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The Multimodal Design of EFL Textbooks: A Social Semiotic Approach

Souryana YASSINE ¹

¹ University of Tizi Ouzou, Algeria

“Whether conceived as post-modern phenomenon or as emergent analytical orientation, multimodality is concerned with the multi-semiotic complexity of a construct or a practice” (Iedema, R. 2003)

1. Introduction

The media of wider communication and dissemination have recently witnessed profound changes in their design, attempting to incorporate meaning making affordances that go beyond language. These changes are best reflected in the increasing role images and other visual representations are playing not only in the transmission of messages but also in their making. Whatever the field of communication, it seems that there are many more images than before and all types of texts are becoming multimodal. As a means of cultural diffusion, EFL textbooks are no exception to this increasing multimodality. Many studies (for instance, Lemke, 2000, Kress et al. 2005, Bezemer & Kress, 2008) show that the textbooks which are used to teach English, a subject that concerns itself with modes of writing and speech, include an increasing number of visual images becoming thus multimodal texts. This state of the art urges us to examine the Algerian EFL textbooks which were used during the last decade as well as those that are currently in use in secondary schools. Our aim is to show whether and to what extent they adhere to the “visual turn” that is taking place, transforming the current culture into a visual one. As a theoretical framework, we will adopt Social Semiotic Theory that accounts for visual design and provides a toolkit that can deal with multimodality. Specifically, we will look at the different modes of representation to understand multimodal development in three secondary textbooks: *Think it Over* (1989), *Comet* (2001), and *New Prospects* (2006)

2. Social Semiotic Theory and Foreign Language Teaching

In traditional foreign language teaching methodology and till recently, the main orientation of textbooks has been towards isolated speech acts or exchanges. However, more and more voices, stemming from recent advances in Social Semiotics, are calling for incorporating communicative skills and strategies in a more extended framework that takes into account social/cultural contexts. This new orientation suggests that skills and strategies “... are seen as realizations in a text, which in turn is a verbal realization of a social process – a unified

piece of human interaction within a relevant cultural and situational context.” (Ventola,1984: 276). Therefore, foreign language learners need to be taught how to orientate themselves to social semiotics so as to be able to predict from generalized contexts what kind of social process/genre, what kind of text, and what communicative skills and strategies will be appropriate.

Starting in the 1990s and drawing on Halliday’s seminal work, a social semiotic approach to foreign language teaching has emerged which goes beyond communicative methodology though without invalidating it. The social semiotic approach is based on three main principles:

- 1) The first principle states that *“there is no such thing as language without historically situated language users or meaning makers in the local context of their communicative practices. Every word uttered or written is addressed by someone to someone about something and for someone’s benefit at a particular juncture in time.”* (Kramsch 2002)
- 2) The second principle draws on the fact that because of each language user’s unique place in history, each word spoken or written bears the traces of its prior uses as well as of its uses in lexical collocations or co-occurrences.
- 3) The third principle is that language learning is a social, dialogic process of meaning making. Whereas traditional views of language learning see it as an *“incremental accumulation of atomistic structures that moves the learner from word to sentence, from sentence to paragraph, and from paragraph to text, a social semiotic approach considers language as holistic network of various signs in the environment, including gestures, silences, body postures, graphic and other visual and acoustic symbols which shape a context of meaning and invites us to respond to it”* (Kramsch, 2002)

This approach calls for a pedagogy of “multiliteracies” that allows the learners to go beyond the traditional language-based literacy. It takes into account other semiotic resources available within the sociocultural contexts, be they images, or other resources.

3. Multimodal Texts and New Literacies

Multimodality has emerged in response to the changing social and semiotic landscape. It *“...attends to meaning as it is made through the situated configuration across image, gestures, gaze, body posture, sound, writing, music, speech, and so on.”* (Jewitt, 2008: 246) Hence, though primarily informed by linguistic theories such as the works of Halliday (1978) and its subsequent developments by Hodge and Kress (1988), multimodality can be viewed as an eclectic approach that developed in different ways drawing on other approaches such as film theory, musicology, and game theory. *“Multimodality thus extends past the traditional psychological and linguistic foundations of print literacy to draw from anthropological, sociological, and discourse theory.”* (Jewitt, 2008: 246).

Over the last two decades, the area of communication has seen a revolution that has forced scholars to rethink the whole social and semiotic landscape. The most prominent effect of this revolution was *“to dislodge written language from the centrality which it has held, or which has been ascribed to it in public communication. Perhaps the most obvious example is the increasing prominence-dominance even of the visual in many areas of public communication as well”* (Kress, 2000: 182)

Indeed, the situation is such that the linguistic is hardly presented bare of other visual supports. More importantly, visuals (images) cease to be there just as an ornament whose single use is to embellish the linguistic (written) text. The visuals, therefore, vehicle considerable content at the cognitive, cultural and ideological levels. On this point, Kress (2001:67) writes:

Verbal language is being displaced as a communicational mode by images, in many sites of public communication: whether in school textbooks, in newspapers, in reports produced in institutions of all kinds, in the electronic media, and in information and communication technologies in general. Image has ceased to be there as mere illustration; that is, an embellishment of the central, the written text. Image is now fully communicational in very many forms of text. This means that neither linguistics nor sociolinguistics in any longer sufficient as the theoretical enterprise to account fully and plausibly for central aspects of representation and communication

This displacement of language by other semiotic / visual modes results in texts and textual objects being more clearly seen to be multimodal, that is to be constituted by a number of modes of representation. Kress (2000), for whom even language is a multimodal semiotic system, emphasizes that the issue of multimodality can be thought about in at least three distinct and related ways:

First, all texts are multimodal. It is very arguable that no text can exist in a single mode, although one modality can dominate.

Second, there are texts and objects (of a semiotic kind) which exist predominantly in a mode or modes other than the (multi-)mode of language.

And third, there are systems of communication and representation which are acknowledged in the culture to be multimodal; all such systems are multimodal. (Kress, 2000: 187- 188)

All these points imply that texts in contemporary society are increasingly multi-semiotic. It is becoming usual that even texts whose primary semiotic form is language increasingly combine language with other semiotic forms. As Fairclough (1995:4) argues, the situation is such that

...written (printed) texts also are increasingly becoming multi-semiotic texts, not only because they incorporate photographs and diagrams, but also because the graphic design of the page is becoming an ever more salient factor in evaluation of written texts. We can continue regarding a text as a primarily linguistic cultural artefact, but develop ways of analysing other semiotic forms which are co-

present with language and especially how different semiotic forms interact in the multi-semiotic text.

In *Introducing Social Semiotics*, Van Leeuwen (2005:13) summarises the six different possibilities of a text image connection / disconnection in compositions and framing as follows:

- 1- **Segregation:** two or more elements are separated by empty space, and this indicates that they should be seen as belonging to different orders.
- 2- **Separation:** two or more elements occupy entirely different territories, and suggest that they should be seen as similar in some respects and different in others.
- 3- **Integration:** text and picture occupy the same space – either the text is integrated in (for example, superimposed on) the pictorial space.
- 4- **Overlap:** frames may be porous – for example, part of the picture may break through the frame or letters may be half in the pictorial space, or the picture in the textual space.
- 5- **Rhythm:** two elements, although separate, have a quality in common – what that quality is depends on the common feature (for example, a colour, a feature of form such as regularity or roundness, etc.)
- 6- **Contrast:** two elements differ in terms of quality (as realized by a colour, or by formal features, etc.)

4. Description of Three Textbooks and their Visual Design

The study reported in this paper is a description of three successive Algerian home-produced EFL textbooks, *Think it Over* (1989), *Comet* (2001), and *New Prospects* (2006). These were/are used in the secondary school by third year learners. Designed for the Ministry of National Education, these textbooks stand as the official syllabus for teaching English as a foreign language. They can be said to reflect the teaching paradigms as well as the curricular ideology which characterizes EFL teaching in Algeria.

In this description, three modes of representation are accounted for: *image*, *layout* and the *modal relations* that occur between image and writing. Whenever possible, a frequency count of occurrences of some modal realizations in texts across the three textbooks is provided in order to show whether the use of a given mode changes diachronically or yields a synchronic variation.

5. Visual Design and Layout of *Think it Over* (1989)

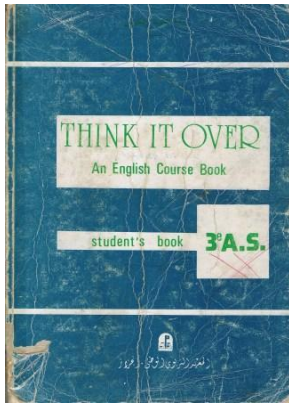


Figure (1): *Think it Over*'s

Front Cover

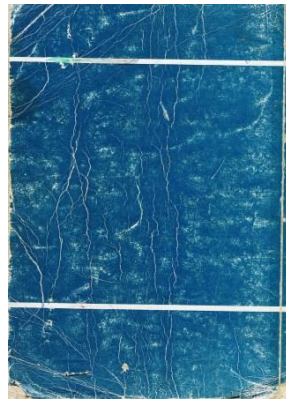


Figure (2): *Think it Over*'s Back Cover

Think it Over (1989) contains seventy images, consisting of thirty-three real images (photographs), twenty-four drawings, and thirteen diagrams, all in black and white. These images are set to fulfil various roles in the process of teaching: to introduce units and themes, complete activities' instructions, illustrate situations, etc.

Another visual element used in the textbooks is the red colour used for the titles of the different units and sections. Also, bold or italic types are used occasionally in different sections of the unit. Therefore, the visual design and page layout of the textbook look regular, setting images apart from the linguistic text.

6. Visual Design and Layout of *Comet* (2001)

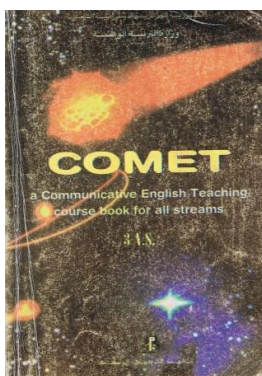


Figure (3): *Comet*'s Front Cover



Figure (4): *Comet*'s Back Cover

Unlike *Think it Over*, *Comet*, which replaced it, has a completely different design and layout. It does not contain any image of any type. But it is characterised by the blue colour to highlight the introduction and its different sections of a unit. Besides, it uses varied

typography such as capitalisation, bold, and different styles. So the visual design and the layout are rendered through the language element itself. The only images included in the textbook are those of the front and back covers.

7. Visual Design and Layout of *New Prospects* (2006)

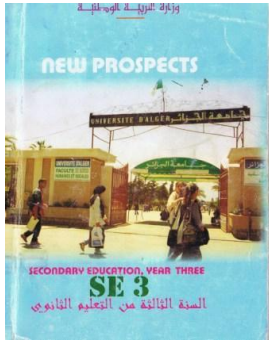


Figure (5): *New Prospects*' Front Cover

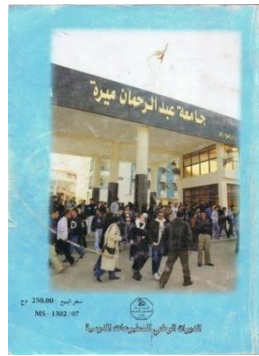


Figure (6): *New Prospects*' Back Cover

New Prospects (2006), which is currently used in high schools, looks different. It has a richer visual design and a varied layout. It contains eighty-one images of different types. The largest number of images, fifty eight, is of a realistic or photograph type. The rest consists of thirteen drawings and eight diagrams. Yet, whatever their type, all the images are in full colour. They look quite different from those photographs used in the previous textbook.

Just as in *Think it Over*, the images in *New Prospects* fulfil different functions: introducing themes and units, illustrating texts and stories, completing activities' instructions, and providing space for fun. In addition, we note some regularity in the roles assigned to the different types of images. Photographs (realistic picture) are used to introduce the teaching units' themes. They are, therefore, associated with serious topics. The diagrams are used to reinforce scientific discourses of which they constitute an integral part. They represent abstract objectivity. The drawings, for their part, look friendly and are associated with fun and leisure.

The layout of *New Prospects* shows a mixed design that integrates writing and images in various ways. It is far from the 'separation' mode that was seen in the previous textbooks. Although the typography is more or less regular, what characterises this textbook design is the use of different colours to highlight different parts of the linguistic component.

8. Multimodal Analysis of the Textbooks: Image and Layout

--Image:

The analysis of the three textbooks reveals a striking fact. The relations between image and writing have remained constant over time even if images were absent from *Comet* (2001) without any visible reason although linguistic texts usually remain cohesive even if presented without images. Both in *Think it Over* (1989) and in *New Prospects* (2006) most of the images are subordinate to writing, and a few are on an equal footing with writing; thus

diagrams are used to explain scientific processes. This implies that images add meaning to the text.

For example, in *New Prospects* (2006), when dealing with themes such as history, civilisation, or child labour, the included photographs and maps help recontextualise reality and make visible those aspects of the world which the written text does not necessarily detail. They provide certain aspects not easy to imagine by the Algerian learners who live in a different context and they are of paramount importance to grasp the whole meaning as well as its context. Bezemer and Kress (2009) explain that: *“Adding images to a text which was originally produced as a written text is a way of recontextualising, that is, reconfiguring social relations between authors and readers. These social relations can be suggested by the ‘provenance’ of the image.”*

Another striking fact is the shift in the nature of the images and the use of full colour. Unlike *Think it Over* (1989) where colour was not used as an element of visual design, all the images of *New Prospects* (2006) are in full colour. However, the functional distribution of the different types of images does not change across the two textbooks. The photographs which show snapshots of ‘real’ people, places, or objects, are used to introduce serious themes and humanistic issues such as “immigration”, “counselling”, “child labour”, etc. (see appendix) The diagrams are associated with scientific topics and are the only images that are set on an equal ground with the linguistic text. Most drawings show an imagined world, with imagined people, animals, objects, such as extraterrestrial creatures, mythical ones (unicorn), or simply funny social situations. The drawings are generally friendly and funny. They appear to be entertaining, while the photographs are meant to raise ‘critical awareness’. (See appendix)

--Layout:

The textbooks’ layout follows a relatively fixed, writing-driven grid. However, it allows for incorporation of different types of images. The latter are generally positioned in alignment with the grid though showing a development in a type of relation with the linguistic texts.

The layout of *Think it Over* looks more traditional and follows the “**separation**” design to use Van Leeuwen (2006)’s terms. Such a layout sets the images and the written texts in two distinct territories and suggests ‘**assemblage**’; that is , the bringing together of different materials and representations. *“The writing produces a general, factual, hence somewhat distanced account, whereas the images produce a spatially and temporally more specific, personal account of those events.”* (Bezemer and Kress 2009)

In *New Prospects*, the layout is more varied. The images are incorporated within the linguistic texts according to different modes. This move from the “separation” mode to the “**integration**”, “**overlap**” , and “**rhythm**” modes, as defined by Van Leeuwen (2006) suggests a shift in the load of meaning that images bring to the overall understanding of texts (see appendix). It seems that the development is a diachronic one.

9. Curricular and Pedagogic Implications of a Growing Multimodality

In recent textbooks, the teaching content is represented differently and adheres more to the demands of multimodality. The way in which curricular materials are laid out on the page suggests both a social and epistemological change. Likewise, Algerian EFL textbooks are

becoming more and more visual. Profound changes are taking place as concerns the use of images and page layout, showing a move from a simple separation of the two main modes of representation used in language teaching materials (writing and image) to a more complex one. Design is no longer exclusively organized on writing principles, displaced by images, but it is increasingly taking into consideration visual principles. This shift is evident from the increase in the number of images per page. While in *Think it Over* the page hardly contains two images, in *New Prospects*, we can find a myriad of images in the same page that overlap with the writing. There is a clear shift from a predominantly written text set in constrained typography to a composition of irregular writing and image- based elements placed on a page.

These changes in design bring about important pedagogic changes as concerns the recontextualisation of content and the shaping of social relations between textbook designers and users because the multimodal design of a textbook shapes learning. As Bezemer and Kress (2009) remark, “*the multimodality of the design allows textbook makers to mix different theories of learning: work involved in one mode may have shifted from textbook author to learners, suggesting a shift from ‘transmission’ to ‘collaboration’, for instance in connecting propositions articulated in writing; in another mode work may have shifted from teacher to learners; in both cases one might recognize a shift towards socio-constructivist theories of learning*”. This change is well reflected in *New Prospects*.

10. Conclusion

The analysis of the images and layout of three Algerian textbooks show a double shift as concerns their multimodal design. The first shift relates to the overall organisation of the textbooks and the way they incorporate visual elements. It reflects a growing multimodality that develops diachronically. The second one relates to the pedagogical implications of such a change. The inclusion of more images does not only transform the appearance of the teaching content but also contributes in reshaping the relations between teaching and learning.

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