

MULTIMODAL TEXTS: THE WAY TO ENGAGE STUDENTS IN EFL CLASS ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Nowadays the need of implementing new technologies and innovative practices in the educational process of teaching and learning foreign languages with an aim to increase students' motivation and develop their communicative skills has become essential. Given that, the authors of this paper have made an attempt to introduce multimodal texts as a key tool to improve school students' vocabulary that may allow developing their ability of thinking creatively and speaking fluently which, in their turn, can lead to students' engagement in the English language classroom activities. In this paper, the notion 'multimodal text' was defined, based on the scientific literature review related to the topic, a classification of multimodal texts was introduced on the basis of the content analysis of the pedagogical literature, and a set of criteria for selecting multimodal texts was offered. The authors theoretically justify the importance of introducing multimodal texts as a tool of forming and developing school students' vocabulary skills, into the language learning process. It is recognized that the usage of multimodal texts provides data in a concise manner, simplifies text interpretation due to their being universally applicable, and intensifies learning processes.

The research methods used in this study were the analysis and systematization of theoretical sources, and a pedagogical experiment. The aim of the study was to develop and experimentally test the methodology of using multimodal texts in the English language classroom to form school students' communicative skills. 38 students from two Kazan schools ranked among 100 best educational institutions of Russia volunteered to participate in the pedagogical experiment. To conduct the above experiment, a set of exercises with the designed multimodal texts was compiled. The five modes of multimodal texts, namely linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and aural, in different proportions were offered. All the materials and tasks, thoroughly selected, were targeted at enriching students' vocabulary which eventually ensured forming and developing students' communicative skills. The findings validated the authors' hypothesis that multimodal texts can significantly influence the students' communicative and creative thinking skills. This study may be addressed to school English language teachers.

Keywords: communicative skills, creative thinking, criteria for selecting multimodal texts, EFL class, multimodal texts, multimodal texts classification, school students.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the growing number of new technologies and innovative practices in teaching and learning foreign languages it is not an easy task for a teacher to find the appropriate approach to increasing students' motivation and developing their communicative skills in class. In this study, the efficacy of multimodal texts for engaging students in the English language classroom activities is identified. It is claimed that multimodal texts are one of the best tools that improves students' vocabulary which contributes to speech fluency. The ability to speak fluently both motivates and enables students to efficiently participate in class activities.

Literature review allowed the authors to find the most precise definition to the notion 'multimodal text' and a clear classification of multimodal texts. These theoretical findings let the authors theoretically justify the value of multimodal texts as a tool of forming and developing students' speaking skills. Moreover, on the basis of the analysis of the pedagogical literature the authors identified criteria for selecting multimodal texts for reading in the English language classroom. One of the most significant criteria for selecting multimodal texts is the text volume. Multimodal texts are not long but contain a lot of information due the fact that they provide data concisely. One more finding amongst others that is worth mentioning, is as follows: multimodal texts include simple images presenting complimentary information that make them easy to understand and interpret. In addition, it was found that multimodal texts simplify text interpretation because of their being universally applicable. All these together intensify the process of teaching reading comprehension.

To investigate how a teacher can efficiently engage students in EFL class activities by implementing multimodal texts in the educational process of teaching foreign languages, the authors held a pedagogical experiment. The research task was to test the methodology of using multimodal texts in the English language classroom with the aim in view to increase students' motivation and form students' communicative skills. To conduct the experiment, the authors chose multimodal texts of five modes,

which were offered to students as in-class activities targeted at forming and developing students' communicative skills.

The findings confirmed the authors' assumption that multimodal texts appeal to students and engage them in EFL class activities. The study found that while reading multimodal texts students can significantly improve their communicative skills. This study may interest school English language teachers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brief literature review shows that there are a few approaches to the way Russian scholars define the concept 'multimodal text'. It should be mentioned that this mixed type of text has got at least three notable 'names': 1) creolized, 2) poly-code and 3) multimodal text. The term 'creolized text' was first introduced by Sorokin and Tarasov [1] into Russian scientific literature in 1990. Since then these texts have been identified as 'poly-code texts' and 'multimodal texts', as well. In this paper, we adhere to the term 'multimodal texts' and answer three Wh-questions.

What are the main features of multimodal texts?

According to Silchenkova [2], these are texts that combine verbal and nonverbal elements. Together they affect the reader: while reading multimodal texts the reader creates images associated with the content. The above viewpoint is shared by another Russian scholar Arguneev [3] who elaborates this idea. Arguneev asserts that a multimodal text (or a new type of educational texts) is a polycode text in which verbal and nonverbal elements are aimed at activating the recipient's brain activity by exciting various types of memory of the reader [3, p. 156]. In Belenko's opinion, multimodal texts visualizing conceptually significant information allow conveying the main idea of the text as well as the author's standpoint [4, p. 78]. One more point of view is manifested in Filimonyuk and Udod's research [5]. The authors claim that verbal and nonverbal components of multimodal texts ensure the integrity and coherence of these texts, and produce the communicative effect [5, p. 171]. Many-faceted research on the nature of multimodal texts is presented in the collective monograph of the research team of the Russian Academy of Sciences [6]. The authors consider the multimodal text components and their compatibility, and the functioning of multimodal texts of different genres in mass communication.

What types of multimodal texts are distinguished?

On having analyzed a number of classifications compiled by Russian scholars [7, 8, 9] we singled out the following types of multimodal texts that are recognized by both theorists and practitioners:

- ✓ comics, a story in drawings;
- ✓ book-trailer, an advertising video about a book;
- ✓ poster, an artistically designed placard advertising a certain literary work;
- ✓ booklet, a brochure containing text and graphic information about a particular book;
- ✓ photo collage, a collection of photos on the topic under study;
- ✓ logo, an original graphic or text symbol representing a specific object on the topic;
- ✓ "doodle" (or sketch), a drawing made unconsciously;
- ✓ scrapbook, an album of photographs and clippings devoted to the topic under study;
- ✓ card, a handmade postcard on a specific topic.

Why are multimodal texts widely used in FL classes?

Dmitriyeva and Sklyar state that all of the above mentioned types of multimodal texts can be easily implemented in the educational process of teaching foreign languages, precisely in the process of teaching reading multimodal texts [10, pp. 373-378]. The high potential of multimodal texts in teaching foreign languages has been highlighted by Russian researchers Trubina, Terentyeva, Nikitina, Galkina, Filatova, Yusaev, Markova, Derzhavina, Frank [11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16]. Trubina examining the use of multimodal texts comes to the conclusion that visual elements in the text draw students' attention and make them focus on the content, which contributes to the assimilation of the presented in the text information [11]. Terentyeva describes multimodal texts as texts of 'new nature' and explains the possibility of their use as a response to the specifics of thinking of a modern teenager – a representative of the Z generation with its 'new literacy' based on the 'clip' thinking mode [12]. Nikitina recommends using this type of texts in teaching adult learners [13], as well. A well-articulated book "Visualized English for Kids" by Derzhavina and Frank can serve as an example of how multimodal texts work in the English language classroom [14]. The book includes the ABC book in pictures, 40 units with creative tasks, a visual English-Russian dictionary, and recommendations for parents. The authors postulate that learning English via multimodal texts makes it easy and exciting for 4-6 year old children. Galkina, Filatova, Yusaev insist on introducing multimodal texts into the educational process because the inserted in the

actual text visual elements can become the focus of students' independent research and project activities provided students are given clear tasks [15]. This approach adds to forming and developing the ability of creative thinking and communicative skills on the part of students. The efficacy of multimodal texts in mastering students' communicative skills is advocated by the Russian educator Markova. This is exemplified by book-trailers. In her research, the author proves that the book-trailer used in the educational process allows the teacher to model the learning process in the way that meets cultural needs of students, stimulates their cognitive interests, and develops speaking skills [16].

Although there have been analyzed a lot of researches on the origin and nature of multimodal texts (which is a solid evidence of the relevance of the topic under discussion), no in-depth investigation that solves the research tasks set in our study has been found.

3. RESEARCH TASKS

In this study, the following research tasks were set:

- (i) Do multimodal texts increase students' motivation?
- (ii) Does the usage of multimodal texts in the English language classroom form and develop students' communicative skills?

4. METHODOLOGY

Research Site

The research sites selected for this study were two Kazan Gymnasiums. Both educational establishments are ranked as 10-Top Kazan schools. The mission of these schools is creating a comfortable space for self-realization of each participant of the educational process.

In this paper, there are presented the results of the experiment held in one of the schools. 16 students of primary school took part in the experiment (3 "A" – a control group, 3 "B" – an experimental group).

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

Study instrument

The pedagogical experiment was chosen as a study instrument in this research. The experiment consisted of three stages:

1. Ascertaining experiment.
2. Formative experiment.
3. Control experiment.

Study materials

Five modes of multimodal texts, namely linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and aural, in different proportions were chosen for this study. The type of the multimodal texts is comics.

5. RESULTS

To assess the level of the motivational indicator at the ascertaining stage of the experiment we used the methodology for studying learning motivation of elementary school students by M.R. Ginzburg [17]. Its purpose is to identify the level of motivation of elementary school students that explains the orientation of an action, orderliness and stability of a holistic activity, the desire to achieve a certain goal.

Students were asked to choose one of the suggested endings of incomplete sentences, e.g., "The most interesting thing in a class is/ are..."

- a) games and physical exercises;
- b) good grades and praise from the teacher;
- c) talking with friends;
- d) answering in front of the class;
- e) learning new things and doing assignments;
- f) getting adapted to life situations."

The formulation of various endings of each incomplete sentence and its score define the presence of six motives (external, positional, social, educational, game motive and assessment).

The obtained data of the questionnaire showed the following results:

17-20 - a very high level of intrinsic motivation with a pronounced personal meaning, the predominance of cognitive and internal motives;

13-16 - high level of learning motivation;

9-12 - normal (average) level of motivation;
 5-8 - decreased level of learning motivation;
 4 - low level of intrinsic motivation.

The results of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The results of the questionnaire.

Control group			Experimental group		
Student	Indicator of motivation level	Score	Student	Indicator of motivation level	Score
Student 1	high level	15	Student1	decreased level	7
Student2	normal (average) level	10	Student 2	normal (average) level	11
Student3	normal (average) level	11	Student3	high level	16
Student4	normal (average) level	9	Student4	normal (average) level	10
Student 5	decreased level	6	Student 5	decreased level	6
Student 6	decreased level	6	Student 6	decreased level	7
Student 7	decreased level	5	Student 7	normal (average) level	11
Student8	high level	16	Student8	normal (average) level	9

In order to assess students' knowledge of the English language we resorted to the Cambridge English for Young Learners proficiency test that is also known as the Cambridge Young Learners English (YLE); a series of engaging and motivating English language tests designed for students aged 7 to 12. The test consisted of 15 questions.

The following results were revealed for this indicator. Out of 8 examinees in the control group, 2 students had an A2 level of English language proficiency and 6 had an A1 level of English language proficiency. Of the 8 test takers in the experimental group, 1 student had an A2 level of English proficiency and 7 had an A1 level of English proficiency. The results of the diagnostic test in the control and experimental groups are shown in Figure 1.

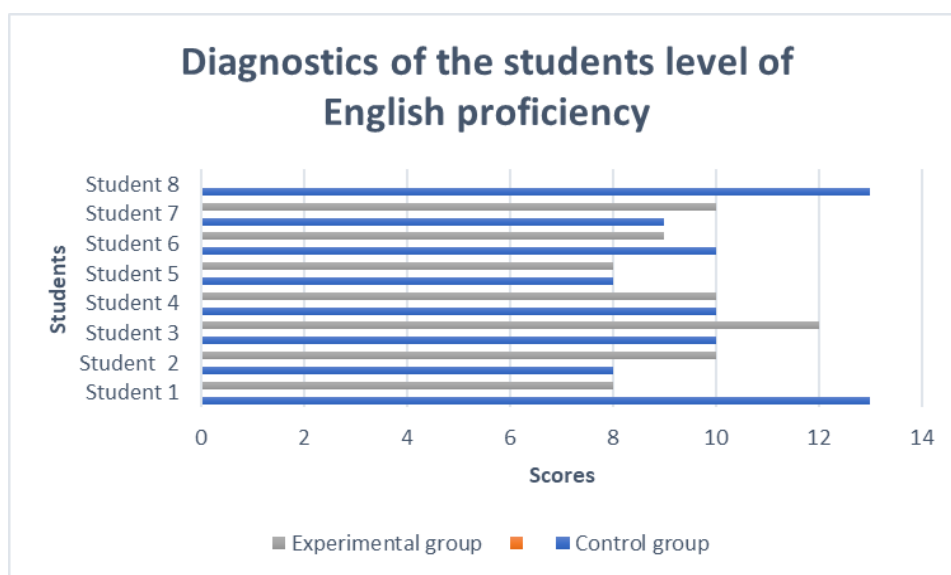


Fig. 1. Results of the diagnostic test in the control and experimental groups.

At the formative stage of the experiment, we devised and implemented a series of lessons supplementary to the textbook by I.N. Vereshchagina, T.A. Pritykina "English language. Grade 3" based on four children's comics "Maya Makes a Mess" by Rutu Modan, "My Family Celebrates Kwanzaa" by Lisa Bullard, "National Geographic Readers: Lizards" by Laura Marsh and "Discover Dinosaurs" by Pam Holden. One lesson is 45 minutes long and contains a small comic book or part of a comic book and 10 activities, most of which are designed to teach and reinforce the vocabulary of the topics. The authors of the study divided a comic book into two semantic parts, each of which represents 10-15 pages of illustrations with the text. Below is a table with the topics, studied lexical units, grammatical structures and the comics we selected that correspond to the content of the textbook "English language. Grade 3" by I.N. Vereshchagina, T.A. Pritykina (Table 2).

Table 2. Comics selected for the textbook "English Language. Grade 3" (I.N. Vereshchagina, T.A. Pritykina).

Lessons	Topics	Comics	Lexical units	Grammatical
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					structures
14-25	Food	Chapter 1 – “Maya Makes a Mess” by Rutu Modan	Chapter 2 – “Maya Makes a Mess” by Rutu Modan	Cup, tea, milk, juice, glass, coffee, drink, eat, spoon, fork, napkin, dinner, cookies, salad, pineapple, ham, broccoli	The past simple tense (was, were)
29-35	Holidays	Chapter 1 – “My family celebrates Kwanzaa” by Lisa Bullard	Chapter 2 – “My family celebrates Kwanzaa” by Lisa Bullard	Holiday, celebrate, culture, presents, last for, candle, lights, party, special, visit, write	There is (was)... There are (were) ...
37-47	Pets and Other Animals	Chapter 1 – “National Geographic Readers: Lizards” by Laura Marsh	Chapter 2 – “Discover Dinosaurs” by Pam Holden	Neck, tail, animal, big, shapes, lizard, eggs, skin, lay eggs, desert, forest, mountain, body, plant, leg, ear, eye, hide, claws, toes, fins, horns	Modal verb - must Numbers Degrees of comparison: long, longer, (the) longest

All these data were taken into account during the experiment for the organization of the educational process at the formative stage of the experiment where various drilling and communicative tasks improving English proficiency and increasing students' motivation level based on multimodal texts were implemented in EFL class.

With an aim to estimate students' knowledge on lexical units we used quizzes for each lexical block:

Food: test 3

Holidays: test 6

Pets and other animals: test 7

Each test consisted of 11 tasks. The students were offered the following types of tasks: filling the gaps, matching, multiple choice, ordering, translation, true/false. These tests can be found in the test book "English language. Grade 3. Tests. Didactic materials" for the textbook by I.N. Vereshchagina and T.A. Pritykina. Below are the results of three tests in the control and experimental groups (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. The results of the control group.

Control group				
Students	Food	Holidays	Pets and other animals	Total score (max 33)
Student 1	8	8	10	26
Student 2	7	6	8	21
Student 3	6	7	7	20
Student 4	6	6	7	19
Student 5	7	7	9	23
Student 6	9	8	10	27
Student 7	7	6	7	20
Student 8	8	10	9	27

Table 4. The results of the experimental group.

Experimental group				
Students	Food	Holidays	Pets and other animals	Total score (max 33)
Student 1	9	8	11	28
Student 2	10	9	9	28
Student 3	10	8	10	28
Student 4	8	6	9	23
Student 5	7	8	10	25
Student 6	7	8	9	24
Student 7	8	6	8	22
Student 8	9	9	9	28

Based on the results of the students' output tests, we can note that both classes succeeded in the topic "Pets and other animals". The scores of the experimental group differ from those of the control group by several units.

To assess students' learning motivation we used the same test developed by M.R. Ginzburg [17].

Table 5. The results of the output test of students' motivation level at the control stage of the experiment in both groups.

Control group			Experimental group		
Student	Indicator of motivation level	Score	Student	Indicator of motivation level	Score
Student 1	high level	16	Student 1	normal (average) level	9
Student 2	normal (average) level	11	Student 2	normal (average) level	12
Student 3	normal (average) level	10	Student 3	extremely high level	17
Student 4	normal (average) level	9	Student 4	normal (average) level	10
Student 5	decreased level	6	Student 5	normal (average) level	9
Student 6	decreased level	7	Student 6	decreased level	6
Student 7	decreased level	5	Student 7	normal (average) level	11
Student 8	high level	15	Student 8	normal (average) level	10

Below are the results of the level of motivation of the experimental group before and after the experiment.

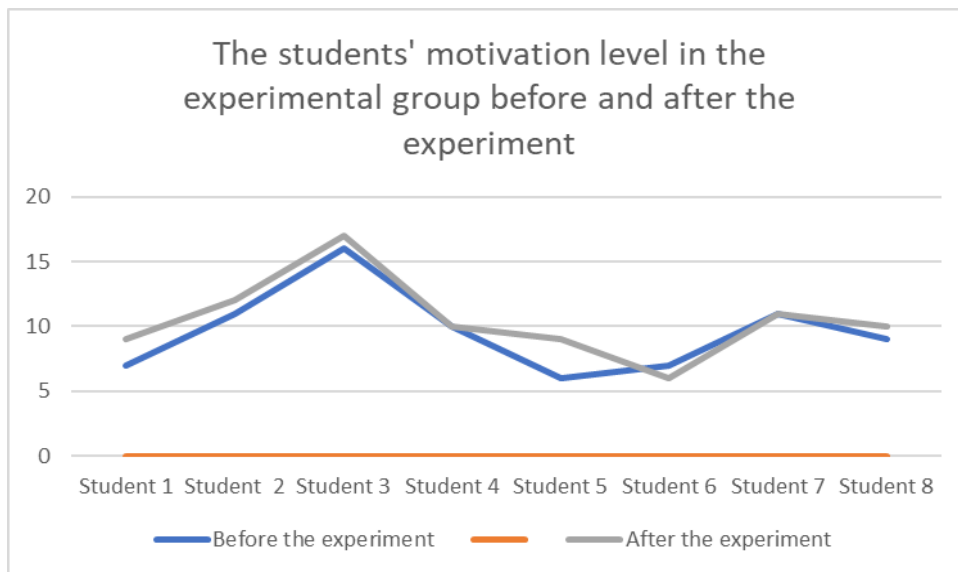


Fig. 2. The students' motivation level in the experimental group before and after the experiment.

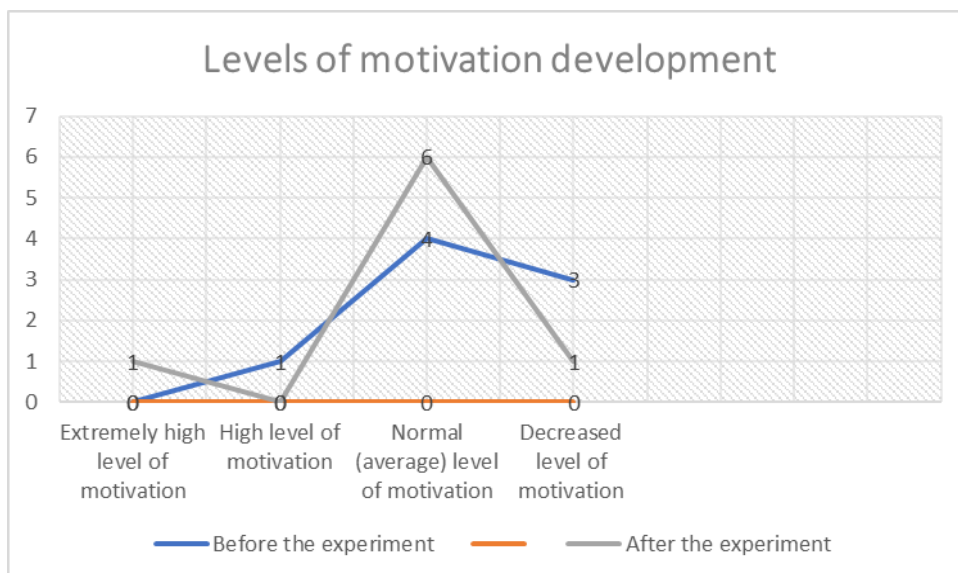


Fig. 3. The students' levels of motivation development.

Motivational indicators of the control group remained stable; however, the experimental group data revealed a slight increase of the motivation level by 1-2 points. One student's motivational index level increased from high to very high, two students' motivational index levels increased from low to average.

6. DISCUSSION

In this paper two research questions were set:

- (i) Do multimodal texts increase students' motivation?
- (ii) Does the usage of multimodal texts in the English language classroom form and develop students' communicative skills?

To find answers to these questions there was conducted a pedagogical experiment. The obtained data in the course of the experiment made it possible to state that the implementation of multimodal texts in EFL class appeared to positively influence on the motivation of school students. Our claim about the efficiency of visualization in comprehending various texts that works as a motivational booster for young learners in EFL class was proven.

In this study, we made a presupposition that English language proficiency improves via using multimodal texts. With this aim on mind, we chose comics as the most appropriate type of multimodal texts for the participants of the experiment – 7-8 year-old students. Comics can give students the opportunity to practice making sense of the material printed on the page, tracing from left to right and top to bottom, interpreting symbols, and following the sequence of events in the story. Comics allow connecting the story to children's own experiences, predicting what will happen, inferring what happened between parts of the story, and summarizing. The advantage of using comics is that children do not need to be able to decode the text to learn and practice comprehension skills. We were able to observe how visual elements in the comics drew primary school students' attention and made them focus on the text content and, as a result, assimilate the teaching materials. The results of the students' output tests (Table 4) may serve as a good evidence of it.

Among other main advantages of the usage of multimodal texts in EFL class there were noticed the following ones:

- ✓ improvement of information perception;
- ✓ intensification of learning;
- ✓ expansion of possibilities to analyze and interpret a text;
- ✓ versatility of usage as a classroom tool;
- ✓ possibility to use multimodal texts at different stages of a class.

Our results proved that the introduction of multimodal texts to EFL class engages school students to learning, and contributes to maximizing their language proficiency.

7. LIMITATIONS

The current study is inevitably a subject to some limitations. First, it presents insufficient data: the results of 16 students were analyzed and interpreted. Second, only one type of multimodal texts – comics – was tested. We believe that these issues can be taken into consideration in future researches in this area.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has been intended to develop and experimentally test the methodology of using multimodal texts in the English language classroom to reinforce primary school students' motivation and to form and develop their communicative skills. Based on the literature review, the notion of multimodal texts was defined, their features (verbal and nonverbal components as the main ones) were highlighted, and different types of multimodal texts were singled out.

As shown by the results of the conducted experiment, the implementation of multimodal texts in the educational process of teaching EFL provides for the increase of motivation and the development of the communicative skills of school students.

The findings of the research can be recommended for school English language teachers.

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