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# An Action-Research project evaluating the efficacy of Multimodal texts over Monomodal texts in Communicative Teaching.

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このプロジェクトは、日本の高等学校の英語教育における、単一モードテキストに対するマルチモードテキストの効率性を比較するものである。このプロジェクトの理論的根拠は、二つ以上の記号モード（学習活動におけるコミュニケーションチャンネル）を用いて生徒の理解とモチベーションがどの程度まで高められるかということを探ることである。一連のレッスンプログラムの一部で、一つは単一モード、もう一つはマルチモードによる類似した二つのリスニング活動を実施し、検証として、リスニング活動で学習されたことを評価する活動を設定した。結論として、マルチモードによるテキストのほうが、いくつかの理由で言語的・メタ言語的意識をより深めることを明らかにした。その第一の理由は、ターゲットとなる言語のコンテキストを正しく理解することにより、生徒が類似したコンテキストにおいて学んだことを適用しようとすることである。第二の理由は、高校生はより長く集中でき、学習活動において二つ以上の記号モードが展開されてもテキストにより深く関わることであり得ることである。第三に、教室における活動にテクノロジーを導入すれば、目新しいものとして作業課題に対する関心を高めることができるからである。

## Abstract

This project compares the efficacy of Multimodal texts over Monomodal texts in teaching English in a Japanese high school context. The rationale of this project was to explore to what extent is student understanding and motivation enhanced using more than one semiotic mode, or channel of communication during an activity. As part of a program of a series of lessons, two similar listening activities were conducted, one Monomodal and one Multimodal. As a follow up, activities were designed to evaluate what was learnt in the listening activities. In conclusion it was demonstrated that Multimodal texts lead to a deeper quality of linguistic and meta-linguistic consciousness, for several reasons. Firstly due to the fact the students appreciate the context of the target language, they are able to apply what they have learnt in a similar context. Secondly, high school students are able to concentrate longer, and engage more deeply with the text when more than one semiotic mode is deployed in an activity. Thirdly, bringing technology into the classroom acts as a novelty that stimulates enthusiasm for the task in hand.

## (a) Multimodality and multimodal texts

Multimodal texts are defined as texts which utilise more than one semiotic mode, or channel of communication. Although arguably nearly all human communication is to some degree multimodal there are degrees of multimodality present in different published genres, usually as a direct result of the limitations of technology, the topic, the purpose of the text and to some degree the audience. In the West, traditionally since the invention of moveable type,

printed block text has been the prevalent mode of mass communication. However, with the introduction of the gramophone, telephone, wireless, cinema, television and now internet, it is becoming more common for users to expect to be informed through a range of modes, more recently verbal/ aural. By separating the components of communication (that is, deconstructing) which make up a text, and analysing them separately it is said to be possible to gather a deeper understanding of meaning which can subsequently be applied to instruct a class and to learn a second language.

#### **(b) A description of the texts/ exercises under analysis**

In this paper two text production exercises will be compared and contrasted. One is a traditional dictation-style exercise using a CD as the source of an original text, whereas the other uses a DVD to provide the model language use.

##### **Exercise One/ Text One**

In this exercise, the a mixed sex group of 30 Japanese high school students sat down in a class and listened three times to Aretha Franklin's song "*Respect*". Native English Speaking teachers and Native Japanese Teachers were both present. After listening the first time, they were each given a handout with some words removed, and as they listened a second time they filled in the blanks. The third time around they compared their answers with a original version. After the exercise they talked about the meaning of the text in groups based upon what they heard and read from the handout.

##### **Exercise Two/ Text Two**

In this exercise the same participants watched a scene from the DVD version of "*Love Actually*". They could watch it as often as they like, using Japanese or English voiceovers or subtitles until they were confident that they understood the scene. They were then asked to write, direct and film in groups a short love scene based upon what they saw, which was to be performed to the whole class.

#### **(c) Analysis**

Exercise One is basically mono- or bi-modal. The only voice is Aretha Franklin's, and it is basically a dictation exercise. It embodies what de Souza sees as the Derridan observation of Western academic texts: the writing represents sounds, and is consequently only a system of secondary representation (de Souza (2003, p.228)). When one considers Swanwick's (2003) analysis of how students of BSL learn to write English (which is often their second language), one can see the obvious fallacy of this assumption. They process language using an inner voice, they visualize meaning without "words" before constructing a meaning on paper. This leads one to question the validity of over-relying on this teaching method.

The DVD in contrast uses the visual, audio, written semiotic modes. Iedema (2003) picks out the key multimodal features present in a television documentary that are essentially the

same for the DVD. The semiotic modes used include (but not exhaustively) visual, gestured, written, and verbal (aural/ oral). Among the visual modes used one finds scenery, clothes, location and props, hand-written signs declaring love, and gestures. The verbal mode includes dialogue, but also monologues, silence and song.

Iedema suggests that the key to meaning is how people are represented, modifying slightly Halliday's basic metafunctions (Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual) into *Representation*, *Orientation* and *Organisation*. In "Love Actually", a similar analysis could be made. Ideationally/ Representationally, the movie is about love and humanity, which puts a strong emphasis upon the Interpersonal/ Orientation Metafunction. The large number of couples who are closely related to each other adds layers of meaning to the basic meaning as the web of relationships builds the plot. The structure of the plot revolves around how people met/meet each other. This leads to complexity by interweaving many layers of different kinds of love relationship in a complex Organization/ Textuality. In fact the Design (namely the generic structure) of this movie as a semiotic construct deeply reinforces the meaning that would come simply from the dialogue otherwise, and helps make it easy for non-Native speakers of English to follow. If the movie relied on language sound alone (rather like radio without the sound effects), understanding would surely be limited even for fluent English speakers. The cutting from location to location would hardly make sense.

In one sense, Materiality (Ormerod and Ivanic, 2003) is also relevant as the students are examining texts and producing them themselves. Even Exercise One involves the students reproducing word for word the authorized "correct" model text (where alternatives are not viewed as viable), but this concept is crucially relevant in Exercise Two. The materiality (namely the physical design of the medium) of the DVD itself, as in the way it was built, designed is of crucial importance in that it affects the messages sent and the way they are understood. The fact that students have access to bilingual voice tracks and subtitles makes the meaning accessible to all students regardless of their L2 ability. But even beyond the physical construction of the DVD software, the props and locations enhance and promote understanding of meaning. In one scene a man parodies a serenade, by declaring his eternal Platonic love for his friend's wife silently using handwritten placards. He stands on the doorstep of a house pretending to be a carol singer while a portable cassette player plays carols. He then shows a sequence of signs, words, photographs all declaring his love for the lady as she watches on. The camera cuts between them, showing this body language as well as the romantic Christmas Eve setting. When the students wrote their own texts, they were encouraged to explore semiotic modes in this way, using objects, signs, pictures, gestures, facial expressions beyond the level they were accustomed to with traditional communicative lessons and even Total Physical Response methods (which incidentally many of the students themselves vocally objected to as patronizing or childish).

Another key difference between Text One and Text Two is the active re-contextualizing of meaning by the students. With the CD the students are listening and inserting single

disconnected phonemes in a broken written text, but with the DVD they are actively (re-) building knowledge into a context, in a similar way to de Silva's (2003, p. 226) observation of a Brazilian indigenous teacher. It also encourages the type of "inner speak" discussed by Swanwick (2003) in her analysis of BSL and written English. The students have a visual image which they mediate into a written form. As mentioned above, the CD exercise explicitly implies that the written form is a second generation form of the spoken. The advantage of the DVD exercise is that this inner speech shows an active process of re-contextualization, resignification transformation and modification (after de Souza (2003, p.229)). Vygotsky claims that this internalisation of knowledge as a crucial step to constructing true understanding.

#### **(d) Conclusion: Multimodality and EFL/ teaching and learning**

There are some drawbacks to applying Exercise Two and similar activities in the classroom. Japan, as the world's second largest economy, is a developed nation which highly prioritises education. Consequently, schools are extremely well resourced, and access to DVD hardware, projector, software and video cameras is a basic matter of paperwork. However, in less developed countries, where the need for promoting education is arguably greater, these resources are lacking. Hopefully, as access to technology increases the benefits can be felt in less affluent areas of the world.

There are advantages to both Texts. They both promote a partial sense of community. In Text Two students can sample a vision of supposed everyday life in the UK, and in Text One we see a vision of Western romantic love. Both present an interesting source of a contrast with the Japanese understanding of romance. Should they have the opportunity to travel, or take part in online chat forums, they can move towards building a common understanding with British or American people based on a common interest in cinema or love songs. This is a key facet to them developing an identity as a young Japanese learner of English.

Although the researcher viewpoint is valuable, the stance of the learner is also worth mentioning. If students are encouraged to emulate mono-modal texts (such as TOEFL written exam) they will fall into the trap which de Souza (2003) identifies with native speakers as they grow up: education (which is focused largely on traditional academic print genres) effectively can limit their range of self-expression and may inhibit their range of perception to one or at best only two dimensions. Ormerod and Ivanic (2003 p.121) make the point that children, when making texts, move from three dimensions to two dimensions at around the age of ten years, so limiting the range of creative use of other semiotic modes, though undeniably correlating with a deeper understanding of traditional adult written modes. Perhaps teachers and adult learners of English too, intuitively move away from using and producing multimodal texts to the familiar "mono-modal" ones, denying themselves the opportunity to use a wider range of language flexibly and creatively. This is seen in the paradox that on the one hand pictures and collages are seen as "babyish" in junior/secondary schools and yet CD-Roms and the internet are increasing

used in English schools and universities.

Wilson (2003, p294) looks at the so-called "third space" in studies of men in prison. In a similar way, after short series of teacher-led classes, secondary school level EFL students can gain a meta-awareness of multimodality, and so learners can create their own third space where they can construct knowledge and skills, motivate themselves and enable themselves to use DVDs as a self-study aid (as opposed to merely copying out CD-Rom reference material). The teacher too has to be aware of how the meaning has been built and is expressed in the teaching materials they are using if they hope to glean a clear picture of what their students are learning from a class. Without a systematic approach, what is being taught (the specified curriculum) and learnt (the experienced curriculum) may be at variance. As we engage with new forms of technology, as a learner or teacher, we need to be aware of what we are doing to prevent the uncritical application of new technology simply for its own sake. On a personal level, as a teacher hoping to deploy "Macromedia Flash, "PowerPoint" and web pages in the classroom, it is a humbling feeling to recall how when the author first used a blackboard to teach a class, it took him some time and experience to gain an intuitive feel for when it was appropriate to use it, where to write, what colour chalks to use. The main point of any technology in the classroom should be to support learning. This being said, it ought to be emphasized how much more eagerly the students participated in Exercise Two due to the novelty factor of the DVD. Although the students were measurably learning (by producing and performed original salient texts) one student commented that it did not feel like they were studying. By motivating the students, learning is further scaffolded. In terms of concentration too, the Multimodal Exercise Two held the student's interest for longer. When several semiotic modes were employed, the text became observably easier for the students to follow, so that they need concentrate only on the novel aspects of the language as they appeared. In Exercise One, students started chatting and moving off task as soon as they came across difficult vocabulary, and one group of five students actually were not interested in trying to understand the meaning of the text at all, since (as they said) they thought the objective of the exercise was simply to fill in the blanks and to enjoy the music. On the other hand, Exercise Two carries the advantage that one cannot enjoy the DVD without understanding the meaning of the text to a greater degree.

In conclusion, though both Texts are useful instruments of instruction, Multimodal texts can offer more opportunities for student learning, both their second language and in terms of their development of identity. The students could explore different semiotic modes of communication using their second language. By experimenting with how they represent themselves in front of the classroom camera, they are also constructing their identity as a Japanese second language learner, and are able to use new voices with they would not normally have access to in daily life. In effect the language use is placed within a person-to-person context authentically, albeit within the constraints of a drama classroom.

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