Re-defining 'Reading' in the 21st Century: Accessing Multimodal Texts

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Abstract

The act of reading has been made more complex in the 21st century with the proliferation of multimodal texts. Organizations like the 'Partnership for 21st Century Skills' and researchers like the New London Group (1996), Hull & Nelson (2005) and Kress et al (2006) argue for the need for schools to re-look at the ways our children become literate in this and media-driven environment. Teachers too live with this reality and can appreciate the fact that not everything they learn can be found in the textbook. However, many do not possess the knowledge and skills to harness the media and technological tools for use in the language classroom. In order for teachers and learners to be effective users of texts in the 21st Century, we argue that a framework is needed to assist them. Hence this article proposes a framework called the *6 Semiotic Modes* (Chan & Chia, 2014 adapted from Anstey and Bull, 2010). They include Linguistic, Audio, Spatial, Oral, Visual and Gestural modes and are used as tools to unlock the meaning behind different types of multimodal texts needed for teaching and learning.

Keywords: multimodal texts, multiliteracy, literacy development, semiotic modes

Introduction

Our learners live in a media-saturated world where they are bombarded with images on a daily basis. If teachers are to catch up with the times, then the teaching of reading in any English classroom should move beyond the learners' engagement with just print text. Such a belief is supported by Hobbs (2007) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), who emphasized that the process of reading, understanding and meaning-making requires learners to not only have the ability to identify the printed word, but also to read differing patterns, forms and structures within their daily lives and environment. Many English syllabuses – i.e. Singapore, several states in Australia and the Philippines to name a few – have in recent years made attempts to move away from a 'logocentric, book-centered, and essay-driven' (Hull & Nelson, 2005) approach. These syllabuses advocate the necessity for learners to have the ability to integrate the reading of the printed word with visual forms in print and non-print modes. Put another way, educational policy makers have begun to recognize that being visually literate is a necessary asset for the 21st century learner. Teachers too live with this reality but may not have the knowledge and skills to harness the media and technological tools for use in the language classroom. In order for teachers and learners to be effective

users of texts in the 21st century, a framework that is principled and systematic is needed to support them.

The 6 Semiotic Modes Framework

Any framework which enables the 'reading' of a multimodal text presupposes that the text is made up of more than one semiotic mode to communicate meaning. The practice of 'reading' a print or non-print multimodal text involves the learner 'figuring out how the different semiotic modes complement or work against one another' (Chan & Chia, 2014). For example, an effective television commercial often employs the use of moving images, speech, music, sound and often traditional texts in the form of words, phrases and sentences. The challenge for teachers is to unpack these different semiotic modes in accessible ways so that their students are able to understand how the commercial is effective in persuading the consumer to buy the product. Chan & Chia's (2014) *6 Semiotic Modes* framework outline a number of semiotic modes – *Linguistic, Oral, Audio, Visual, Spatial* and *Gestural* (ideas adapted from New London Group, 1996; Bull and Anstey, 2010) – which could be seen as 'vehicles' for teachers and learners to read, listen, view and understand different kinds of texts. The framework requires that teachers and learners tap on their 'senses' and powers of

Table 1

Descriptions of the 6 Semiotic Modes with examples

Modes	Description	Examples
Linguistic	refers to the print prose form found in multimodal texts which are depicted by letters of the alphabet, words and sentences	look out for vocabulary, sentences, grammar items, paragraphing
Audio	refers to content and information in multimodal texts that the reader receives aurally	listen for volume, pitch, rhythm, silence, pauses
Spatial	refers to how space, as depicted in multimodal texts, affects the reader's understanding of the world and surrounding contexts, setting and environment	look out for proximity, direction, position in space
Oral	refers specifically to monologues and dialogues depicted in multimodal texts and how they affect the reader's understanding of characters	look out for conversations and speeches
Visual	refers to the images – still as well as moving ones – depicted in the form of people, objects and places	look out for colours, vectors, lines, shapes, viewpoints
Gestural	refers specifically to physical movements that depict the various aspects of human nature as depicted in multimodal texts	look out for movement, speed, stillness and body position

(adapted from Anstey & Bull, 2010; Chan & Chia, 2014)

awareness and observation when analysing a multimodal text (Anderson, 1999). Technically, they have been purposely defined in an easy-to-understand way to help learners gain confidence as they grasp the reading of multimodal texts.

Pedagogically, they provide teachers with a set of terms for easy application in classrooms. Inspired by the work done by researchers like the New London Group (1996) and Anstey and Bull's (2010) framework of *5 Semiotic Modes*, Chan & Chia's (2014) spell out the 6 Semiotic Modes in greater detail:

'Reading' Multimodal Texts

Framework to reading multimodal texts

The figure below shows a schematic representation of how the 6 Semiotic Modes can be applied to the reading of multimodal texts.
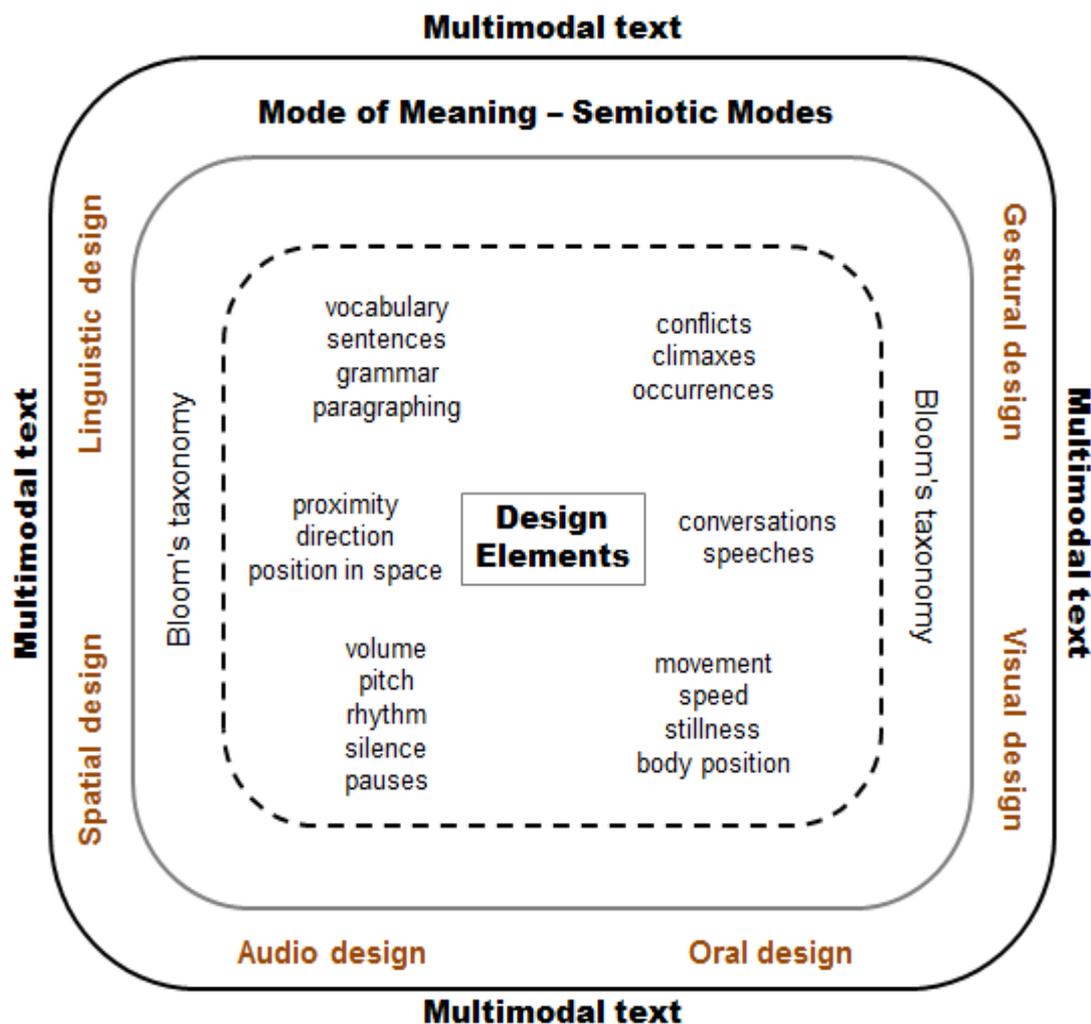

Figure 1. Framework to reading multimodal texts via the 6 semiotic modes (Chan & Chia, 2014)

General Analysis

The process of analysis begins with the teacher choosing a multimodal text (e.g. a picture book, a television commercial, a YouTube video, a brochure or a movie poster, etc.). The teacher then poses the following questions that would guide learners through a general analysis of the multimodal text (Chan & Chia, 2014; *adapted*):

1. Is there a dominant semiotic mode in the multimodal text? What is it?
2. Are there secondary semiotic modes present?

Detailed Analysis

Table 2 provides the teacher with specific questions pertaining to particular aspects of each semiotic mode. Depending on the

3. What do you think is the purpose of each of these semiotic modes? What is the message conveyed?

semiotic modes identified, the teacher encourages the learners to further probe the text with another set of more pointed questions specific to each of the six modes.

Table 2
Probing questions for each semiotic mode

Semiotic Mode	Questions
Linguistic	• Does the vocabulary, generic structure, punctuation, grammar or paragraphing stand out in any particular way? • Where are the words, letters, phrases, sentences or paragraphs placed? • What fonts are used? Are the fonts coloured? Are the colours contrasting? Are the lines depicting the fonts thick or thin? • If there are moving texts, how are they timed to appear? • Is there interaction with another semiotic mode?
Audio	• Does the music or sound effects stand out in any particular way? • What is the type of audio depicted? • What is the rhythm and pace of the audio? Are there extreme variations in volume? • What emotional responses does the audio elicit from listeners? • If the depicted audio 'X' is replaced with 'Y', would it change the intended effect? How? • Does the audio interact with other semiotic modes? Is the integration between semiotic modes seamless? • Would the audio have a greater impact if it wasn't in English?
Spatial	• How are the object/s or person/s placed? In the foreground or background? At the top or bottom? Left, right or centre? • Is there a distance between the object/s, place/s or person/s? • If there is a main character, in what sort of space does he or she appear? For example, in small dark box? OR amidst a vast ocean? Or stranded in the wilderness?
Oral	• What is the conversation about? • How is the dialogue or monologue delivered (intonation and stress)? • At which part of the text does the dialogue or monologue appear? • How does the dialogue or monologue affect other characters in the texts? • How does the dialogue or monologue add to the viewers' understanding of plot development or text development and structure? • Is the dialogue or monologue catalytic in the characters' development and/or plot development? • How does it or do they influence the mindset of the audience and understanding of the text? • How and why does the dialogue or monologue keep viewers engaged with the text?
Visual	• Are there visuals used? • Which ones capture your attention? • What type of visuals are they? Objects, pictures, photographs, colored fonts, etc. • How are the visuals placed in relation to one another? • From which point of view are you looking at the visuals? Bird's eye? Eye level? Worm's level? • How is the visual framed? What is available to the 'reader'? What is not available? • What sort of lighting is used? Soft? Bright? Subdued? Spotlighting? • What colours are used?
Gestural	• What sort of facial expression do you see? • Are there eye movements which capture your attention? For example, staring, gazing, etc. • What are the other gestures, e.g. shift of the head, twitching eyebrow, finger movements, body position, etc. depicted? Are they exaggerated or are they natural?

(adapted from Anstey & Bull, 2010; Chan & Chia, 2014)

These sets of questions allow a novice teacher to pre-analyse a text plan ahead; and enable an experienced teacher to delve deeper into textual analysis and interpretation of meaning and intent.

Extended Discussion of Text

After the detailed 'reading' of the multimodal text, the teacher could, for a more extended discussion, pose higher order questions to encourage a more critical reading of the text. This could be done purposefully and systematically by incorporating Bloom's taxonomy of skills and question types. Table 3 below outlines some generic stems that the teacher could use to elicit a deeper understanding of the text:

Table 3
Bloom's taxonomy of skills and question types

Levels	Bloom's taxonomy of skills	Some key terms exemplified in the question type (they are by no means exhaustive)
1.	**Knowledge** – refers to the process of remembering, memorising, recognising, recalling and identifying, recalling information and describing differing situations and contexts	Who, what, when, where, why, how, describe, identify, define, list, give an example of, give an account of, name, label, etc.
2.	**Comprehension** – refers to the process of interpreting, translating information from one form to another, describing in one's own words, retelling information in another mode, organising and selecting ideas and information	Explain, cite, quote, write down, give examples of, paraphrase/restate in your own words, summarise, trace, give reasons why, etc.
3.	**Application** – refers to the process of solving problems, applying information to achieve a certain outcome, utilising rules, statistics and principles	How is 'X' an example of 'Y'?; how is 'X' related to 'Y'?; why is 'X' significant?; illustrate, demonstrate, show, etc.
4.	**Analysis** – refers to the process of identifying motives, surfacing underlying ideas and intentions, separating/breaking down an issue/concern to exemplify how it is related to the large picture	What are the parts or features of, what evidence can you list to show, classify… according to …, examine, infer, why do you think, compare and contrast, etc.
5.	**Synthesis** – refers to the process of forming/creating an innovative and unique 'product' or a combination of ideas and thoughts which may materialise in verbal or physical form	What would you predict/ infer from…; what ideas can you add to…; how would you create a new…; what could possibly happen if you combine…; what are the possible solutions to…, etc.
6.	**Evaluation** – refers to the process of making value decision on issues of concern or duty, solving contradictions and controversies, developing perspective, opinions, judgements and making decisions	Do you agree…; what are your thoughts on…; what is the most important…; place the following in order of priority…; how would you decide…; what criteria would you enact to assess…, etc.

The following list of questions demonstrates how Bloom's taxonomy could be

- What evidence from specific parts of the multimodal text point to the dominance of one or two semiotic mode(s)? Highlight them.

- Why is this one semiotic mode dominant over others? Would the impact be different if another semiotic mode was or other semiotic modes were dominant, instead of the one identified? How so? Explain.

- Describe the relationship between the key dominant semiotic modes in the chosen text. How are they combined? How do they affect or support one another? How do they work together to make meaning for the reader/ viewer?

- What are the messages that are brought to the surface in relation to the inter-play between the semiotic modes?

- From your (reader/viewer) understanding of the relationship between the key semiotic modes, from whose perspective is this multimodal text constructed?

incorporated with questions pertaining to the semiotic modes:

- Are there other possible construct-ions from different points of view?

- Who is the multimodal text pro-duced for?

- Whose interests are being served by this multimodal text? The target group? Explain.

- Who is excluded or included in this text? Are there communities, special groups or individuals who have been marginalised by this text? Why?

- What assumptions about the target audience(s) of this text have been made?

- Are there particular beliefs, values, attitudes and ideologies that are foregrounded in this multimodal text? How are they brought to surface? Are they surfaced in the first place?

- How did you (the reader-viewer) come to the conclusions, messages, insights and make meaning out of the multimodal text?

(Chan & Chia, 2014; *adapted*)

Sample Analysis

This section demonstrates the application of the 6 Semiotic Modes framework on a multimodal text in the form of a book cover (see https://tinyurl.com/mz9qzjv) entitled *Papa's House, Mama's House* written by Jean Patindol (2004):

- Is there a dominant semiotic mode in the multimodal text? What is it?

- *Yes, linguistic.*

- Are there secondary semiotic modes present?

Yes, visual.

However, some might say that both semiotic modes appear to have equal status and they complement each other.

- What do you think is the purpose of each of these semiotic modes? Where are

the words, letters, phrases, sentences or paragraphs placed? Does the vocabulary, generic structure, punctuation, grammar or paragraphing stand out in any particular way?

The words 'Papa's House, Mama's House' is the title of this book. We know this because it is represented with large and bold fonts and placed right in the middle of the book cover. At first glance, 'Papa's House, Mama's House' appears to be an unusual title i.e. a comma separates the two noun phrases 'Papa's House' and 'Mama's House'; and it's not 'Papa and Mama's House' neither is it 'Papa's House and Mama's House' – which would probably be

the usual way of referring to the house belonging to one's parents.

- What type of visuals are they? Which ones capture your attention? How are the visuals placed in relation to one another? How is the visual framed? What is available to the 'reader'? What is not available? What colours are used?

The visuals that capture the readers' attention are two very tall houses – line-drawn with intricate details e.g. curtains, blinds, facade designs, etc.. The houses occupy more than three quarters of the length of the book cover. One house is placed on the right of the title and the other on the left. The houses, along with the title, occupy a central position of the book cover. Most of the linguistic features and visuals are predominantly in white and they sit in contrast against a bright red background.

- What is the message conveyed? What are the implications? What is the significance? What do they imply?

The title, read together with the visuals, conveys a sense of separation i.e. Papa and Mama are separated and hence they live in separate houses. The height of the houses presents a looming presence and probably central to the story. Despite the seemingly dire situation of parental separation, the neatness of the houses and their beautiful facades and gardens depict a sense of normalcy unusual in many cases of separation. This juxtaposition piques the readers' interest to want to open the cover to read more. On top of this, the predominantly red background could be interpreted as the colour of love or passion. But in some cultures, it also represents danger. This further arouses the readers' curiosity. Lastly, what is interesting is that the narrator, whom we assume is the child caught in this separation, is missing from the book cover i.e. no images, no names, no toys, etc. can be seen.

Conclusion

This article started off by making a case for the re-examination of reading in the 21st century classroom. It argued that act of reading has been made more complex in the 21st century with the proliferation of multimodal texts. The 6 semiotic modes – *Linguistic, Oral, Audio, Visual, Spatial* and *Gestural* were then introduced and described. General questions were also provided to help teachers guide their learners in their analyses of multimodal texts. For each semiotic mode, a set of questions was presented to help teachers and learners probe texts. Bloom's taxonomy of skills and question types were incorporated with the latter set of questions to encourage a deeper, more critical reading of texts. The article ended off with a demonstration of an analysis of a multimodal book cover. It is hoped that the framework presented here will enable teachers to guide their learners to 'read' and access multimodal texts in better and more meaningful ways.

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