of discourse. (Kress, 2010 :18-19)

2.2. Teaching Approach

This activity was laid out in the form of a webquest (following the webquest model of Dodge and March (Sox, 2009)) because it favours autonomous learning, inquiry- based learning, collaborative learning and a constructivist approach. The webquest presented a series of tasks that students had to solve to complete the quest; thus, students had to work together to provide a collaborative answer for each task. Besides, each activity was meant to foster critical thinking and debate among students. Students had to visit different web pages; therefore, they were highly exposed to the English language, having the opportunity to consolidate their language and learn new linguistic items that helped students expand their linguistic knowledge. The tasks were crafted to suit the language level of the students. However, there are many external links which are not pedagogically tailored to suit students' linguistic competence, so a language resource page was included within the webquest for students to consult when necessary. Providing students with resources helped to improve their autonomy since they had to select which resource they were going to use to solve each situation.

Webquests follow a constructivist approach (Sox, 2009) since students have to learn by making connections with their already existing knowledge and the new information. According

to J. Piaget, J. Bruner and L. Vigotsky, “knowledge is socially constructed rather than received or discovered” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:109). Webquests provide a series of resources to promote students’ autonomy, create a learning environment that fosters critical thinking and learning by doing, and promote the role of the teacher as facilitator (Tharp, 1993) . Besides, since some webquests can be carried out in groups, they foster collaborative learning (social constructivism) in which students can learn together from their peers. Following constructivism, learners are encouraged to analyze, do research, make contributions, share, build, and generate meaning based on what he or she already knows, encouraging, in this way, the development of an active methodology, mainly learn by doing. (Baynat Monreal & Sanz Gil, 2007 : 85)

2.3 Motivation

It is not unknown that motivation supports the behaviours necessary for language learning. In this sense, significant developments in language teaching have occurred as new technologies are used to provide novel ways of configuring and accessing language learning opportunities; thus, language teachers are called upon to adjust or restructure their pedagogical and professional practices in response to changes in curricula, materials, classes and learners, and in response to shifts in broader understandings of language learning and teaching. (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Hand in hand with XXI century ways of accessing language learning, this webquest represents the restructuring of our pedagogical practices in which students were guided in their process of understanding their role as readers and producers of multimodal messages. This proved to be highly motivating in the sense that students related this learning experience to their own background knowledge.

3. Project:

3.1 Setting

The webquest was planned out to be used with students from 4th and 5th year of a private secondary school whose specialisation curriculum paves the way towards the fields of social studies and humanities. The English level of these students is B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). As stated by the Council of Europe at a threshold or intermediate level (B1), students are able to deal with “the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.” (Council of Europe, 2014).

This learning experience took place in months previous to Argentinian presidential elections 2015. As regards technological tools present in the classroom, the school is equipped with computers and Internet access. The activity presented here was meant to consolidate the key important areas of what had been discussed in the classroom as regards multimodal messages and to guide the analysis of these messages with the help of the teacher.

3.2 Methodology

We crafted a webquest by using a free software to create webpages, Wix.com (to have access to our site click on this link: <http://cecicadlt.wix.com/reading-mt>). The layout is user friendly and extra buttons have been added in strategic places so that students can navigate through the site with easiness and clear out any questions they may have as regards language use by consulting the language resource section. Some class time was devoted to explaining students how this tool works and students were asked to experiment with it.

This educational tool is made up of an introduction, task objectives, a process section divided into four sub- tasks, an evaluation, and a conclusion. First, in the introduction section, students were introduced to the concept of new literacies, which was a new concept for them, and analyzed some components of multimodal messages as well as their impact on meaning construction. Once the main concepts were introduced, students were presented with the task objective and the first sub- tasks, first and second. In the first task, students worked collaboratively to define the concept of multimodal texts. Secondly, students had to analyze different multimodal texts, audiovisual and visual political propaganda, to see how each of the different mode elements contribute to the creation of the ultimate meaning of a text. Part of this task was carried out as classwork, followed by a plenary session and the rest was assigned as homework to foster students' independent analysis. The homework done served as scaffolding for task three which presented some guiding questions for a written piece of work in which students had to summarize ideas discussed so far. In this same session, the final sub- task was introduced and students started drafting their own multimodal message, political propaganda for the Students' Union Election. This group work was meant to be done in two classes so as to share their final production with their classmates in upcoming classes.

The work described above was carried out in 6 classes, including the evaluation stage. The first class was devoted to the introduction of the webquest. On a second session, the task objectives were presented and the first task was solved so as to present students with a model of analysis of different mode elements. In a third session, by a written piece of work, students summarized the main concepts dealt with so far. At the same time, they were introduced with the rubrics of the final work. On the fourth class, students worked collaboratively on the production

of their multimodal messages, which were shared with the rest of the class in sessions five and six.

3.3 Results

The fact that teenagers are allowed to participate in presidential elections in Argentina as from the age of 16 and that the school where the experience took place is paving the way towards the creation of their first Student Union this year made the project meaningful and highly motivating for students. Both groups got involved in most of the activities suggested on the webquest, showing a special interest in the ones dealing with visual and audiovisual input, and found the final crafting of their own propaganda appealing. Most of the collaborative work was carried out in class, which made it easier for them to hand in a final product on time.

Dealing with political messages as well as analysing images, bearing in mind a multimodal frame of thought, posed a challenge for both groups. The pedagogical scaffolding provided by teachers served as a facilitator and supported their work in class. Peer collaboration was paramount and learning together (with others and from others) was an appropriate pedagogical frame for the project, which meant that every student could actually do some useful work, depending on their own abilities and competences.

All in all, students managed to craft simple and successful multimodal messages for the upcoming Student Union Elections and were able to grasp the key concepts introduced by the webquest to enhance their socio-cultural capital within a frame of responsible citizenship awareness. We may conclude that this project has resulted in a valuable step towards the encouragement of critical thinking and upper level thought in the context of secondary school work. Also, students could play an active role as readers since they had to analyse and produce

their own multimodal texts. To generate these texts, students made use of technological tools in a genuine productive way, responsibly handling available resources such as images and audio openly licenced.

As to technical devices, in the last five years the school chosen to carry out the project has gradually equipped its classrooms with an interactive whiteboard with audio tools and a projector in every class. Besides, each student has a netbook, which allows to work on a one-netbook-per-pupil scheme. This institutional context meant an initial asset for the project work described above; however, technical problems such as issues related to broadband facilities and the number of netbooks available every class had to be sorted out.

4. Conclusion

Changes in literacy brought about by the use of technology and different modes to convey meaning, added to changes in Argentina's voting system make the teaching of reading and writing of multimodal texts an imperative in our context. Current learning classroom materials that rely heavily on print are highly divorced from a reality in which students are immersed in multimodal texts that need to be interpreted, analyzed and responded to. Today's socio- cultural reality challenges our traditional practices, which should be altered to teach how to read and write these novel messages.

A proper use of technology in the classroom has allowed us to provide students with a learning experience in which they explore a new kind of literacy within the context of a pedagogical practice that respected the construction of their identities and language development. In working with this webquest, students were empowered with the knowledge of text

compositionality and critical thinking skills that would lead them to be responsible citizens.

5. References

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