Documentaries as Multimodal Texts to Promote Reading in the Virtual Language Classroom: An Experimental Study

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Abstract

As education today is immensely reliant on distant and virtual learning methods, addressing the individual learning styles of the students is a challenging task particularly in second language teaching. Therefore, this study examines the use of documentaries as multimodal texts in the virtual language classroom to promote reading. 50 first year undergraduates enrolled in the BSc. degree program at a Sri Lankan national university were selected for the study and they were randomly divided into two groups; experimental and control. The virtual application used in the study was Google Classroom and a subtitled documentary was shared among the students of experimental group whereas the controlled group was given access to the transcript of the same documentary. After allocating adequate reading time for both groups, a test paper was simultaneously assigned using the same platform. While the students' scores were analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of the two reading approaches, a questionnaire was virtually distributed among the participants of the experimental group to gather their perspective on the use of documentary. The findings revealed that, using documentaries as digital multimodal texts is a successful language acquisition method which enhances the students' comprehension and enthusiasm in learning the language. Further, using documentary was identified as a novel experience in the virtual classroom. Hence, the study recommends the incorporation of digital texts in virtual language teaching as a multimodal approach.

Keywords*: Multimodal Texts, Virtual Language Teaching, Documentaries, Individual Learning Styles*

1. INTRODUCTION

Second language teaching has undergone significant changes during the past few decades and in many contexts the traditional teacher-centered classroom has been replaced by student-centered learning. Prominence is given to the learner requirements and in consequence, multimodal approach has acquired a significant place in the classroom as an effective mode of delivering language content. According to Sarıçoban & Yürük (2016), "learners have a preferred learning modality, namely, visual, aural, read/write or kinesthetic while numerous learners are multimodal (utilize a blend of these modalities)" (p.116). Emphasizing on the significance of multimodal teaching, Gilakjani et al., (2011) claimed that, "learning is not only a visual-cognitive activity but also a physical one particularly as it requires the interplay among multiple sensory modalities and representations" (p. 1325). Multimodal approach has been identified as a learner friendly strategy of second language teaching since the incorporation of different materials and learning methods ensure a variety of learning experiences which result in memory retention, enhanced enthusiasm, motivation and improved comprehension which can significantly contribute to the performance of students. Based on a study by Bao (2017), application of multimodality in the second language teaching can make the classroom atmosphere more relaxing and interesting while boosting learner motivation and confidence in using the language. Freyn (2017) has also highlighted that the combination of different learning modes "allows for creativity, meaning making, and can enhance the learning environment." (p. 81).

The significance of multimodal teaching is often observed in the undergraduate second language classroom since the instruction methods demand frequent alteration in response to the individual learning styles of the students. Based on the target lesson, its content and the language competency, the students' acquisition process requires a combination of approaches (multimodal) to ensure that all the students are actively engaged in the learning process and their expectations in the language classroom are met. Today, where education is primarily based on virtual platforms, addressing learner needs requires alternative teaching strategies and methodologies as the practices of the traditional language classroom cannot be employed in an online environment. In this light, the present study is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of using documentaries in the undergraduate second language classroom as multimodal texts to facilitate the reading skill of learners.

Documentaries have been identified as authentic materials of language teaching which can be effectively used to enhance the learners' comprehension of a topic, their vocabulary and cultural knowledge. According to Ducca (2015), films and documentaries "present target topics and linguistic content to students in an attractive way that meets their needs and interests allowing them to focus on the ideas, diverting their attention from language itself" (p. 240). Several studies have highlighted the efficacy of using digital texts as a substitute for the materials used in the traditional language classroom. Based on a study by Bajrami & Ismaili (2016), "videos can be used in a variety of instructional and teaching settings – in classroom, as a way of presenting context, initiating discussion, for providing illustration for a certain topic and content, self-study and evaluation situations" (p. 503). As emphasized by Wilson (2003), "by providing the comprehensible input that the learner is going to receive in real world, they have interacted in an environment in which the language spoken will likely

proven to be better for the learners, especially considering the fact that a language classroom will not be able to reflect the broad range of language use that the real world provides."

In the virtual language classroom, multimodal approach can be incorporated through the introduction of digital texts as has been highlighted in many previous studies. Since face-to-face interaction between the teacher and students is restricted in online teaching, these materials can be exploited in numerous ways to deliver the target lesson in a creative manner. Emphasizing on how digital materials can be successfully employed in creating a multimodal learning environment, Rodrigues et al., (2019), claimed that they (digital texts) "provide students with a personalized, learner centered, open, enjoyable and interactive learning environment supporting and enhancing the learning process." (p.95). According to Freyn (2017), using digital texts in the online classroom enable creativity and meaning making while enhancing the learning environment. He further commented that "through technology induced interactions, multimodality provides resources and opportunities that challenge the traditional forms of communication and teaching" (p.81).

Many studies have investigated the impact of using digital texts in the language classroom. Ducca (2015) has examined the effect of using documentaries in reducing the speaking anxiety during oral tests while Rahman et al., (2017) have analyzed the written texts of students after they were provided language input through short documentaries. Freyn (2017) has applied a multimodal approach in teaching poetry through the incorporation of poetry videos and video poem clips and Whatley (2012) has studied the impact of using motion pictures in the classroom as opposed to paper based texts. All these studies have indicated a positive impact of the utilization of digital materials. However, less research has been conducted on the use of these texts in the virtual learning environment. Therefore, the present study concentrates on the effect of using documentaries in the online language classroom with reference to multimodal learning. Both the performance and perspectives of the students are descriptively presented.

In order to pave the way towards a better understanding of the use of documentaries as multimodal texts in the virtual language classroom to promote reading, this study examined the following questions:

1. How documentaries can be incorporated as a source of multimodal learning in the virtual language classroom?
2. What are the benefits and limitations of using documentaries as an alternative to the traditional paper based reading materials?
3. What is the impact of using documentaries as reading materials on students' comprehension?
4. What are the students' perceptions on the use of documentaries in the virtual language classroom?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Multimodal Approach to Language Teaching

Ducca (2015) stated that the language classroom "can be used as a laboratory for learning, applying, and improving linguistic contents as well as acquisition of production

skills" (p. 236). Commenting on the present day language teaching environment, Quesada (2006) observed that, "current generation teachers serve to assist students in organizing learning activities where students construct understandings around authentic and meaningful collaborative experience". (p.7). According to Gilakjani et al., (2011), "for learners to be engaged in a subject, they need to relate themselves and connect their everyday life to the learning material" (p. 1325) This requirement can be accomplished through the multimodal approach which is known as a teaching technique that combines several modes such as combining the use of images, audio-visual, and text in learning (Shalihah et al., 2018). Based on a study by Shah & Freedman (2003), "multimodal courses allow instructional events or elements to be presented in more than one sensory mode (multiple representations), thus have been used to further facilitate students' learning" (p.319). Sankey & Birch (2005) also observed that, multimodal learning involves "the use of multimedia and ICT to develop dynamic course resources that appeal to different savory modes and a variety of learning styles" (p.9). According to Cubillo & Garido (2010), "the challenge for linguists working in the field of language teaching is the need to conduct theoretical approach on both the multimodal text structure and on the possible ways to adapt and integrate these multimodal texts into the design on pedagogical material" (p.1)

2.2 Multimodality in Virtual Language Teaching

Emphasizing on the application of multimodal teaching in the virtual language classroom, Fadda & Liu (2020), stressed that "multimodal e-learning has been regarded as an encouraged concept that promotes much more interaction in a quality manner" (p.953). This has been highlighted by Sun (2015) as well who claimed that "traditional teaching is represented as the teacher teaching, students learning, and respective responsibility, but unlike the traditional teaching method, multimodal online teaching stresses greater interaction between teachers and students" (p. 54). Commenting on the role of language teacher in establishing multimodality in the virtual classroom, Tsou et al., (2006) stated that, "in the online teaching multimodal model, teachers should often help the students experience a real language environment, according to the students' actual conditions through a combination of the internet, multimedia options, and other means" (p.19).

It has been emphasized in several studies that digital texts can be employed as multimodal learning materials in the second language classroom. According to Alter (2019) "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)" (p.156) Commenting on the use of videos in language learning, Shrosbree (2008) observed that "it (digital video) can simply provide a welcome break from the rigors of more traditional study" (p.76). Bajrami & Ismaili (2016) stated that, "language teachers like video because it motivates learners, brings the real world into the classroom, contextualizes language naturally and enables learners to experience authentic language. Students like it because video presentations are interesting, challenging, and stimulating to watch" (p. 504). In his study on the use of motion pictures in the language classroom, Whatley (2012) stressed that "the combination of both image and sound significantly aids in the achievement of the pedagogical goals of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills" (p.51). According

to Shrosbree (2008), "videos allow learners to see the context of the discourse and the speaker's body language as well as other visual aids for comprehension" (p.75) Ducca (2015) claimed that "continuous inclusion of documentaries or movies in preparation stages, and engaging in non-assessed activities during one or two terms could dramatically potentiate students' self-confidence while lowering their performance anxiety" (p.247). Bajrami & Ismaili (2016) observed that "while watching video contents, learners can put themselves in the vivid atmosphere created by the visual materials and can comprehend the pragmatics of the language used by the characters." (p. 503). Based on a study by Mirvan (2013) on the use of short films, it had been observed that they (short films) "enhance students' reading skills in a way that it strengthens students' understanding of English context-bound expressions" (p. 65) He further commented that films help the students "guess the meaning from visual clues" while improving the skills like "comparing and contrasting, analyzing perspective, constructing support or error analysis" (p.65).

2.3 Reading in the Second Language Classroom

Ahmed (2015) identified reading as "a process in which words are interpreted and meaning is created" (p.42). Grabe & Stoller (2013) claimed that "in order to comprehend or assign meaning to a text, various linguistic, conceptual, reasoning, and metacognitive abilities must work efficiently and simultaneously within the reader" (p.224) which emphasizes the need for alternative reading materials as the traditional paper-based materials are rarely updated. Highlighting the significance of using multimodal texts for reading, Walsh (2007) stated that "reading theories based on only printed-texts cannot give an account on the way people process multimodal texts containing images, print, sound and moment." (p.30). Hence, the application of different materials in the reading lessons was recommended.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Population and Sample

The target population included 50 mixed- ability undergraduates enrolled in the BSc. Degree programme at a national university in Sri Lanka. The group comprised of 21 male and 29 female first year students who are required to learn English language as a compulsory subject during the first two years of their study program. The curriculum of their English language module includes the essential academic writing skills in addition to reading and speaking components targeting the competencies required for successful performance in their selected degree program.

3.2 Research Design

The study was conducted on Google Classroom using the experimental method. Accordingly, the selected students were divided into two groups (25 participants in each) through simple random sampling method. As the initial task, the experimental group was given access to a documentary with subtitles in English whereas the transcript of the same documentary was provided to the students in the controlled group. The second phase involved a test including three tasks; a gap-fill activity, vocabulary test and multiple choice

questions. This was used to examine the students' comprehension of the text upon their exposure to the two different materials. Their performance in the test was later evaluated to identify the efficacy of each learning mode. During the final phase, a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire was distributed among the participants of the experimental group via Google Forms. The responses were used to examine the effectiveness of the multimodal reading approach in the students' perspective.

3.3 Instruments

A test comprising different activities; vocabulary test, gap-fill activity and multiple choice questions was employed to evaluate the students' performance after they were given access to the documentary and transcript within their respective groups. A 5 point Likert Scale questionnaire was created and virtually distributed among the experimental group to gather their perception on the use of documentary.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Students' Performance in the Test and its Implications

The participants were given individual access to the reading material to ensure that they were provided with adequate time for reading. Accordingly, both the documentary and the paper-based script were shared on Google Classroom based on the respective groups of the students. The test paper was simultaneously made available to them. Within a period of 45 minutes, they were expected to turn in their answers using the same platform. It was observed that all the participants were able to complete the test during the given time. The standard examination evaluation procedure followed at the university was adopted in assessing the students' answer scripts and accordingly the following criteria were employed.

100-85 – (A+)	69-65 – (B+)	54-50 – (C+)
84-75 – (A)	64-60 – (B)	49-45 – (C)
70-74 – (A-)	59-55 – (B-)	

It was identified that 24% of the students in the controlled group were able to score between 100-85 while in the experimental group, 40% the students had reached the same range of marks. Only 8% the participants in the controlled group had obtained marks between 84-75 and significantly, 20% the students in the same group had been unable to reach the minimum range of marks obtainable which is 49-45. In comparison, 28% of the undergraduates in the experimental group had scored between 84-75 and none of the participants in the group had obtained marks below the range of 59-55. As indicated in these findings, using documentary in the classroom had a positive on the reading comprehension of students whereas the traditional text-based reading material and instructions had not sufficiently contributed in enhancing the students' performance.
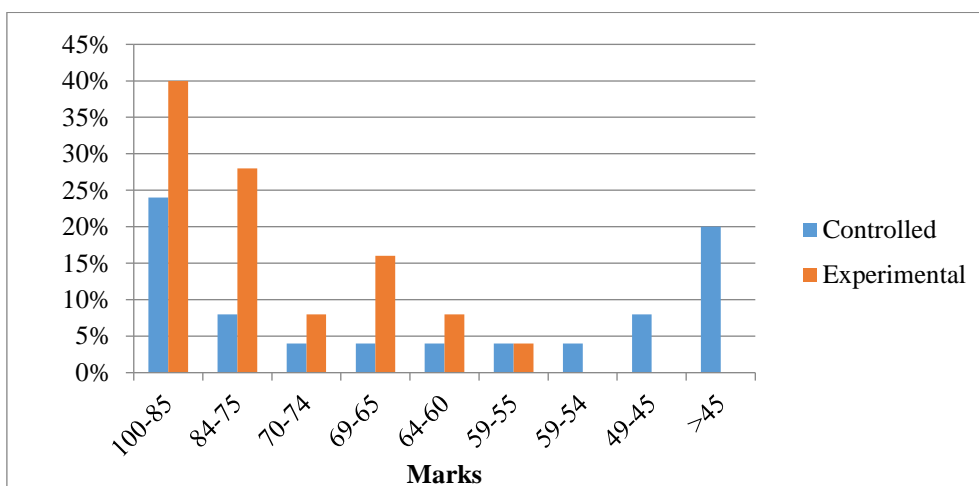
Figure 1: Distribution of Marks

The scores obtained by the two groups were statistically analyzed using SPSS V28.0 as follows,

Table 1: Test Results of the controlled and experimental groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Score	Controlled	25	13.2400	4.45608
	Experimental	25	16.9200	2.88560

As indicated by the mean and standard deviation, there is a significant variance between the two groups who have completed the test after reading the material via two different modes. These findings further highlight that the use of documentary has resulted in better comprehension of the text.

4.2 Findings of the Questionnaire

At the end of the activity, a Liket Scale questionnaire was distributed among the participants of the experimental group via Google Forms. Their different perspectives regarding the documentary-based reading approach were examined to determine its effectiveness. Accordingly, the following results were obtained.

Table 2: Results of the questionnaire

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
Watching documentaries is an interesting and a productive approach to practice reading.	48%	44%	8%		
The combination of visual and audio along with subtitles helped me to understand the text better.	80%	20%			

I learnt how language is used in actual communication.	76%	24%		
I felt more engaged in learning during the activity.	40%	32%	12%	16%
Watching the documentary was beneficial for my overall language development.	40%	36%	24%	
I prefer digital text based activities to paper-based tasks.	40%	8%	24%	28%
I was motivated to learn English.	44%	56%		
Language is easier to understand when it is presented through a digital material.	88%	12%		
More digital text based activities should be practiced in the language classroom in future.	52%	24%	24%	

As indicated in the above responses, majority of the participants agree that using documentaries is an interesting approach to language development while the combined use of visuals, audio and subtitles has also been regarded as a positive factor contributing to better comprehension. Further, all the students believe that documentary enabled them to understand the authentic use of language spoken in a natural environment. However, 16% the students have responded that the activity failed to make them feel engaged while 28% students do not prefer the use of digital texts in the language classroom opting for the traditional paper-based approach. While it is evident that the students' motivation and level of understanding has increased through the exposure to the documentary, 24% of the participants demonstrate a neutral attitude towards a possible continuation of using digital texts in the language classroom.

5. DISCUSSION

In consideration of the students' performance at the test and their responses to the questionnaire, it can be concluded that using documentaries as multimodal reading texts in the virtual classroom is an effective approach towards language development. It was also observed that digital texts have a positive impact on students' motivation and interest in learning the language. Since virtual learning can be a monotonous experience owing to the absence of face-to-face interaction, digital texts provide a healthy distraction to the students which can simultaneously improve their language use. In addition, these texts can enhance the learners' exposure to the target language better than the traditional classroom texts. Further, digital texts as multimodal learning materials enable the language teacher to practice different skills via a single activity rather than focusing on one skill at a time. These findings are in consistent with the studies by Freyn (2017), Liou et al., (2003) and Sarıçoban & Yürük (2016) who claimed that digital materials facilitate language development through the presentation of real language used in authentic settings. Further, these studies identified a significant difference in students' performance when digital materials were incorporated.

However, when examining the students' responses to the questionnaire, it is understood that while majority prefers digital materials, some learners believe that the paper-

based approach is more efficient and productive. Also, as indicated by the findings, some learners find the digital materials less engaging and motivating. Hence, a combination of the paper-based and digital texts can be considered a learner-friendly approach of teaching in the second language classroom.

6. CONCLUSION

In the present day second language classroom where learner-centered approach is encouraged, individual learning requirements and interests of students play a significant role. In striving to address the aforementioned needs, prominence is given to the development of multiple language skills using authentic materials instead of concentrating on one skill at a time. In this context, multimodality can be considered a productive strategy applicable during the process of material development and teaching. As much of the language teaching is taking place over virtual learning platforms today, digital texts can be incorporated as multimodal learning aids to motivate the learners and enhance their exposure to the natural use of language while developing the core skills governing successful language acquisition. Further, digital texts can ensure learner engagement and interaction particularly in online teaching where face-to-face interaction between the teacher and students is restricted. While the study observed some drawbacks in employing these materials based on the students' responses, their advantages towards language development overweigh the negative effects. Therefore, a combination of digital texts and traditional classroom materials is recommended in the study.

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