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**CONFERENCE ARTICLE**

## **Multimodality As A Defining Feature Of Digital Text: Implications For The Training Of Primary School Teachers**

**Zokirova Sohiba Mukhtoraliyevna**  
Professor at Fergana State University, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** The paper considers multimodality as the feature that most clearly distinguishes digital text from traditional written text and outlines what follows from this for the preparation of future primary school teachers. It is argued that creating a digital text is an act of design, that the relations between modes can be taught explicitly, and that narrative offers a workable criterion for deciding which mode should carry which part of the meaning.

**Keywords:** digital text, multimodality, design, multiliteracies, narrative, teacher education, primary school.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

When a primary school teacher prepares a lesson today, the text that reaches the pupils is seldom made of words alone. A slide, an e-book page or a short explanatory video combines written and spoken language with pictures, colour, layout, movement and sound. The term multimodality refers to this use of several semiotic resources, or modes, in a single act of communication. For teacher education the question is practical: if the texts teachers make are multimodal, what must future teachers learn in order to make them well?

The theoretical basis is provided by social semiotics. Kress showed that the dominance of writing and of the page is giving way to the dominance of the image and the screen, and that each mode has its own affordances: writing is governed by the logic of sequence in time, the image by the logic of arrangement in space [1]. Kress and van Leeuwen described multimodal communication as involving distinct strata of discourse, design, production and distribution [2]. The New London Group placed design at the centre of literacy pedagogy: the meaning-maker draws on available resources and transforms them into something new [3]. Hull and Nelson demonstrated, through a detailed analysis of one digital story, that a multimodal composition has a semiotic power that exceeds the sum of its modes [4].

Three implications follow for the preparation of primary teachers.

First, creating a digital text should be taught as design, not as typing plus decoration. The novice habit is to write the text and then "add pictures". A designer asks earlier questions: what is to be understood, by whom, and which mode can best show it? A spatial relation is better shown than described; a sequence of actions may need narration; an emotion may be carried by voice or music. Future teachers need practice in making and justifying such decisions.

Second, relations between modes can and should be taught explicitly. An image may repeat the words, complement them with new information, or contradict them. Research on multimedia learning indicates that people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone, but that extraneous material harms learning and that presenting identical verbal information as both on-screen text and narration can be

counterproductive [5]. For young children, whose attention and working memory are limited, these principles matter greatly. A teacher who knows them will remove an ornamental animation rather than add one.

Third, narrative offers a criterion of relevance. The difficulty with design principles is that they are abstract. A story makes them concrete. When a student teacher composes a digital story for seven-year-olds about, say, why leaves fall, each image and sound can be tested by a simple question: does it move the story forward or help the child understand what is happening? Elements that do neither are removed. The storyboard, in which each frame is planned as a combination of words, image and sound, becomes the central tool for learning multimodal coherence.

These implications suggest several kinds of learning activity: analysing model digital texts for children and identifying what each mode contributes; transforming a text from one mode to another, for example turning a written explanation into a sequence of images with minimal words; storyboarding before any software is opened; and peer review focused specifically on the relation between modes. Such activities fit within existing courses on language teaching methodology and educational technology, provided that the two are coordinated.

Two cautions are in order. Multimodal richness is not a value in itself: the aim is not more media but better-distributed meaning. And attention to design must not displace attention to language. The primary teacher's text is a model of language for the child; correct, clear and expressive wording remains the foundation on which the other modes build.

### **Conclusion**

Multimodality changes what it means to create a text and therefore what it means to prepare a teacher to create one. Treating digital text creation as design, teaching the relations between modes explicitly, and using narrative as a criterion of relevance together form a coherent basis for developing the digital text creation competence of pre-service primary school teachers. The practical effectiveness of this approach remains to be examined empirically.

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