Chapter 9
Visual and Media Literacy Put Into Practice: Creating Multimodal Texts in ELT

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author explores the concept and teaching potential of visual and media literacy and discusses the creation of digital visual narratives as a means to develop critical media literacy. Based on an example from her university class, the author argues that a hands-on approach of creating digital visual reader-responses to literary texts is a highly beneficial tool to not only develop but also experience visual and media literacy. In the process of creating digital visual narrations using the Web 2.0 application Pixton, students additionally reflect the representation of the protagonists’ ethnic and cultural identity within the text and in their surrounding environment, thus fostering intercultural awareness. This creative reader-response approach allows combining literary literacy with the development of visual and media literacy in digital learning settings.

INTRODUCTION

Within the past decades, being visually literate has become increasingly important in society and public life. Pictures are ubiquitous, be it on the news, advertisements, communication or for entertainment. As visuals influence decision-making and opinion formation, it is important to be aware of the effects pictures can have and how these are created. Through the concept of visual literacy, it is possible to integrate reflections of media messages into classroom teaching, be it in the students’ first or additional language(s). Scholars such as Hecke (2017) and Merse (2015) define visual literacy as the ability to view visuals critically, to analyse and interpret visual messages from a critical perspective. In this way, students can develop visual literacy by questioning and critically reflecting on visual media messages they encounter through different media. The concept’s potential for the EFL classroom has been widely
discussed by scholars such as Merse in relation to global education (2015), picturebooks and graphic novels (Burwitz-Melzer, 2013) and film (Fisch & Viebrock, 2013), to name but a few.

Visuals play a particular role in communicating meaning through digital and online media. However, electronic and digital tools for taking and editing photos and images make these an easy subject to image manipulation. It is therefore essential to see visual literacy in close connection to the design possibilities of new technology. Researchers have recently explored the potential of new technology for ELT. They have, for example, investigated the potential of smartphones (Schmidt, 2013), educational apps and digital learning programs (Heil, Wo, Lee, & Schmidt, 2016), video conferences in teacher training (Drexhage, Leiß, Schmidt, & Ehmmke, 2016), digital games (Jones & Schmidt, 2014), the Web 2.0 (Kaliampos & Schmidt, 2014), or interactive whiteboards (Durán, & Cruz, 2011) for learning foreign languages. The common frame of such concepts and ideas is media literacy, which scholars such as Kress (2003) and Cope, Kalantzis, Chan and Dalley-Trim (2016) brought to the foreground of media education, and which is a promising approach to the new demands of education in the 21st century.

While the researchers and scholars mentioned above point at the challenges involved with such new media, they also shed light on options of decreasing artificial communicative situations that often appear in foreign language teaching classrooms (Schmidt, 2011b) by applying meaningful tasks involving digital tools. Their potential for creating interactive, meaningful and motivating learning environments in ELT is extensive. Through such tools, students not only have access to a vast amount of information about Anglophone countries and cultures, but can also participate in providing and exchanging information. They can access news broadcasts from around the world and access the schools or places mentioned in textbooks. Through Web 2.0, email programs, partner schools, school’s websites in English, books or film reviews on websites such as Amazon or rottentomatoes.com, students can participate in information exchange, authenticate their writing products and increase the significance of their learning process. For such tasks and activities to be successful, students need skills not only in reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, but also in digital and media literacy. This repertoire of competencies is particularly essential as digital media surround students on a daily basis. They need to be prepared to deal with the influx of information critically in order to benefit from the potential it offers and to deal with the challenges – fake news and manipulated images – involved. Hence, visual literacy, digital literacy and media literacy have become increasingly significant in ELT and have taken centre stage in current pedagogical discourse.

In light of this development and demand, this chapter describes a best-practice example from a university class for students in their mid-twenties participating in an EFL teacher education program. In view of the significance of new demands of modern media and the high relevance of literacies in general, this chapter suggests a combination of literary and media literacy by producing digital visualizations of literary texts. The university students used Pixton, an online tool that invites students to create visual texts, to visualize their reader-responses to short stories digitally. Whereas further tools such as ToonDoo or PowToon can be used, Pixton was chosen because it is easy to handle, straight forward and offers high quality visuals and various design features.

The first part of this chapter discusses a changing media environment that demands an extended set of skills and competences schools need to develop. Translating the aforementioned demands into classroom practice, these skills include visual, digital and media literacy. In its second part, the chapter presents how students’ own digital visualizations of literary texts enable them to develop literary as well as media literacy. The third part presents and discusses some of the visual texts students created in the course, and is followed by a conclusion.
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