

## UNDERSTANDING AND PRODUCING MULTIMODAL TEXTS IN GREEK PRIMARY SCHOOL

Oikonomakou Marianthi  
University of the Aegean  
Greece

### Abstract

The analysis of the latest Greek L1 Curriculum (Pedagogical Institute, 2003) can provide useful scientific data concerning the integration of recent linguistic and sociolinguistic principles in Greek primary school and the orientation of language teaching in a technological society under radical transformation. Our main purpose is, therefore, to demonstrate that the didactic objectives described in the L1 Curriculum cannot be fully achieved without the creative utilization of ICT tools, mainly because of the multimodal nature of contemporary cultural products.

### Introduction

The complexity of circumstances prevailing at all levels dictates a constant query into the mechanisms of production and assimilation of meaning, all the more since coming to grips with such features is a pursuit directly associated to both the notion of communication in new semiotic contexts and the orientation of language teaching as a whole (Stamou, Tranos, & Chatzisavvidis, 2004). Based on this assumption and building on a theoretical approach of *multimodality*, our purpose is to critically visit Primary Education Curricula (PI, 2003) in terms of language teaching. In particular, we actually aim to investigate the degree to which research-based conclusions have been embedded in the educational process, on one hand, and how satisfactorily, on the other, if at all, has been the valorization of technology achievements in this field towards attaining relevant didactic objectives.

### Theoretical Background

Essentially addressing the matter of communication, the theory of multimodality contributes to better cultivating multiliteracy pedagogy. Adopting such theory considerably affects teaching of the *language system* as well as of the *use of language* (Mitsis, 2004), while helping to determine at the same time the content of basic skills, which the language literacy primarily aims at developing.

### The Multimodality Theory

The necessity to understand the ways whereby concepts are formed and codified implies a profound elaboration of contemporary cultural products, which are *par excellence* parts of the semiotic context within which persons eventually dwell and operate, both individually and collectively. One such concept is *multimodality* (Kress, 2003), concerning the mode of presentation

of a cultural product involving more than one semiotic mode. Contrary to what the case is with uni-modal products (Chatzisavvidis, 2011), involving a single semiotic mode, multimodal ones may, comprise not only oral and written speech, but also images, moving pictures and even sound (Kalantzis, & Cope, 1999). Consequently, a multimodal product consists of a synthesis of single, uni-modal products connected through a two-way interaction. Such coincidence, within contemporary multicultural environments, of visual, acoustic and verbal messages is an essentially natural process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). It practically adjusts to the functioning of the human senses, which are instinctively activated in the form of a structured whole, in order to process specific stimuli.

The notion of *multimodality*, therefore, undoubtedly contributes to the opening of new ways in communication, while overturning, at the same time, past (Kress, 2000), otherwise generally accepted, concepts relevant to the components of the process of communication. Consequently, language is now perceived as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Fairclough, 1992), directly associated with specific, constantly transforming practices. The representation of the various aspects of reality is essentially obtained through the conscious choice and utilization of different, case-specific alternative discourses (Kress, & van Leeuwen, 2001), under the criterion, at all times, of efficient communication.

Thus, departing from the linguistic principle of *dual articulation* at the level of descriptive analysis (Martinet, 1985), we are now led to the determination of four distinctive *strata*, through which an attempt is made to integrally interpret the phenomenon of contemporary communication as a whole (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). At the antipode of *content*, further distinguished in *discourse* and *design*, there is *expression*, achieved through *production* and *distribution*, respectively.

Thus, besides *discourse*, *designs* are understood to play also a determinant role, because they are associated with the choice of semiotic modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) considered to be suitable for each specific communication circumstance. Designs are known to pertain an abstract level, delving somewhere between content and expression and, as such, are independent from the means of materialization, since the semiotic modes, upon which such designs are based, may be achieved through use of different materials (Koutsoyannis, 2005). Understandably, the designs obtain perceivable form and concept at the level of *production*; it is at this level that the material articulation of semiotic products or events (Graikos, 2005) is determined, whereas the level of *distribution* is the one as of which semiotic products are decoded, in order to ensure their distribution in whichever way (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

### **Multiliteracy Theories and Multimodality**

It has been sufficiently established that the formation of meaning is determined by a wide array of factors that render decoding a composite process. It is, therefore, obvious that the investigation of such information production and interpretation mechanisms ought to be high on the agenda of

the educational process. It is, indeed, no accident that the notion of *multimodality* has been developed within the context of re-determination of the content of literacy, which, in turn and in time, contributed to further elaboration of *multiliteracy* pedagogy (New London Group, 1996). As a matter of fact, both notions –that is *multiliteracy* and *multimodality* –have been jointly invoked as means whereby to meet the multiple challenges triggered by social and semiotic changes (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2010). Nowadays, it also seems that there is a strong need to adopt a new kind of literacy, dubbed *multimodal literacy* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Such a perspective was bound to inevitably contribute to a reconsideration of the content of basic skills, the acquisition of which is predominantly pursued through the subject matter of language (Mitsis, 2004). It is clear that the production of written and oral speech constitute the fruit of a dynamic intervention of the one who puts through the message, this being eventually the person to intervene at each instance with specific choices and therefore specific transformations of the available semiotic modes. The utmost priority at all times remains the desire to meet such party's needs and objectives in communication, while at the same time catering to the specificities of prevailing cultural and sociopolitical circumstances (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998; Fairclough, 2000). Yet another activity acquiring a dynamic character, however, is that of reading and, more generally, the skill of reading comprehension by the reader / listener. This is actually the party expected to look for and eventually decode, mostly through means of visual investigation, whatever hidden concepts or latent information there may be in such texts.

At the level of didactics, explaining the notion of *text*<sup>1</sup> appears once again to be of paramount importance, given that it used, through time, to be considered mostly as a unimodal product. In the light of new circumstances, multimodality is a fundamental parameter for any text, which further results in language – at least, in its traditional dimension – losing its central role in communication. All other semiotic systems have now come to be considered to contribute to communication just as importantly. The position of language, vis-à-vis such semiotic systems, is frequently equal rather than complementary – let alone secondary – (Hondolidou, 1999), since the system of semiotic modes is clearly not just an articulate formation, but a brand new semiotic fact (Graikos, 2005).

In the light of such considerations, thanks to the adoption of a variety of writing styles, codes and colors, texts appear to become liberated from the constraints of traditional pagination uniformities. Consequently, this produces an enhancement of their communicative potential and a clear enrichment of their conceptual content with new elements known to expand their expressive capacities.

### **Multimodality and Technology in L1 Curriculum**

A theoretical approach of multimodality, within the context of cultivation of multiliteracy, may indeed come to be a point of reference for the investigation of ways whereby to incorporate such research-generated facts in the Hellenic educational system. At an institutional level, such an attempt should require a

previous critical elaboration of the formal Studies Curricula (PI, 2003). Given their nature of political texts, besides echoing the ideological parameters of the essentially political intentions behind the orientation given to the teaching of language, such curricula also provide some essential indications as to the teaching practices implemented by educators at all levels (Kostouli, 2002).

Consequently, a critical approach of the L1 Cross -Thematic Curriculum in terms of language teaching in Primary Education (PI, 2003) may play a determinant role in the drawing of useful conclusions as to efforts eventually waged at the level of production and understanding of multimodal texts, as well as at the level of appropriate utilization of technology to that end.

### **Language and Multimodality in L.I. Curriculum**

A comprehensive monitoring of the Curriculum, elaborated under the supervision of the Pedagogical Institute and further adopted in principle by all educators in Primary Education, should, to begin with, yield an assumption as to the lack of a direct, express reference to the notion of multimodality. Understandably, this also implies an absence of a systematic approach as to the ways whereby to interconnect different semiotic systems at the stage of production of meaning. As a consequence, the presentation of similar relevant activities that would as a priority encourage the production of multimodal texts (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2010) by pupils seems rather deficient.

Such general observation imposes, therefore, an investigation into the indirect references to multimodality, which, up to a certain degree, also highlight the fundamental components of language teaching. More specifically, when it comes to the description of objectives, thematic units and the indicative proposed activities, there are constant and extensive references to the need for utilization of diverse textual genres, many of which have a predominantly multimodal character. Thus, for instance, the detection of messages contained in artistic creations and the decoding of logograms (PI, 2003) unquestionably require a previous familiarization of pupils with different semiotic contexts.

Still, since language fundamentally retains its role as the predominant semiotic mode, whatever contribution of –amongst other- visual elements and of the ancillary visual teaching aids, is in practice downplayed. Thus, *visual literacy*<sup>2</sup> is not approached systematically, nor are there any suggestions formulated towards an eventual integration and utilization of image – whether moving or static – in the teaching of language. Typical of such a situation is the fact that, at times, an image fails to be proposed as part of the text, as is, for instance, the case where a picture (PI, 2003) is submitted as a separate assignment (e.g., conversion of a comic strip in textual form)<sup>3</sup>.

We should, of course, admit that the adoption of the *communication-based / text-centered approach* (Mitsis, 2004; Kostouli, 2001) in the various Curricula contributes to the general improvement of the quality of the teaching of language, as it is bound to remedy in a large extent the weaknesses of the traditional approach. The emphasis given on the functional use of language, as well as in the valorization of its communicative dimension (Charalambopoulos & Chatzisavvidis, 1997), brings the whole exercise closer

to the pedagogy of literacies, all the more since there is utilization and implementation of pedagogical procedures similar to those applied in the case of multiliteracies (Chatzisavvidis, 2003).

### **Towards a Cross-Thematic Approach of Knowledge**

An appropriate utilization of the possibilities available under computer technologies and internet-based applications – in itself one of the *specific objectives* of language as a subject matter (PI, 2003) – is possible through the adoption of *interdisciplinarity* (Alachiotis 2002; Matsaggouras 2002) as a fundamental axis for the Curricula as a whole. More specifically, what is pursued, at the level of theoretical principles, is that knowledge is not presented as strictly delimited within self-standing disciplines. It is considered as an integrated whole, structured around issues directly relevant to everyday realities of the subjects to the learning process (Bibitsos, 2011). It is only reasonable for such an interdisciplinary, cross-thematic approach to be closely associated with multimodality, as it foments a familiarization of pupils with an array of alternative versions of reality, hence a variety of semiotic modes.

Such familiarization of pupils with different semiotic contexts may initially be obtained by way of typical activities, systematically proposed within the framework of the presentation of a generic, grade-specific targeting process. Structured as they are around the objective of the critical understanding and the production, at a second stage, of multimodal texts, such activities are strictly connected to the collection, analysis and further evaluation of various types of information, which in turn implies, as a prerequisite, the evaluation of all relevant elements, whether *linguistic*, *extra-linguistic* or *paralinguistic* (Mitsis, 2004). An indicative example is the proposed cross-thematic activity (Study of the Environment, Social and Civic Education, Aesthetics) aiming at the investigation and elaboration of mechanisms and strategies adopted within the context of real-life advertisements (PI, 2003).

A more concerted utilization of the theories of multimodality and multiliteracy – with an express reference to the role of technology – is attempted under the chapter dedicated to the management of information. At that level, the main objective consists in the acquisition of skills relevant to the creative search of information and the critical decoding of visual and acoustic signals. More specifically, the aim is for the pupil to train gradually, in order to be “in a position to locate and eventually assess information he or she may require, using various linguistic or non-linguistic sources of information,” before going on to “analyse and synthesise specific data” (PI, 2003, p.39).

It is clear that this is not just about the pupil’s skill to make simple use of IT Technology and Communication tools; much more than that, it is about the pupil’s capacity to manage the volume, the form and the type of information to which he or she is exposed, while using such tools or products. This complex process, therefore, implies the detection and decoding of information within the context of specific semiotic modes (e.g., language, shape, color in the text, music, graph, picture) and simultaneously requires an ongoing evaluation of

such information by reference, at all times, to the criterion of their relevance to whatever may each time be required.

But such objectives, which determine the framework of both the interdisciplinary activities and the *interdisciplinary work projects* under the given Curriculum, may not be easily attained unless relevant possibilities, made available by modern technology, are creatively explored (PI, 2003). It is thus explicitly recommended that information be searched for and further processed by reference to a variety of different sources (printed or electronic). So, the pupil, in coming into contact with diverse types of multimodal texts (i.e., maps, diagrams, etc.), will be eventually able to fathom the importance of the contribution of image and other semiotic modes in the production of meaning, while at the same time encouraged to produce texts in writing using a PC.

Thus, the production of written texts may eventually be associated with a subsidiary use of some educational software (for instance, an electronic multimedia-based dictionary or a CD-ROM aiming at a general improvement, however ludic the approach, of the pupils' language skills level) and with the valorization, of course, of the material already obtained at a previous stage through the Internet. Besides, writing on a computer screen has been proven to also foster a synergic composition of texts. It allows pupils to function as a group, whether by way of a consecutive asynchronous communication and follow-up of modifications along the way, or by way of synchronous (correct-as-you-type) corrections followed by an assessment by other members amongst those belonging to the same group.

It pays to note, however, that the notion of multimodality is experienced more globally at the level of description of exemplary *interdisciplinary work projects* (PI, 2003). Thus, for instance, the proposed editing by pupils of a newspaper, or a tourist guide for their region, implies both a previous assimilation of the theoretical principles determined within the context of the pedagogy of multiliteracies and the adoption, at the same time, of specific strategies aiming at an ultimate, tangible implementation thereof - understandably depending on the prescribed needs in communication.

### **Information and Communication Technologies: Towards an Overall Evaluation**

It has been established that an interdisciplinary, cross-thematic approach for knowledge, combined with a creative utilization of the information and communication technologies tools, may be very efficient in the learning process. It assists towards the achievement of the objectives that language literacy is meant to pursue, while at the same time remedying many of the existing weaknesses. Despite all efforts, however, the essentially regulatory character of language teaching has at times been emphasized, just as has been overvalued written speech over any other semiotic mode (Graikos, 2005). Still, even in terms of principles, there have been reservations expressed as to whether and to what extent the actual Curricula are in a position to cater to the needs of today's realities, fostering, as they are, sufficiently appropriate multiliteracy skills and competences. They often tend to be considered as, "in

fact closed and rigid, with very clear, stated or implied, preplanned directions, which makes them technocratic both in planning and in classroom implementation” (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2010, p, 59).

Referent to interdisciplinarity, the very structure of the Curricula, as well as the all too frequent lack of sufficient time or planning undermines, seems to prevent, despite all good intentions, the development of a satisfactory level of innovative interdisciplinary actions (Noutsos, 2003). At the same time, the Curriculum (PI, 2003, p.39) itself stipulates that “the use of computers may be introduced provided the appropriate conditions of hygiene, space, equipment and teaching capacity of the staff are ensured.” This remark at the bottom of the page proves that the question of the didactic approach of multimodal texts may not be visited separately from the general scope of difficulties already encountered -and those that keep coming up along the way- concerning a pedagogical utilization of new technologies.

As an example, may we mention the incapacity of education to swiftly adjust to new realities, because of certain specificities at the local or national level or, even, as a result of conflicting interests (Koutsoyannis, 1999); also to be mentioned should be an initial deficit in preparation and training experienced amongst teachers. The lack of training and preparedness, resulting in stress and even in feelings of frustration and inferiority, along with an originally negative attitude adopted by certain Greek teachers vis-à-vis the use of computers<sup>4</sup> -sometimes triggered by certain ideologies (Christidis, 2001) - expectedly affected the degree of sufficiency in the pursuit and eventual achievement of the institutional didactic goals, however good the direction such goals have been given may be.

### **Conclusion**

It is true that the notion of multimodality has already led to a redetermination of the didactic objectives and methods in the domain of language teaching, admittedly the domain bearing the best part of the task of valorizing all components of the communication process (Hondolidou, 1999). The change of the communication landscape, symbolized by the complexity of the processes of production and perception of meaning has, amongst other, led to the adoption of an interdisciplinary conceptualization of knowledge. The capacity, therefore, to manage and assess information within new semiotic environments is placed at the epicenter of the whole approach. What has also been made evident, however, is that the achievement of such goals is not possible without a creative utilization of the possibilities made available with information and communication technologies, because the approach of modern cultural multimodal products implies a previous understanding in essence of the way whereby all existing semiotic modes are interconnected.

The challenge for the contemporary educational systems is to be in a position to incorporate all these conclusions reached through investigation and research, which will further enable them to successfully meet further challenges ahead. What was demonstrated, through such critical approach of the Hellenic Curriculum for Primary Education (PI, 2003), was that there is indeed quite an effort currently waged at the institutional level, despite

whatever weaknesses and practical difficulties experienced along the way, towards globally highlighting the functional and communicative dimension of language. What is required, however, is a more systematic approach of multimodality, both in terms of original planning of the targeting process and in terms of descriptively analysing those strategies considered to be more apt to be utilized in practice by the teacher.

### Notes

1. By *text* we perceive a comprehensive sequence of language messages within a communication context (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 1999).
2. Under such approach, literacy is increasingly associated to visual communication, which includes, for instance, multimedia interfaces, user-friendly screen-based technologies, text processing and desktop publishing.
3. Emphasis is nevertheless placed on the importance of image, both within the Nursery School Curricula (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2010) and in Teachers' Manuals (especially those corresponding to the First Grade of Primary School). What is discussed there essentially is the complex pattern of association between the two semiotic systems (namely language and image), whilst it is stressed that at the end of the day "being able to read pictures is reading as well" (PI, 2003, p. 12).
4. For conclusions drawn in the aftermath of contemporary research concerning the attitude of Greek teachers vis-à-vis the use of computers, we indicatively refer the reader to Ntinis, D. K. (2010). Νέες τεχνολογίες και γλωσσική διδασκαλία: ένας απολογισμός - διαφαινόμενες προοπτικές [New technologies and language teaching: review and prospects].

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