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Naima Sahli

Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret, Algeria
naima.sahli@univ-tiaret.dz
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6400-8675

Multiliteracies as a Landmark to Shape the 21st Century EFL Learners

Daniela Elsner, Sissy Helff, Britta Viebrock, eds., *Films, Graphic Novels and Visuals: Developing Multiliteracies in Foreign Language Education- An Interdisciplinary Approach.* **Berlin: Lit, 2013, pp. 221.**

Today's educators should be well-aware of the world of the 21st century; a world that is characterised by a constant technological advancement, a fierce economic competition, a diversified digital village at the end of a fingertip, and unforeseen pandemics and crises. Teachers need to develop innovative methods to allow their learners to successfully cope with the requirements of the 21st century. Gone are the days when the major aim of learning a foreign language is to fully master the basic receptive and productive skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing), and content about a given subject. At present, students are digitally-oriented in need of skills and competencies that empower them to smoothly understand and critically engage in dialogue with the world they live and work in. A vivid incarnation of the principles of multiliteracy approach is the edited book entitled *Films, Graphic Novels and Visuals: Developing Multiliteracies in Foreign Language Education- An Interdisciplinary Approach* by Daniela Elsner, Sissy Helff and Britta Viebrock. Dr. Elsner and Dr. Viebrock are experts in the domain of TEFL, working at the Institute of English and American Studies at Goethe University in Germany, while Dr. Helff is a specialist in English Studies, with an interest in Anglophone world literature, transcultural studies and visual culture.

Films, Graphic Novels and Visuals: Developing Multiliteracies in Foreign Language Education -An Interdisciplinary Approach is a distinguished monograph that offers a much-needed account of transcending the development of students' conventional literacy forms (E.g., reading left-right written texts), and embraces updated trends that actively bring cultural studies, foreign language education and media together (Multiliteracies) in favour of developing 21st century students' competencies.

The monograph tackles three broad themes; multiliteracy perspective and approaches in foreign language teaching, multiliteracies and still images, and multiliteracies and moving images respectively. In Chapter I "Developing Multiliteracies in the 21st Century: Motives for New Approaches of Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages," Elsner and Viebrock draw readers into a remarkable account of the reality of the new millennium in which technology and digitalisation have dominated the students' and the teachers' lives alike. The authors pinpoint the necessity to develop new competencies and skills that transcend the traditional literacy skills of reading and writing. In today's complex world, the EFL classroom should equip the students with the appropriate assets to have control over their private and professional life as well as entitle them to demonstrate their active citizenship. Hence, Elsner and Viebrock (2013) argue for the inclusion of a multitude of texts such as QR-texts and visual texts. They state that "nowadays we have an extended notion of text which incorporates electronic as well as paper texts or spoken language, linear and non-linear arranged text types that may be decoded interactively, mono- or multimodally." Furthermore, they challenge the traditional role of the teacher by highlighting the teachers' need to take into account current forms of online discourse such as virtual shopping scenarios in which the communicative competence includes visual images of the products, detailed description of the product, and the process of payment and provision of personal data. Within the same line of thought, it is reported that the students are faced with a multitude of information using miscellaneous searching engines. Hence, it is of a paramount importance that the teacher addresses information literacy. In this prospect, the student should develop the appropriate searching strategies that enable them to evaluate and question the sources of data. Moreover, they focus on the changing nature of users of web 2.0 in which a shift from consumers to 'producers' occurs when the users interact with content via re-posting, sharing and commenting. The students need to be trained in critical literacy in order to produce a generation that is committed to assuming responsibility for virtual actions. The students are also faced with the omnipresent representation of different languages besides English; thus they come into contact with other languages and cultures in which multilingual and transcultural competences are needed. In this context, foreign language classrooms should present their students with a variety of texts and media representing real life situations that engage the students in real discussions, reflection, and problem-solving of local and global issues.

In Chapter II "New Realms of Meaning Making: Multimodal Literacies in Language Classroom", Özlem Etuş focuses on extending the students' repertoire of competencies through her emphasis on developing the students' multimodal competence

in a world that is characterised by miscellaneous semiotic codes and texts. Thus, it is of a paramount importance to build an inclusive system that rigorously embraces "a continuum, gradually abridging conventional theories and practices of literacy development with multimodal literacy" (Etuş, 2013, 36). To support an effective implementation of a Vygotskian constructivist frame of a multimodal approach in the language classroom, she suggests a thorough plan including: initiating, constructing and utilising. The initiating phase personalises the learning experience by relating it to their daily use of media technologies in shaping their perceptions about other cultures. The constructing phase triggers meaning-making by evoking a reflective discussion of different texts in which genre and intertextuality are of a paramount importance in deciphering the content of new reshaped texts. The utilising phase merges the previous phases and entitles the students to create their own multimodal texts.

In her chapter "Graphic Novels in the Limelight of a Multiliteracies Approach to Teaching English," Elsner provides a comprehensive history of the graphic novels and calls for its instillation in the EFL class since graphic novels can ignite a love for reading among students, particularly those with less developed language skills, and have the potential to advance critical literacy. Fundamentally, graphic novels merge visual, written and semiotic codes to evoke an individual response and transformational identity if the reader deconstructs the symbols and critically assesses the content of the graphic novel.

Meyer pinpoints the cultural dimension of the graphic novels in her chapter "Exploring the Cultural Potential of Graphic Novels" since they offer a window on other cultures and a contemporary literary text that represents an opportunity for change in the literature class and is open for interpretation and nurtures discussion if approached critically. To better explore the cultural element in graphic novels, Meyer elucidates the use of the techniques of "masking" and "closure effect" in a cultural reading of Karasik's and Mazzucchelli's (2004) *City of Glass*. She then proposed a detailed account of an identity dilemma in Gene's (2006) *American Born Chinese* to be addressed in the language classroom.

Dolle-Weinkauff brilliantly analyses the representation of the dynamics of violence in visual arts from different cultural backgrounds in his chapter "Types of Violence in Sequential Art: The Mise en Scène of Violent Action in Comics, Graphic Novels and Manga." He brings to light the aesthetic strategies that are used in depicting violence, which is a central element in the aforementioned genres. However, violent actions are not exhaustively represented since there is interplay of the hero's intense action amid battles and the reader's ability to imagine and deduce meaning (eg., Foster's (1941) *Prince Valiant*), or the use of the 'reductionist style' in Pratt's (1983) *Ballad of the Salt Sea* in which violent actions are shown as fragmentary shadows in which meaning-making can be reconstructed from hints in the narrative context. Dolle-Weinkauff's analysis also includes a detailed account of the dominance of dynamic physical action and confrontations in superhero comics such as Giordano's (1969) *Batman* and the multiplicity of anti-realistic violent scenes in Manga (eg., Watsuki's (2001) *Kenshin*)

in which violent scenes are meant to "intensify experience." This approach to the analysis can be tackled in the language classroom from a literary and media perspective.

Street Art as a powerful means with multifaceted advantages in the EFL classroom is addressed in Dausend's chapter "Street Art: Fostering Discourse Literacies with Graffiti, Sticker, Stencils, and Paste-ups." This chapter offers a considerable comment on the development of Street Art in America and Europe backing it up with its types and characteristics including multimodal structures, audience perception and critical dimension. Dausend illustrates how Street Art can be implemented in the language classroom to create a shift from passive students into active citizens who can notice silent language in multimodal structures of Street Art, decode in-depth provocative messages and relate them to their real life situations.

Fisch and Viebrock introduce film posters as cultural objects in promoting visual and film literacy in their chapter "Between Visual Literacy and Film Literacy: Working with Film Posters in the EFL Classroom." They depict their historical development, characteristics and their functions. The bulk of this well-crafted account focuses on integrating film and visual literacy in the language classroom in order to empower the students to develop other competencies including 'critical, perceptive, communicative, intercultural, and textual competency.' Furthermore, they provide two cutting-edge examples of embedded social history of the stereotypical representation of blackness and blaxploitation in Hollywood and the culturally-various film posters illustrations of Ken Loach's *Ae Fond Kiss* in Britain, Germany, France, and Turkey and their potential in triggering different cultural interpretations based on symbols, objects and language.

The third part deals with moving images (Film, Documentary, and TV Advertisements). Lütge's chapter "Global (Audio) visions: Teaching Cultural Studies through Film" insightfully demonstrates how films address global education and transgress static notions of culture in order to raise awareness of current debatable issues (eg., peace, human rights, sustainability and global warming). Cultural studies should be approached from a perspective that utilises globally-relevant films as a unifying medium that bring different people and cultures together to react collectively to global issues. The author emphasises her standpoint through two films: *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Slumdog Millionaire* to highlight how students can engage in 'environmental critical literacy' and develop audio-vision competence to discuss globally challenging themes in the EFL classroom.

In her chapter "Buy That Man a Beer: Masculinity and Beer Advertising," Starck reflects on the relationship between beer advertising in the Western World and the unremitting promotion of masculinity among consumers. Her analysis that stretches along three decades portrays the multifaceted contextual representations of masculinity in beer advertisements in which men are fearlessly challenging hardships, showing physical powers, and in control of their emotions as they exclude women. In addition, this account points at the role of these advertisements in forming role models and gender identities for the young generations. This chapter ends with some suggestions on how to carefully initiate a debate in the EFL classroom about beer advertisements in various cultures.

Helff's chapter "Carceral Iconography: Reading Filmic Representations of Prison Islands through the Lens of Media Literacy" underlines the significance of integrating media literacy in the EFL classroom with a special focus on genre and visual conventions. The author closely investigated visual representations in three films: the BBC documentary *Voices from Robben Island* (1994), Marc Rocco's *Murder in the First* (1995), and the Deutsche Welle TV featuring the Norwegian prison island Bastøy, using Henrik Juel's (2006) criteria: Formal Setup, Truth Claim and Reliability, and the additional criteria: Viewing, Reception and Markets, that the author recommends to stimulate EFL students' interest in critical media literacy.

The subsequent chapter "On the *Lost Highway*: An Encounter" Herzogenrath challenges the traditional linear narrative manner of reading films. He considers films such as Lynch's *Lost Highway* as purely artistic and open to various individual interpretations. Such films do not follow a narrative plot; instead they are abstract and rich with recurrent visual and atmospheric symbols. In this respect, Herzogenrath relies on Deleuze's notion of *encounter* as a method of breaking up with conventional reading of films and merging opposite concepts to understand films.

The last chapter "The Useful, the Bad and the Ugly: An Epistemological Perspective on Media-Based Education" by Hoof provides an overview of the close relationship between education and media in order to argue for a new epistemological perspective on media-based education. Then, she differentiates between useful and pathological media in an age where the latter should be considered for educational purposes since they are unavoidable. She also provides an example about film as a medium in the educational setting (1900–1930) to highlight its changing functions from inclusion to exclusion from the educational pedagogy.

This well-grounded monograph of multiliteracies situates insightful accounts of bringing several media into the EFL classroom to effectively develop short and long-term competencies. Its nuanced and far-reaching conclusions draw attention to the need of keeping up with the transformation of the world around us, the characteristics of the 21st century learners, and the changes in the tecahing profession as well. Hence, the themes contained in each chapter remain topical and well-worth considered nowadays. Furthermore, each chapter encompasses a theoretical background of the issue at hand as well as a practical side. This fact makes it a suitable reference for novice teachers wishing to nurture their curiosity for innovative approaches, for experienced teachers aiming to update their practice, and for practitioner researchers to inspire change in their classrooms.

It is worth noting that the style of writing can be accessed by diverse readers with different levels of proficiency in TEFL and media studies (undergraduate, academics, and practitioners). Every single chapter entails the definition of key concepts in its related context to enable the reader to understand the aims of the chapter. Furthermore, the content and ideas discussed in every chapter are the outcomes of experts in their area of research and teaching.

As a monograph aimed at enhancing students' multiliteracies, the roles of pupils and students of various backgrounds and proficiency levels form the locus of inquiry

throughout the chapters. In this respect, the students are considered as active and autonomous agents and citizens who can critically analyse and vigorously have a say about current and global issues. They are simultaneously viewed as a non-marginalised agent in the process of developing positive, collective and responsive attitudes.

As a university practitioner researcher, what I find particularly appealing about this book is the richness of the themes with multifaceted topics (eg., films; film posters, moving images, historical background of film industry, film and American social history, etc.). Those interested in renewing their materials or getting creative will never run out of ideas. In addition, this monograph is not strictly addressed to a proficiency level or a specialty; teachers can adapt and substitute a range of techniques or strategies to better fit the requirements of their courses (Writing, Literature, Cultural Studies, Civilisation, Oral Expression, etc.), their students' interests and needs, and their methods of teaching as well. For instance, American Civilisation module can tackle the history of racism against coloured people using film posters.

My one and only regret is minor. Though the current monograph deals with audio visuals as a part of teaching critical competencies, it fails to show how these media are used to address the listening skill in a way to connect visual, film, and media literacy in the 21st century.