An Eye for Detail: Practicing Visual Literacy in Language Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

With the fast emergence of new literacies, particularly digital and multi-modal ones, the demand for integration of visual and media literacies into educational programs is mounting. The present study narrates an experience of weaving a number of vision-oriented activities into a Reading Comprehension course. The participants of the study were a community of 22 female freshmen studying English Literature at a state university in Tehran. At the first stage, we focused on reading conceptual still images and short silent animations considering compositional, affective and critical dimensions of visual language. The vision net was cast wider as we practiced comparing and contrasting mental, graphic, and verbal imageries employed in an abridged literary novel and its movie adaptation. In yet another comparative expedition, we embarked on making comparisons and contrasts between two movie adaptations of an English novel, produced at two different eras, with a focus on their literary, cinematic, dramatic, and ideological dimensions like the portrayals of characters and plot, settings, lighting and camera techniques, costumes, soundtracks, values and ideologies, and the like. Such vision-based practices, accompanied with vehement classroom discussions and reflective writings, provided spaces for the students to experience more profound understanding and appreciation of the "art" of language in different genres or mediums, fathom the potentials offered or systematic constraints imposed by them, and practice becoming active analyzers rather than passive viewers.

Keywords: Visual literacy, conceptual still images, silent animations, movies, English Language classes

INTRODUCTION

Living in a media-oriented and image-driven world where language is moving beyond verbal territory by endorsing multimodal semiotic modes of communication, where images inundate us in all walks of life, and where the velocious ascension of visual technologies is highly palpable, there seems to be a pressing need for individuals to become visually literate and get to grips with visual and media literacies; the kinds of literacies which are seen to be more complex than the traditional print-based one (Serafini, 2014; Share, 2015). However, despite the prominence of visual and media literacies in the lives of new millennium learners, such literacies have not carved a well-deserved niche for themselves in literacy-oriented educational programs yet, and "there is still a lack of understanding on how to read, use, and interpret…images" and multimodal media (Baylen & D'Alba, 2015, p. xiv). In other words, "although our students are consumers and producers of media and highly stimulated by a culture rife with easy access to the visually rich Web, photo-dependent social networks, video saturated media…,they are not visually literate" (Metros, 2008, p. 103). Highlighting the issue more boldly, Serafini (2014) posits that "The proliferation of visual images does not guarantee that students are paying any more attention to their visual environments, nor does it suggest that their ability to navigate, interpret, or analyze images is expanding to meet the demands of contemporary society" (p. 20). In view of that, there have been resounding calls for incorporating visual and media literacies into pedagogical programs as a way to meet the requirements of the different forms of new literacies of this era of information (Callow, 2005; Serafini, 2014; Share, 2015).

Feeling this glaring gap in literacy courses targeted at English-major university students in Iran, I, as an English language teacher, set heart on planning classroom activities that are likely to pave the way for developing visual and media literacies in a reading course. A glance at what is happening in our English as Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes shows a tendency for following conventional and probably outdated tracks of practicing reading textual materials or print-based texts. What is generally counted as the "skill" of reading sums up in reading passages/texts for answering a number of comprehension check questions or applying reading strategies like predicting, summarizing,