

# MULTIMODALITY IN L1 EDUCATION

Introduction to the Special Issue

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## Abstract

The introduction serves as the first entry point into the special issue. Based on a semiotically grounded concept of multimodality, it summarizes the contributions of the articles to the topic. Additionally, the articles are thematically grouped to highlight the connections between them.

Keywords: multimodality, literature education, semiotics, teacher education

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Shifts in media preferences like the drastic decline of everyday reading of books are often perceived as threats to literature education. The Special Issue sets a counterpoint to these laments, grounded on the premise that literature education should extend beyond narratives conveyed solely through written language. The articles within this issue investigate multimodality with a specific emphasis on its implications for literature education.

Was does multimodality mean? The term 'multimodality' encompasses several dimensions, with perceptual and semiotic multimodality being the two most prominent. As defined by Sachs-Hombach et al. (2018, p. 12), "a perceptual dimension of multimodality is present when a stimulus or a constellation of stimuli is processed through at least two modes of perception" (translated by the author). Here, modes of perception refer to the five human senses and, in some cases, include motoric body sensations (ibid.). Within the context of L1 education and literature studies, semiotic multimodality plays a central role. This term is used, when narratives are presented through "multi-layered sign systems" to "present worlds and stories" (Eder 2022, 354). In this case, the various sign systems are conceived as semiotic "modes," which are frequently defined as "resources for meaning-making" (Jewitt & Kress 2003, p. 1f.; see Serafini, 2014, p. 12f). For instance, "[i]mage, writing, layout, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack are examples of [such] modes" (Kress 2010, 79; see also Bateman et al., 2017, p. 18).

In the semiotically grounded framework of Bateman et al. (ibid., p. 7), multimodality is defined as "a way of characterising communicative situations [...] which rely upon combinations of different 'forms' of communication to be effective". This abstract definition is particularly well-suited for educational purposes. For example, a communicative situation possesses certain "necessary features," whereby specific "knowledge [...] among a community of users" must be shared. This knowledge is about a "particular range of material regularities that are to be considered to be carrying semiotic activity" (ibid. p. 86). Furthermore, "a scheme for deriving interpretations from the material regularities identified must also be shared" (ibid.). From an educational perspective, the pertinent question arises: how can we empower students to become members of these communities of users? In order to achieve this goal, the influential New London Group prescribes "the development of a semiotic toolkit [...] that builds access to the literacy practices and discourse resources that constitute the contemporary social landscape" (Siegel 2006, 72; see also Wildfeuer, in prep.). This includes much more than a list of stylistic devices of different media—comics, films, videogames, or novels. The New London Group (1996) recommends "Overt Instruction" comprising "the use of metalanguages, languages of reflective generalization that describe the form, content, and function of the discourses of practice." Moreover, "immersion in meaningful practices within a community" including experts is needed, as well as a critical framing, all resulting in a "reflective practice". By following this path, multiliteracy—an extension of the traditional concept of literacy—can be achieved.

For teachers, this presents a daunting challenge. They may not be well-versed in how various semiotic modes contribute to meaning-making or how the modes generate ambiguities and undecidabilities. They may also lack the terminology necessary to perceive the idiosyncrasies of a multimodal aesthetic object. Furthermore, some of their students may have more experience with multimodal artworks than the teachers themselves. To determine whether these constitute discouraging conditions for teachers to employ multimodal literature in the classroom, it is best to inquire with them. This leads to the first main question of the special issue: What challenges and opportunities do (prospective) teachers think of and face in dealing with multimodal literature in literature education? How do articles of this special issue address this question?

- 1) The article by Poyas and Elkad-Lehman approaches this question regarding graphic novels. They conducted a questionnaire study involving 48 Jewish and Arab teachers, some of whom were pursuing a Master's Degree, while others were in the early stages of their careers. They completed an online questionnaire after reading the first 21 pages of "Tunnels" by Rutu Modan (2020). 44% of the sample reported having no experience with graphic novels. Although especially the Arab teachers appreciated the task, 58% of the participants "found it harder to read the graphic novel than to read a verbal novel in Hebrew". Even though the participants were quite young and "grew up in the digital and multimodal age", the teachers need additional training to confidently use graphic novels in literature classes. This is why Poyas and Elkad-Lehmann propose "updating the teacher training curricula in Israel—and worldwide—in order to equip language arts teachers with the tools of reading, interpreting and mediating such texts".
- 2) Comparable insights can be drawn from the article by Aliagas et al. concerning the inclusion of digital fiction in literary education. They interviewed six language arts teachers who were at the beginning of their career. They voluntarily participated in a project led by researchers to collaboratively design proposals for "guided reading of multimodal texts, and especially digital fiction" for use in Catalan or Spanish classes. Aliagas et al. compared three teacher profiles (very enthusiastic, moderately keen, and more resistant) in terms of their views regarding digital fiction, as well as challenges, difficulties or even threads associated with integrating such literature into the classroom. The results indicate that "although the introduction of digital fiction into schools might promote new ways of conceptualizing the learning environment, it does require deep didactic reflection" to realize the potential of such texts.

In addition to exploring the perspectives of teachers, the special issue features articles that focus on how students process the specifics of semiotic modes. Consequently, the second main question is: How can the specifics of different multimodal media help to initiate aesthetic experiences for learners with varying abilities and differences in prior knowledge? For aesthetic experiences, subjective

entanglement and, subsequently, emotions are central (Magirius et al., 2023). Emotions “are not the adversary of considered and reflective action, but rather an indispensable compass” (Seel 2018, 132) for the purpose of perceiving the idiosyncrasies of an aesthetic object. Four articles of the special issue deal with aesthetic experiences with different semiotic modes.

- 1) The article by Wittig presents results from her exploratory dissertation study in which 19 elementary school students performed so-called panel readings of the comic *Lehmriese lebt! [Clay Giant's Alive!]* by Anke Kuhl. In the panel readings, the children bring chapters of the comic to life by creating sounds using various objects. To achieve this, they must identify where the semiotic modes of the comic convey information about sound. In the article, Wittig meticulously analyzes how four children negotiate the use of different sounds and how they perform the panel reading. She demonstrates how panel readings can lead to aesthetic experiences for learners with varying abilities.
- 2) While in Wittig's study, the sound of the comics had to be created—since comics do not produce sound themselves—in Pietsch's article, the multimodal text—a film shot—incorporates physical acoustics in the form of sound effects and/or music. Drawing on a Master's thesis by Seifert (2019), he analyzes how 17 elementary school students interpret a character's feelings and actions in relation to different soundscapes and -tracks. The same film shot was presented to the class with three different audio tracks, and after each iteration, the teacher asked, “What kind of character could that be? What might happen next and why?” The analysis of the plenary discussion revealed in detail how the students engaged in meaning-making by utilizing multiliteracy. Pietsch's article is particularly significant for this special issue, as he emphasizes a concept that is foundational to research on multimodality: the interplay between different semiotic modes (see Batesman et al., 2017, 8). He demonstrates that primary school students can engage with this interplay, evoking a wide range of emotions and associations.
- 3) Dammers' article presents a quantitative analysis of data from his dissertation study. In this study, 48 elementary school students were presented with seven picture books. Over three recording sessions, Dammers collected gaze data using eye-tracking instruments. Furthermore, he conducted brief follow-up interviews with the students. The article focuses on gaze data from ten students. By comparing “the fixation time of peripheral and central areas of the picture book”, he explores whether attention of the students is related to the narrative function of the text elements. In some aesthetically ambitious books, peripheral areas may contain details that need to be processed to fully understand the narrative. However, “[t]he allocation of visual attention tends to correspond to the expected (conventional) relevance of the print elements”. Thus, an

“efficiency-oriented strategy” is already apparent in elementary school and may inhibit literary (multi-)literacy, as literary literacy requires a prolonged engagement with the (multimodal) aesthetic object and a deeper interaction with it.

- 4) In the study by Castellano-Sanz and Reyes-Torres, a sample of 60 participants is surveyed through questionnaires and interviews regarding their assessment of a learning unit about Valencian rondalles. The learning unit, consisting of five sessions, aimed at multiliteracy “and the acquisition of Catalan, while fostering enriching reading experiences”. One key aspect of the study is the heterogeneity of the sample. It includes students aged 12 to 18 from different sociolinguistic contexts, as well as teachers who “bring a wealth of pedagogical experience spanning from kindergarten to baccalaureate, including specialized areas like vocational training (VT) and adult education”. The learning unit is based on extensions of concepts proposed by the New London School (see above). Results show that while all students “valued the creative tasks and showed interest in learning new vocabulary and understanding rondalles”, especially students from less diverse backgrounds “did not see the necessity of learning the minority language”. The authors interpret this phenomenon as “‘self-hatred’ (Flors-Mas, 2021)—a reluctance to embrace their minority identity, preferring instead to align with the dominant culture”. The teachers fully embraced methods and contents of the learning unit. This in part aligns with the teachers’ background “as consultants for teacher-training courses related to multilingualism”.

The brief overview of the articles of the Special Issue highlights the potential that multimodal texts can hold for literature education and beyond. At the same time, it becomes evident that implementation, particularly in curricula, is challenging and necessitates specific conditions. Many of the articles demonstrate that teachers require training in multimodality to effectively utilize such literary materials in the classroom. This not only enables students to engage in literary learning and aesthetic experiences, but also increases the likelihood that students can meaningfully incorporate their everyday experiences with multimodal texts into the literature classroom. Certainly, the individual articles present much more nuanced results, and I encourage you to delve deeply into them.

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