



**VISUAL LITERACY:  
the interpretation of images in English classes**

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**ABSTRACT**

My goals in this article are to discuss the area of visual literacy and summarize the talk presented at the XVI Convention of English Teachers realized by APLIEMT - The Association of English Teachers of Mato Grosso, in 2013. In the first part of the article, I investigate three key concepts that influence the education of foreign/additional secondary languages: globalization, the roles of English and new technologies. In the second part, I discuss the area of visual literacy. Finally, I refer to some activities as examples of visual literacy.

**Keywords:** Globalization. Visual literacy. English language education.

**1 GLOBALIZATION, THE ENGLISH ROLES AND THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES**

O que geralmente chamamos de globalização refere-se, de fato, a diferentes conjuntos de relações sociais que dão origem a diferentes fenômenos de globalização. Nestes termos não há, a rigor, uma única entidade chamada globalização. Em vez disso, existem globalizações, para ser mais preciso. Este termo deveria ser usado somente no plural.

**Boaventura Santos**

Globalizations, in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2006

It seems that studies on globalization has touched every field of knowledge. In Ferraz (2012) I defend that globalizations (Santos above) can be seen through multiple perspectives, such as their social, economic or financial views, but also globalizations might be problematized in more philosophical ways. In this sense, the perspectives of Brydon (2001;

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2008; 2009), Andersen (2006) and Garcia-Canclini (2005) suggest that at the same time globalizing processes influence our daily lives, it might be seen as an imagined concept, *una globalizacion imaginada* (GARCIA-CANCLINI, 2005), and as a possibility for building global democracy and social justice (BRYDON, 2001). For Kumaravadivelu (2008), there are three dominant narratives of cultural globalizing processes:

One narrative presents globalization as homogenizing in its forms of powerful cultural and corporate products such as Hollywood movies and globalized brands (RITZER, 1993). An alternative narrative depicts globalization as being heterogeneous inasmuch as local cultural identities are recreated and renewed in response to the dominating center (GIDDENS, 2000). A third claims that globalization is both homogeneous and heterogeneous because these processes are simultaneously occurring (APPADURAI, 1996), creating situations in which “the global is brought in conjunction with the local, and the local is modified to accommodate the global” (KUMARADIVELU, 2008, p. 44-45).

I argue here that studies on globalizing processes are essential when we teach English provided it is mainly through the English language that such processes (academic traveling theories, businesses, traveling people, the WWW) have occurred. Also, having in mind that globalization can be at the same time homogeneous and heterogeneous helps us break down the idea that there is ONE globalization that influences our lives (such as the mass media TV channels, or the social media websites such as Facebook, or the World brands spread around the Globe – McDonalds, Car brands, Nike, Coke, etc). Another important aspect is that when we see globalization in these perspectives, we can also acknowledge the importance of the local in relation to global such as the local movements that instantly become global: protests, mobile texting, flashmobs movements, social media spread in Youtube videos. For Appadurai (2006) this comprises important movements of globalization from below (grassroots globalization) where the local “has a voice”.

Intertwined with globalizing discourses are the roles of English in current times. On one side, English is considered a lingua franca, meaning that there is one single version of the language, which is spoken and written throughout the world. This idea of English taking over the world is as an imperialist/ colonizing view on how this language has been used and spread. This is usually the view of those who defend that there are two main “levels” of speakers: a superior one where the native speakers who determine the standard (Americans and British have occupied this position); and an inferior level where the non-native speakers who should struggle to “reach” the native standard patterns. Pennycook (1994; 1997; 2007a; 2007b), Canagarajah (1999; 2005), and Menezes de Souza (1994; 2008) - authors who belong to the inner circle of native speakers – have questioned the myth of English as a lingua franca

by defending the perspective of the World Englishes, a view where the varieties of the language are acknowledged, and moreover, contextualized.

In relation to the new technologies, it is said that we have faced more connectivity, more world communication, new mindsets, and the presence of digital natives (the generation usually born after the 90's whose characteristics are the natural ability to deal with technologies and technological mindsets). The New Literacies and the Multiliteracies are the educational fields that problematize the new technologies and education. In the perspectives of Lankshear and Knobel (2008, p. 05),

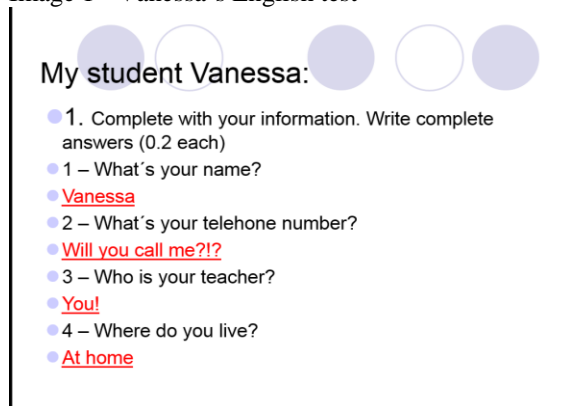
If we extend this argument from literacy to digital literacy it involves thinking of "digital literacy" as a shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification. Hence, [...] we may add blogs, video games, text messages, online social network pages, discussion forums, internet memes, FAQs, online search results, and so on.

Kalantzis and Cope (2000; 2008; 2010) participate in the debate by defining Multiliteracies as a pedagogic project that emphasizes the new literacies present – sometimes altogether – in contemporary society. Thus, both authors also expand the concept of traditional literacy (usually reading and writing) into multiple literacies. According to the authors, meaning is produced in ways that are increasingly multimodal - in which written linguistic modes of meaning interface with visual, aural, gestural and spatial patterns of meaning (KALANTZIS; COPE, 2000).

## **2 FOREIGN/ADDITIONAL LANGUAGES EDUCATION: teachers and students' new roles**

Within the contexts above, how can school respond to these new demands? Have schools changed? Has education changed or redefined/problematized itself? What about students? Which actions can the English teacher take in order to contribute to the education of the students? How does the field of VL contribute to these educational inquiries? If we agree that there are new roles that teachers of the digital age should deal with, then we would have to assume that a test like the one below should make us rethink our pedagogic practices. Vanessa, my student of English 1 at the Faculty of Technology I teach answered:

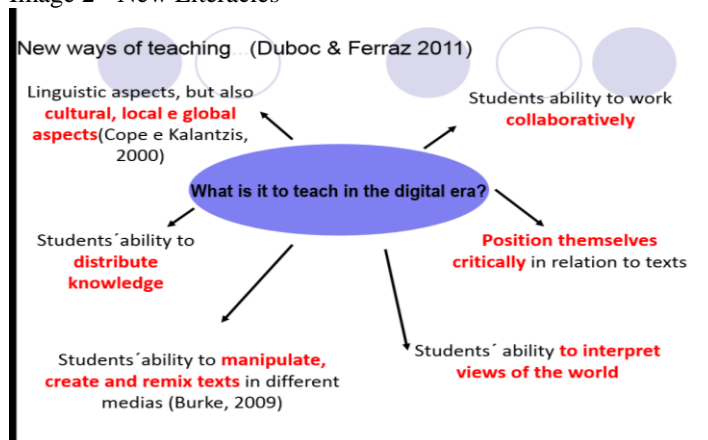
Image 1 - Vanessa's English test



Fonte: Duboc and Ferraz, 2011.

Vanessa's answers show that we, educators, still reinforce traditional ways of learning. McLuhan critiques that many of us are still within the typographic society, which characteristics are: individualism, centrality, concentration, norms, rules, structure, and linearity whereas our students are demanding new ways of learning put forward by a Post-typographic society. In this "new" society new characteristics arise: distributed knowledge, collaborative authorship, sharing, networked thinking, critique (DUBOC; FERRAZ, 2011). In Vanessa's test above it is clear that I was looking for very pragmatic and linguistic answers whereas Vanessa was questioning it and bringing more social preoccupations (such as "why are you asking about my telephone number, will you call me?"). Hence, new ways of learning probably require new ways of teaching. Building on Duboc and Ferraz's ideas on how to teach in contemporary/ digital times, we might assume there are new roles the English language educator should assume, as well as there are other realms to be touched:

Image 2 - New Literacies



Fonte: Duboc and Ferraz, 2011.

As seen in the image, we have defended that there are many aspects to be dealt in class. The ones suggested by Kalantzis and Cope above (the linguistic, but also the cultural, local and global) seems to be challenges for English educators. Providing students with the ability to work collaboratively using distributed knowledge is also another challenge to be dealt with by educators and students. Also, positioning yourself in relation to texts and contexts (critique) is an important pedagogic practice. For Warschauer (2000),

- Globalization pushes English as an international language promoting a change in "authority" of the non-natives
- New trends in the economy and employment will change the way English is used: non-natives need to use the language in presenting complex ideas, collaboration and negotiation in international location and critical interpretation of the information
- The new information technologies will transform the notions of "literacy", making navigation online, authorship and interaction with the new multimodality are critical strategies in language teaching.

Image 3 - The Multiliteracies Pedagogy



Fonte: Kalantzis and Cope, 2000.

I believe the Multiliteracies pedagogic project might be one of the responses to these new demands we have faced as educators. By bringing this perspective of the multiple, usually happening altogether, into educational contexts, this project thinks through and offers other possibilities for language education, and VL as a sub-category of the Multiliteracies project comprises an important field of study.

### 3 THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VISUAL LITERACY: an image speaks for a thousand words?

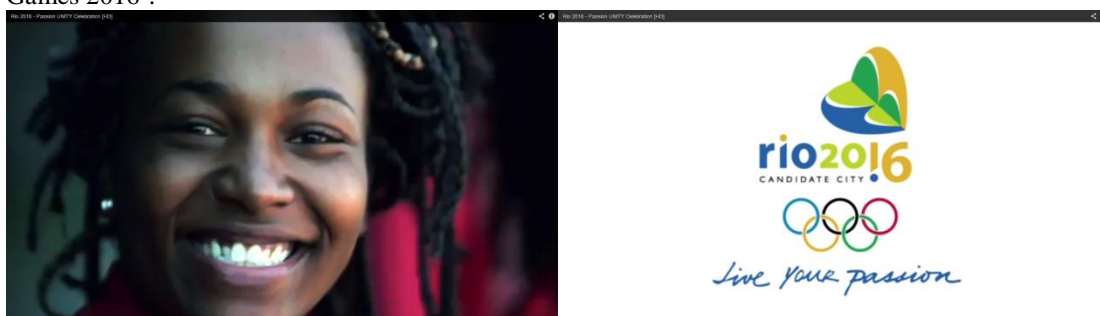
Visual language is not – despite assumptions to the contrary – transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific.

**Kress & van Leeuwen**

*Reading images: the grammar of visual design, 2006*

Visual Literacy is a field of study which problematizes the study of images (static, movement, mixed) in order to: investigate their importance in all fields, question the idea of representation, rethink images as meaning making processes, expand perspectives, interpretations, and knowledge. The initial questions I posed during the presentation in Mato Grosso were: How do we use/interpret images in classes? How have we dealt with multimodality in English classes? Are we prepared to deal with diversity, different interpretations? I believe the field of VL, as a kind of sub-field of Multiliteracies or the New Literacies has a lot to contribute to educational discussions through the studies of images. For example, we can start questioning fixed or SINGLE/mono interpretations usually incentivized by teachers in classes. To expand the discussion, I presented the video of the Brazilian campaign for the Olympic Games in 2016. The video was considered by many as one of the most important assets of the Brazilian candidature. The main idea was that “an image speaks for a thousand words”:

Figure 01 - Images from the Brazilian Campaign video *Live your Passion* for the Candidature of the Olympic Games 2016<sup>1</sup>.



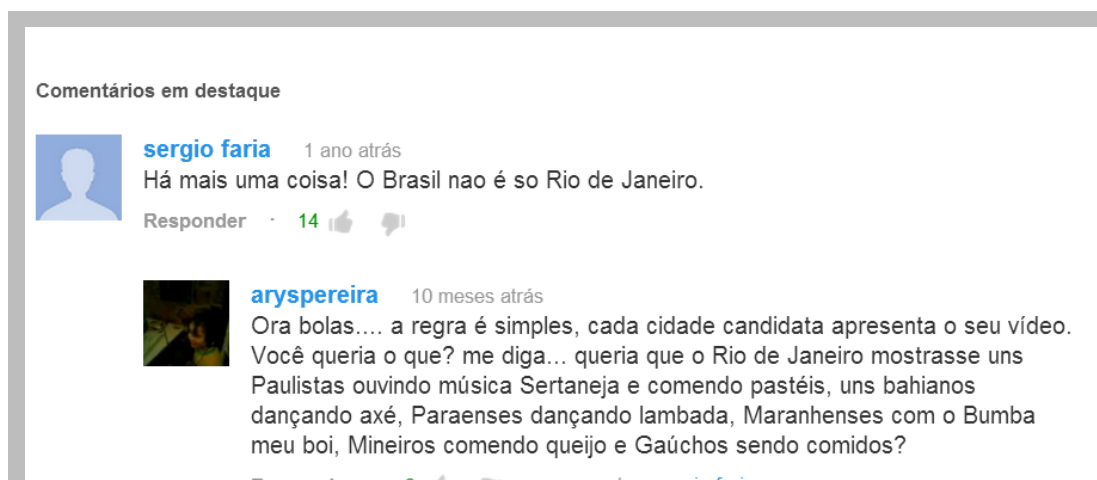
This example establishes the very first idea I want to problematize when we talk about images or images and education: the idea of representation of reality or truth. It is widely spread in mass media that an image indeed speaks for a thousand words, meaning that in image, like the video above, represents the reality *ipsis literis*. However, Critical education and Visual literacy studies will question this idea of representation provided that 1. Images not only represent realities, but construct them (MIZAN, 2004; FERRAZ, 2010); 2. Images in

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xucJTdUTMzA>

the realm of mass media often times manipulate the message to be sent; 3. Images represent one side of the truth, for they are always historically, socially and culturally placed and interpreted. In this sense, Buck-Morss affirms that

The complaint that images are out of context [...] is not valid. To struggle to bind them again to their source is not only impossible (as it actually produces a new meaning); it is to miss what is powerful about them, their capacity to generate meaning, and not merely to transmit it (BUCK-MORSS, 2004, p. 23).

Still about this video, I continued the discussion by critiquing some of the posts that were published as comments by internet users:



Going against the idea that the video represents one reality, the posts by Sergio and Arys show the opposite provided that both do not talk about the campaign itself or how important it was for the Brazilian candidature. On the contrary they publish their reactions to the video. It can be inferred that for Sergio, the fact that the video showed mostly the city of Rio de Janeiro (and not the other capitals where the Olympics will probably take place) made him critically mention that “Brazil is not only Rio de Janeiro!”. In response, Arys – in a very stereotyped vision of the regions and peoples of Brazil – wrote: “*What would want? Tell me... Would like the video showing a bunch of paulistas playing country music and eating pastries? Some bahianos dancing “axé”? Some Paraenses dancing “lambada” and the Maranhenses dancing “Bumba meu boi”? And some mineiros eating cheese and some Gaúchos being F...?*” In a very ironic and stereotypical way, Arys Pereira defends Rio de Janeiro at the same time he eschews all the other people from around the country. His last sentence reinforces a typical joke made about gaúchos, meaning that every gaucho is gay. What is interesting for me about these posts is the discussion itself. People on the Web – specially on



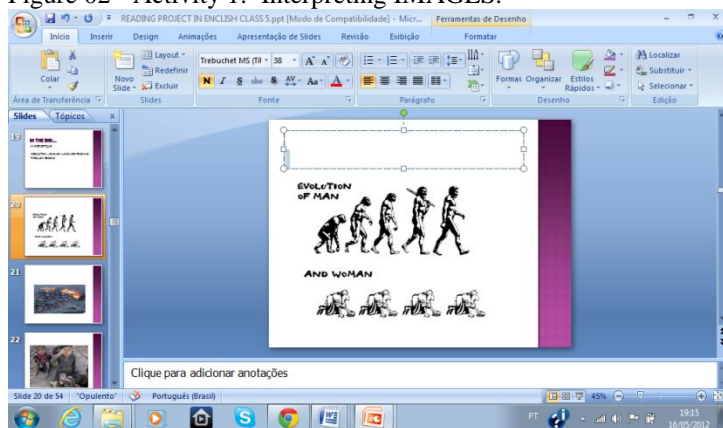
spaces where it is possible to post comments and pictures – are freer to move into other conversations, sometimes diverging from the original intention of the published object (in this case, to show how the video helped Brazil win the Olympics Campaign).

Thus, going back to the questions I posed in this chapter, I believe we educators have used images in very traditional ways in classes emphasizing the one possible interpretation. In this sense, multimodality and multiliteracies seem to be much more the reality of the digital native students than of teachers. When we reinforce this one possible view – usually our view – we are not opening up for plurality. Rather, we are reinforcing the power-relations and individualism. I am also not saying they should be excluded, but I do believe we should provide both contextual needs where individualism and collaboration, like co-exist depending on the context.

#### 4 SOME ACTIVITIES

In the second part of the lecture I suggested the practice of some VL activities, as follows:

Figure 02 - Activity 1: Interpreting IMAGES.



Fonte: Grupo Escolar, 2011.

**OBJECTIVE:** to discuss possible interpretations of an image, to discuss different kinds of interpretation of the same image, to widen students' interpretation habitus, to discuss different views of the world, to practice and improve speaking, to improve vocabulary.

**STEPS:**

1. The teacher chooses many images from Google or Flickr and puts them on Power Point slides.
2. Student may work in pairs or in groups.
3. The teacher explains that students will be shown some images.



4. For each image students might say a word (basic level) or a sentence (pre-intermediate levels up).

*For example: Prejudice! or: This image makes me think about prejudice!*

Hints: The teacher has to explain that ANY interpretation of that image is possible, even the most absurd ones. The teacher might also previously explain the ideas of common sense (interpretation habitus), and of more critical interpretations of an image. The teacher might ask them to go beyond common sense! To close, the teacher might discuss different interpretations, and how people see the world in different and varied ways.

Figure 03 - Activity 2: FILM SCENES – Interpreting short films<sup>2</sup>



**OBJECTIVE:** to expand interpretations, to construct meanings, to practice and learn English, to improve listening and vocabulary. **STEPS:**

1. The teacher brings one video from Youtube.com or Ted.com or any other. The video must represent the topics the teacher wants to debate in class.
2. The teacher explains that students will watch the video and will talk about it. They will also have to position themselves in relation to that video, and explain their interpretation.
3. After the video, give them some time to reflect (in groups).
4. Open for discussion.

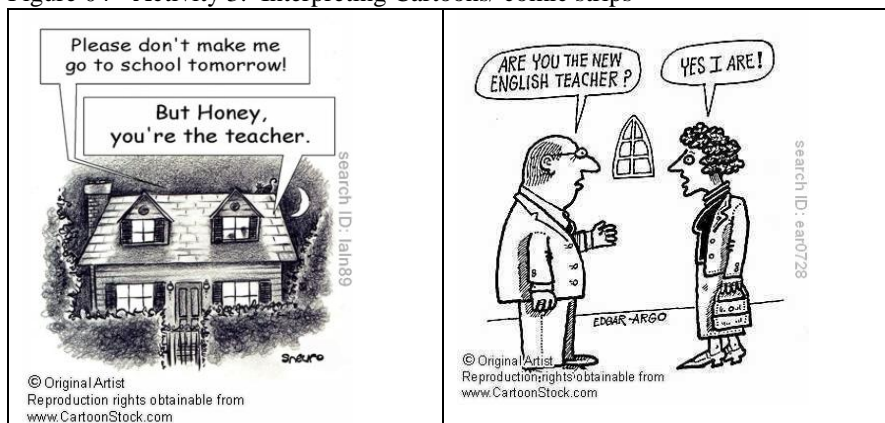
Option: The teacher might want first to talk about the topic of the class, for example in the video above (Did you know...?) the teacher might want to discuss technology in society and in their lives.

Hints: The teacher might also previously explain the ideas of common sense (interpretation habitus) , and of more critical interpretations of a film. The teacher might ask them to go beyond common sense!

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmwwrGV\\_aiE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmwwrGV_aiE)

Figure 04 - Activity 3: Interpreting Cartoons/ comic strips<sup>3</sup>



**OBJECTIVE:** to expand interpretations, to construct meanings, to perceive irony and satirical language, to practice and learn English, to improve reading and vocabulary. **STEPS:**

- Part 1 – Discuss the teacher’s cartoons:
  1. The teacher brings some cartoons or comic strips (according to the topic of the class). The teacher might also project the site [www.cartoonstock.com](http://www.cartoonstock.com) and choose the cartoons from there.
  2. The teacher asks students to make an interpretation of each cartoon.
  3. Students should connect each cartoon to the topic of the class.
  4. For example, the cartoons above might bring the discussion into education and English language teaching areas. The teacher might ask which ideas they point out to, also the teacher might ask if these cartoons represent the student’s teachers. If not, why not? If so what are the consequences?
- Part 2 (Optional):
  1. The teacher might want to invite students to explore the site, and students will find cartoons that they find relevant and interesting in their views.
  2. Students surf on the site and choose some cartoons.
  3. They present their cartoons to the group explaining the irony, and the topic that is discussed or critiqued.
  4. Hints: The teacher might want first to talk about the topic of the class, for example, to discuss English language teaching in Brazil. The teacher might also previously explain the ideas of common sense (interpretation habitus), and of more critical interpretations of a film. The teacher might ask them to go beyond common sense.

## 5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

<sup>3</sup> [www.cartoonstock.com](http://www.cartoonstock.com)

I have discussed in this paper the impact or influence of globalization and the new technologies in foreign/additional languages education. Provided that these ‘movements’ have changed social, cultural, and educational paradigms, we as educators should problematize them in order to be ‘more’ prepared for this generation of digital native students which – with accessibility or not – come to our everyday classes. The English language in this sense has also assumed new roles. I believe that the new educational movements such as the new literacies and the multiliteracies have a lot to contribute to these new roles/ demands. The VL field, for example, is an important sub-area of multiliteracies provided it discusses the presence of images in contemporary society. Moreover, it breaks down the traditional notion that images are mere representations of the truth/reality. In fact, images around us construct realities and the way we interpret them will highly influence or determine the way we see the world.

**LETRAMENTO VISUAL:  
a interpretação de imagens nas aulas de inglês**

**RESUMO**

Os objetivos neste artigo são discutir a área de letramento visual e resumir a palestra apresentada no XVI Encontro de Professores de Inglês realizada pela APLIEMT – Associação de Professores de Língua Inglesa do Estado do Mato Grosso em 2013. Na primeira parte do artigo, investigo três conceitos-chave os quais influenciam a educação de línguas estrangeiras/ adicionais: a globalização, os papéis da língua inglesa e as novas tecnologias. Na segunda parte, discuto a área de letramento visual. Para o fim, aludo a algumas atividades como exemplos de prática de letramento visual.

**Palavras-chave:** Globalização. Letramento visual. Educação de LI.

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