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Abstract

The article focuses on the authors' pedagogical experience of exploiting digital narratives in a foreign language education at a modern university (on the basis of National Technical University of Ukraine “KPI” named after Igor Sikorsky). The study aims to consider multimodality in terms of foreign language didactics. It was designed by the constructivism theory and narratology in terms of teaching a foreign language. The research exploited the set of theoretical methods: analyzing, summarizing, and interpreting scholarly sources on the issue under scrutiny; generalization and conceptualization of the authors' pedagogical experience. Applying those methods in coherence logic enabled the effective study and interpretation of the concepts of “narrative” and “digital narrative” in their interrelations. In the study, the narrative is viewed as a sociocultural tool that provides students with deeper self-understanding, and complements the communicative system of foreign language acquisition with metacognition and values of life meaning. The digital narrative as a form of expression, empowered and determined by digital technologies incorporates multimodal communication and narrative as a cognitive unity. The authors have stated that multimodality, grounded on information technologies, is introducing entirely new semiotic resources into the communicative environment of foreign language learning. It is also generating innovative ways and forms of oral and written interaction. Multimodal learning activities illustrating the specifics of creating digital narratives by learners of English as a foreign language, are highlighted. The significance of the study lies in the fact that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is unquestionably a rather fertile condition for active implementing digital technologies into foreign language education, and developing different multimodal learning activities in this area

Keywords: digital competence, digital narrative, multimodality, multimodal learning activity, narrative, teaching a foreign language.

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Introduction

Today, the modern socio-cultural environment has undergone fundamental shifts. In particular, the latest digital technologies have reduced the degree of dominance of the spoken and written words in various spheres of human life, and in education as well. These changes have made non-verbal and mixed texts more influential, and have also given rise to new forms of text creation (video, web pages, etc.), where purely linguistic text structures are supplemented with important visual, acoustic, kinetic, and other structures. Such transformations are providing new multimodal opportunities for learning a foreign language.

Previous studies of the representatives of poststructuralism (Baudrillard (1998), Derrida (1978), and others support the idea that the surrounding world is nothing more than a text for reading and interpreting. It has encouraged academics from different spheres to realize the communicative power of messages created not only by verbal means. On these grounds, in the late 80s of the 20th century, a new interdisciplinary research field began to emerge, the main motto of which was the desire to study communication in its natural state, i.e., without reducing it to any single manifestation – verbal, visual, or auditory, etc. Philosophers (like Keeley (2002), Matthen (2005), Prior (2009), and others), sociologists (Bergmann, and Luckmann (1995), Hoffman (2010), Hall (2003), and others), psychologists (Gibson, and Larson (2007), and others), linguists and sociolinguists (Bateman (2018), Dressman (2019), Fulwiler, and Middleton (2012), Kasch (2018), Kress (2003), Labov, and Waletzky (1966), and others) provided a theoretical and methodological basis for such studies. As a result, the formed interdisciplinary direction was called multimodal research. Notably, multimodality can be viewed as a characteristic of the modern world, which is becoming more and more “dependent on new technologies and different modes of communication” (Fedorenko, 2019, p. 13).

Additionally, current challenges in modern society affect not only the socio-cultural sphere, but also have an impact on the development of innovative ways of teaching a foreign language. This presupposes the multidisciplinary approach, combining key aspects of different knowledge areas (linguistics, philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, culturology). Furthermore, it is impossible to learn a foreign language without simultaneous reference to sociocultural aspects of society on the basis of different modes of communication. In the latest paradigm of education, it is an axiomatic statement on the multimodality as a characteristic of all texts without exception, even of those that at first glance seem monomodal (like Farías, 2011; Hall, Meyer & Rose, 2012). For the matter, the core of the phenomenon of multimodality can be summarized by the following principles: 1) multimodality assumes that the representation and content of an utterance is always based on the interaction of modes, which, in turn, is a set of resources from several sign systems, and not limited to purely linguistic signs; 2) multimodality implies the existence of certain extralinguistic resources to achieve the communication goal.

Therefore, it is supposed to create a broad systemic educational context according to a new integrated approach – a multimodal one. We argue that the point of intersection of different branches of knowledge related to teaching a foreign language to future specialists in various fields is a multimodal communicative situation. As multimodal communication combines the use of different semiotic modes, such as speech, gestures, graphics, typography, images, moving pictures, sound / music. Although the different perspectives of the study, common to all areas is the view

of Jewitt, and Kress (2003) that the multimodal approach assumes the distribution of a message through different modes of communication. If this is the case, then each mode is only a partial carrier of the global meaning of the message (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). The multimodal approach goes beyond the assertion that language always plays a dominant role in communication. However, it does not rule out the fact that sometimes this assertion is correct.

Given the above, it is necessary to stress that the multimodality of the 21st century has changed traditional approaches to teaching a foreign language. The speech activities (reading, listening, speaking and writing) remain the same, while the forms have transformed, as multimodal capabilities allow exploiting presentations, videos, blogs, etc. Such process requires a new communicative discourse of learning a foreign language. Modern classes should correspond to both the level of students and the level of the development of society as well. As noted by Fedorenko (2019), “students of the twenty first century must be capable of turning quickly and efficiently from one sign system to another” (p. 14). Furthermore, foreign language acquisition, according to Dressman (2019), is successful when learners are exposed to the input from different sources (written language, images, videos), and it is grounded on: reciprocal influence and relationship between a language and development of an identity; chained semiosis (realization of students’ cognitive and communicative potentials); significance of all sociocultural and natural processes in foreign language learning; and collaborative interaction.

Thus, the paper aims to consider multimodality in terms of foreign language didactics. More precisely, in the article we relate to digital narrative in a multimodal educational environment, as narrative plays a crucial role in grasping the essence of human existence. Moreover, narrative understanding of the rapidly changing digital landscape of the modern world as a particular mode of human existence contributes to (self)knowledge, coherence and orderliness of gained experience. And the authors supports the view that the unity of digital technologies and narrative in a multimodal format is conducive to a favorable educational environment of learning a foreign language.

The significance of the study lies in the fact that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is unquestionably rather fertile condition for active implementing digital technologies into foreign language education, and developing different multimodal learning activities in this area. Hence, this study will foster new ways of enhancing students’ communicative competence and attitudes, thus preparing them for successful future interaction in the globally-competitive world. Furthermore, this study will also help in the advancement of multimodal learning activities in foreign language education.

Literature Review

Concepts of “narrative” and “digital narrative”

Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly popular in a multimodal environment of learning a foreign language to turn to an interactive digital narrative. Since, on the one hand, the digital narrative is characterized by interdisciplinarity, and, on the other, – enhances the development of students’ critical and creative thinking, communication skills, and digital competence. As for narratives, the researchers of their role in human life (like Brunner, 1991; 1996; Herman, 2003; 2007) are convinced that the meaning of people’s behavior, in most ways, is fully expressed in the

story or narrative, through which people are able to say more about themselves than they realize. As a result, they get to better understanding of their inner selves, their surroundings, and the world at large. The American psychologist and educator Bruner (1996) emphasizes the existence of two main ways of understanding the world: paradigmatic, evolved during the sociocultural development of mankind, and narrative, which serves as a basis for the effective accumulation of an individual's experience. This points to the narrative mode of human life as a specific model of collective human experience for designing a personal experience. In other words, when something is reported about a certain life event, such as a problem, intention, fear, etc., it usually takes the form of a narrative.

Awareness of the importance of narrative as a way of understanding the world around us and ourselves in this world has led to rethinking the educational process in general, and learning a foreign language in particular. Modern research in the field of cognition shows that the understanding of the surrounding reality by an individual is not purely reproductive, but has a constructive transformative character: information perceived by an individual is interpreted and reconstructed through a prism of acquired knowledge, attitudes and aspirations (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). When students make up stories (or narratives) in a foreign language, they actualize their personal experience through critical analysis of events, and actions (their own and other people).

Specifically, in foreign language learning, in order to comprehend events or actions, narrative encourages students to turn to traditional forms (fairy tales, legends, etc.) inherent in their culture, through which they can relate events or actions to their causes (Polkinghorne, 1988). According to the American psychologist Gergen (1998), a narrative contains a certain value-colored ending – a conclusion based on causation. Students can model their narratives as: stories in which the characters found themselves in certain life situations, their values and norms of behavior (positive or negative); possible consequences that await the characters at the time of implementation of intentions and plans; conditions and chances of overcoming difficulties and realization of intentions (Dieterle & Vie, 2015; Woolhouse, 2017). The narrator, who is “here and now”, takes on the task of describing the actions of the hero “there and then”, who, moreover, is the bearer of his/her self. ... He / she must guide the hero from the past to the present in such a way that the hero and the narrator come together at some point, and become one person with a common consciousness. In order to bring the hero to the point where he/she becomes a narrator, a student undergoes personal growth (Bruner, 1991, p. 69).

The narrative, according to the American scholar Bruner (1996), is a complex of linguistic and psychological structures that are transmitted culturally and historically. Such structures are limited by the level of formed skills of each individual in using his/her social and communicative abilities on the grounds of reflexivity and simulation of life events. Therefore, narrative is a story about interaction with people, who constantly make moral and ethical choices, as well as with the surrounding world. Narratives involve not just the presentation of students' thoughts about a particular event, deed, etc., but contain a transfer of their attitudes to what they describe. At the same time, reflection becomes an integral attribute of the narrative as a sociocultural tool that provides students with deeper self-understanding, and complements the communicative system of foreign language acquisition with metacognition and values of life meaning.

Herman (2002) expressed a similar approach to defining the narrative, but in a broader way. The scholar considered the narrative as a mental formation that can be induced by various embodiments. As noted by the scholar, a narrative is a “flexible cognitive frame” for building, communicating, and rebuilding “projected worlds” (Herman, 2002, p. 49). In this regard, digital narrative is characterized as a form of expression, empowered and determined by digital technologies, that incorporates multimodal communication and narrative as a cognitive unity (Herman 2002; Koenitz, 2015). The digital narrative combines personal breadth of view with digital technologies, breaking up the division between active creator and captive audience, and indicating the emergence of a new triadic educational relationship between a creator, dynamic narrative and tuned-in audience (in our case, other students) (Koenitz, 2015). Within the broad interactive narrative environment of foreign language classes on the basis of using digital technologies, a digital narrative accumulates different artistic and research activities from adaptable, screen-based textual presentations to video depictions, in which interactors encounter consistent narratives together with digital narrative elements.

Given the aforementioned, the digital narrative, covering a wide range of socio-cultural topics (from personal stories to the analysis of historical and sociocultural events; from researching various aspects of an individual’s life to describing and analyzing different lifestyles in a globalized world, etc.), and based on multimodal communication and self-expression, best reflects the use of media and digital technologies in the educational process of foreign language acquisition (Clark, 2010; Fulwiler & Middleton, 2012; Yang, 2012). This requires students to skillfully use a variety of modes to create narratives, exploiting not only words but also digital tools, audio/video format, photos and other visual elements to complement the written narrative (Herman, 2007; Kasch, 2018; Koenitz, 2015). Digital narrative as a progressive metacognitive learning technique in a foreign language acquisition is, on the one hand, aimed at challenging students to use technologies in creating their own stories, and, on the other hand, enhancing a high impact learning environment.

Methods

This study employed the complex of theoretical methods: analyzing, summarizing, and interpreting scholarly sources on the issue under scrutiny; generalization and conceptualization of the authors’ pedagogical experience. Applying those methods in coherence logic enabled the effective study and interpretation of the concepts under research in their interrelations.

The study was underpinned by the constructivism theory (like Richardson, 2003; Schunk, 2004). This theory reflects the view that meaning-making and knowledge construction are foremost principles of foreign language learning (Aljohani, 2017). It considers knowledge as personal, idiosyncratic, socially constructed, developmental, and socioculturally mediated phenomenon (Boethel & Dimock, 2000; Fox, 2001). Additionally, the study exploited the considerable potential of narratives in foreign language learning, especially regarding the enhancement of students’ communicative skills, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence (Gergen, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Findings***Multimodal Narrative-Based English Language Education in Practice***

In this section of our article, some multimodal learning activities from our pedagogical experience, are outlined, illustrating the specifics of creating digital narratives by students, learners of English as a foreign language.

The interactive narrative -based activity comprises some stages. We start highlighting our teaching findings with interactive narrative-based activity. The first stage of this narrative-based learning is that, in class students conduct interviews with each other on a certain socio-cultural topic, which usually covers issues of moral and ethical behavior, social problems, issues of self-awareness as well. The topic of the session is assigned by a teacher on a website a few days before the class for students to make up questions to interview each other. From a multimodal angle, assignments are supposed to encourage students to exploit multimodal meaning-making in their learning process.

Based on the conducted interviews, students prepare their narratives in multimodal web-based text formats, integrating into them images, audio (a narrator's voice is obligatory, and music or other sounds is optional), and video. To do this, we focus on the ways in which digital technologies assist to expand the possibilities for teaching and learning a foreign language (English, in our case). Students should be able to understand how to integrate different modes into their narratives. This requires developing students' digital competence as a set of technology-related skills, which goes beyond the competences necessary for verbal meaning-making in writing and in oral form as well.

Consequently, students present their narratives in a video format in the next class. Every presentation is followed by a group discussion. Students are supposed to watch each digital narrative provided, paying attention to the following questions:

1. How does the author create balance between audio and video in the digital narrative?
2. How are the arguments conveyed – through images, quotations, sounds / music? What purposes do they accomplish? How do they enhance or detract from the mood of the digital narrative?
3. How would you describe the narrator's role? What is his/her significance?
4. Is there anything missing in the digital narrative that you might add? What might you incorporate to make it more effective, if anything?
5. What do you like most about the digital narrative that you might try to emulate in your own?

After that class activity, an English teacher formulates a topic on the website for further discussion, which will take place in writing. Therefore, students should present their thoughts in the form of letters or discursive essays, which depends on the assigned task.

In the next stage, an English teacher collects letters or essays written by students from one group, removes the details that identify the authors, and issues these works for “editing” to students in another group, whose task is to preserve the “spirit” of a letter / essay, but “grind” it up to the standard in terms of lexis, grammar and style. Subsequently, the “authors” of the letters / essays have the opportunity to evaluate the results of the “editorial work” based on a comparison of the original letters with their edited versions. This task is beneficial for enhancing students’ foreign language skills, and providing them with direct opportunities to become successful critical writers and readers in a variety of sociocultural contexts they can encounter in everyday life or future professional activities.

Another multimodal learning activity is based on creating digital narratives in English, accompanied with the explanation strategy. Student in the group receive the instructions on writing a short narrative about themselves. In this narrative, in addition to the name, the features of the place where a student lives, they highlight their interests, how they spend their free time, what places they like to visit and why, etc.

Secondly, based on the written report, a student is supposed to prepare the presentation. And then, in class, after presentation, each student receives “a gift” with a word that would convey the emotions of the presentation, and, at the same time, would cause the speaker pleasant feelings. Students can also think together and decide which of the given words was the most successful, justifying their choices.

Turning to one more multimodal learning activity, we should observe that it refers to our earlier work (Fedorenko, 2015), but the focus is different. This activity has been borrowed from the pedagogical findings of Rose, an instructor for a freshmen course at Oklahoma State University. The U. S. educator attempted to build close links between each student’s unique perspective and how the artwork creates a space for reflections (Moon et al., 2013, p. 225). For this purpose, Rose chooses a piece of art that possesses a surrealistic quality, e. g., “Dali Atomicus”, a photograph by Philippe Halsman (Figure one), known as “Dali and Cats”, shot in 1948, when photoshop was not yet known. The photographer depicted artist Salvador Dali jumping in the air while everything else in the room appeared to be levitating off the ground. In addition, a bucket of water had been thrown from off camera along with three cats that were tossed along with the water (Moon et al., 2013, p. 225). We argue the photo, providing enough ambiguity, is a powerful means for engaging students into discussion with the following creation of digital narratives.



Figure 1. “Dali Atomicus” by Philippe Halsman

Class discussions were generated by a homework assignment. Students were asked to study the photo by Philippe Halsman, to understand the historical and socio-cultural contexts of its creation, and to write an essay, formulating their thoughts on what happens to the person in the photo, what he is feeling, taking into account his jump and cat jumps, as well as the location of other objects in the photograph. The dwelling on the sociocultural context of a work of art contributes to a profound reflection on its content, which to some extent, serves as a source of cognition as well as aesthetic pleasure. Each student writes a story about what they believe is happening in the photograph imagining alternative realities through jumping.

The English lesson begins with students sharing their impressions of the photo and reading their essays, where they describe their own thoughts on the feelings of Salvador Dali at the time of the jump and the author’s ideological idea. Here, we provide an excerpt from an essay, written by student Daryna K., where she describes her thoughts and emotions in the following way: “Photo “Dali and Cats” impresses with its surrealism and unusual artistic decision. The irrational arrangement of objects in the photo immediately catches the eye: everything is in the air, moving. Salvador Dali is in the background, but his figure stands out the most. His smiling face and wide-open eyes form a holistic picture of his emotional outburst. Everything, depicted in the photo, seems to have come to life: cats, water, chairs – everything is moving and is in a constant continuum.

In my opinion, Salvador Dali is in a sublime state of mind, his emotions and experiences overwhelm him. It is possible that the artist is concerned with creating a new masterpiece, its realism and unconventional design. Dali’s face is full of such sincere emotions that he has a desire to smile sincerely and delve into the artist’s soul. The photographer managed to realize incredible things: all objects stopped for a moment so that he could forever realize this moment. The photographer wanted to convey the whole process of creating a picture and the course of events in such detail that his skills should be applauded.

This is the first time I have come across such a photo that its essence and idea are quite difficult to comprehend and understand. I believe that this photo conveys the continuous movement of life: water flows and does not stop its movement, human life is also a continuous movement, even if a person sleeps or is at rest, his body, internal organs work, and, therefore, there is a movement. Cats, as representatives of another kingdom, function through movement. The whole world and we, its particles, exist through movement. So, life is a movement. It is due to motion, not only in its direct physical sense, but also in the abstract – all evolutionary processes take place. Let's remember that even science has begun to develop much faster due to the elucidation of the main phenomena associated with it. In my opinion, the photographer created such an idea to convey all the instability, in the positive sense of the word, the dynamism of our existence”.

The photo inspires various feelings and moods. The flow of time, engraved in the eternal moment, and the omnipotence of chaos, which completely refutes the universal laws of physics, and all-consuming madness, almost beyond self-realization.

Students acknowledge the fact, despite the chaos in the photo, everything is hufely linked in it. The author's philosophical idea is a constant movement, thirst for life, optimism as a life credo, harmony with nature and the desire for self-knowledge and self-expression through art.

At the next stage of the lesson students in groups of tree or four people, using their smartphones or laptops, create a video essay lasting two to five minutes, which summarizes their collective opinion on the main idea of the analyzed foto. In this way, students learn to concisely express their thoughts in a foreign language (in our case, English), think critically, and successfully collaborate in multimodal learning environment. Then, students place their video essays in a Google Classroom so that other students can assess their works and express their thoughts as to their creation and text content.

Thus, the presented examples, as well as previous research within the field, demonstrate that foreign language learning, embracing multimodal meaning-making, contributes to students' deeper understanding and reflecting upon, both as consumers and producers, the modern communicational landscape. We argue foreign language acquisition needs taking into account various modes and media in teaching communication for different spheres of life.

Conclusion

Multimodal learning activities enhance the methodology of foreign language acquisition. Summing up, the educational environment with a digital technologies of transformation, storage and transfer of information creates a powerful source of knowledge, and, apparently, allows the students to get the practical application of a new multimodal narrative-based approach to actualize their creative talent. Digital narratives, in their turn, provide foreign language acquisition with a research character, diversify it, make it interesting and personally oriented, positively influence the development of their cognitive and affective processes. In general, digital narratives relate to the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of multimedia, including graphics, audio, video and web publishing.

Moreover, students, involved in creating digital stories, can also enhance their foreign language communication skills by learning to organize ideas, ask questions, express opinions, and build narratives. Posting digital narratives on the Internet, students have the opportunity to share their work with peers and gain valuable experience in critically analyzing their own work and the one of other students, which promotes the development of emotional intelligence, critical thinking and stimulates social interaction. When creating and editing narratives, students acquire the rhetorical skills through constructing their own judgments, presenting their opinions, delivering logical and convincing arguments.

In the context of the problem under scrutiny, the scope of further research lies in studying the pedagogical practice of the European educators as to multimodal foreign language teaching to implement their innovative ideas into Ukrainian educational environment.

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