

Multimodal genres in textbooks: are students being schooled for visual literacy? / Os gêneros multimodais em livros didáticos: formação para o letramento visual?

*Elizangela Patrícia Moreira da Costa**
*Cláudia Graziano Paes de Barros***

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss some issues involved in teaching and learning reading, especially schooling in visual literacy. We seek to observe the work developed with genres that combine verbal and visual languages, found in the reading activities of two high school textbook series for Portuguese language teaching. Our goal was to understand to what extent these activities contribute towards the development of reading skills needed to deal with the specificities of these genres. Therefore, we used the enunciative and discursive assumptions of the socio-historical approach of Bakhtin Circle, as well as the Social Semiotics perspective to understand multimodality. Data analysis revealed that the incidence of multimodal genres studied in the two textbook series is hardly representative. The didactic treatment these genres receive in reading activities does not favor the mobilization of specific reading skills and contributes little to students' visual literacy schooling.

KEYWORDS: Reading; Multimodal speech genres; Textbooks

RESUMO

Neste texto, abordamos alguns aspectos envolvidos no ensino-aprendizagem de leitura, em particular a formação para o letramento visual. Procuramos observar o trabalho desenvolvido com os gêneros que aliam as linguagens verbal e visual, presentes nas atividades de leitura de duas coletâneas de livros didáticos de Língua Portuguesa do Ensino Médio. Nosso objetivo foi compreender em que medida as atividades colaboram para o desenvolvimento de capacidades leitoras requeridas para as especificidades desses gêneros. Para tal, recorreremos aos pressupostos enunciativo-discursivos de abordagem sócio-histórica do Círculo de Bakhtin, aliados a fundamentos da Semiótica Social para a compreensão da multimodalidade. A análise dos dados revelou que a incidência dos gêneros multimodais nas duas coletâneas estudadas é pouco representativa. O tratamento didático em atividades de leitura não favorece a mobilização de capacidades leitoras específicas para esses gêneros e pouco contribui para a formação do letramento visual dos alunos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Leitura; Gêneros discursivos multimodais; Livros didáticos*

* Professor at Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso – UFMT, Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, Brazil; claudiagpbarros@gmail.com

** Professor at Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, UNEMAT, Pontes e Lacerda, Mato Grosso, Brazil; ecosta@unemat.br

Introduction

Technological innovations and contemporary texts and, specially, image insertion in all forms of representation of social reality, have influenced and modified the contemporary ways in which people read and write; furthermore, literacy theories, educators and schools have been faced with new challenges regarding these issues. In the midst of these transformations, we can point out the appearance of new speech genres such as *chats*, *blogs*, *tweets* and *posts*. These genres, like many others, have gone beyond the digital environment and entered the printed world (for instance, the textbook) and moreover, ask for new literacies, as they are composed of images and other semiosis, implying multiple forms of meaning. On this subject, Rojo emphasizes that “[...] reading written verbal texts is no longer enough – it is necessary for it to be placed before a set of signs from other language modalities (a static image, a moving image, sound, speech) that surround it, or intersperse or impregnate it” (ROJO, in press, p.7)¹.

Based on the author’s statement, our question was: how are multimodal genres taught at schools? How are they inserted in textbooks and what treatment do they receive in the most important reading material used in Brazilian public schools, the Portuguese language textbook?

Reflecting on these questions, in this article, we try to discuss the formation of critical readers, specifically the image reader (a basic element of reality representation forms in today’s society) present in multimodal genres², by observing reading activities in high-school Portuguese Language textbooks. In this extract, we will deal with the position of speech genres in Portuguese Language textbooks (hereinafter, PLT), in specific reading activities. Therefore, we selected two textbook series, which were

¹ “[...] já não basta mais a leitura do texto verbal escrito – é preciso colocá-lo em relação com um conjunto de signos de outras modalidades de linguagem (imagem estática, imagem em movimento, som, fala) que o cercam, ou intercalam ou impregnam”.

² Dionísio (2008) and Paes de Barros (2009) clarify that the term *multimodal* refers to different representation modalities, i.e., it is the verbal and pictorial representation of information. In this sense, the term can comprise not only the genres that combine visual and verbal languages, as a simple font change on a printed page, for example, can characterize texts as being multimodal. Thus, we make it clear that, in this work’s extract, our focus is on visual (such as, painting reproductions, photographs, etc.) and verbal-visual speech genres (such as, cartoons, comic strips, publicity, etc.).

previously chosen by high-school teachers from two large³ schools in Cuiabá, Mato Grosso.

In our work, we conceive the Portuguese language textbook as a speech genre (BUNZEN & ROJO, 2005; PADILHA, 2005) which, in its development, according to Padilha, engenders three elements: the author (author-creator), the hero (object) and the listener (contemplator). The first of these elements is responsible for the authorial project, including “text selection, adaptations, development of the activities, the theoretical-methodological choice, several proposals, and the graphic project” (p. 81)⁴. Thus, the author believes that the

author inserts other genres in the case of the textbook, which serve the pedagogical purpose, while the letters and other genres included in the novel serve the purpose of the plot, the content sequencing, in the extensive narrative. (PADILHA, 2005, p.88).

The second element refers to the teaching objects that will be selected and made didactic. The author is responsible for making the selected objects didactic, according to his/her language concepts interlocked and influenced by different discourses, such as, official documents discourse for language teaching. The third element refers to the textbook structure, which must meet the needs not only of students and teachers, but also of publishers and textbook evaluators.

According to Bakhtin (1986a), when we speak or write, we have an interlocutor in mind, with a discursive intent (what we mean to say). This, in its turn, determines the choices made: the genre, the compositional procedures, and the utterance style. Based on this argument, Bunzen & Rojo (2005, p.86) state that, likewise, textbook authors and the agents involved in its production (publishers, authors, teachers, etc.) produce utterances in a speech genre, “which present themes (teaching objects), a specific interlocution expectation (teachers and students, publishers, evaluators) and their own didactic style” (authors’ emphasis)⁵. Thus, textbook authors (and publishers) select

³ These schools are considered large taking into account the number of students enrolled.

⁴ “a seleção dos textos, as adaptações, a formulação das atividades, a escolha teórico-metodológica, as diferentes propostas, o projeto gráfico”.

⁵ “que possui *temas* (objetos de ensino), uma expectativa interlocutiva específica (professores e alunos, editores, avaliadores) e um *estilo didático* próprio” (grifo dos autores).

teaching objects, orchestrating genres from other spheres when writing textbooks, whose social function is “to represent and present, for each generation of teachers and students, what is officially recognized or authorized as a form of knowledge about the language and about teaching and learning forms” (p.87)⁶. For Bunzen & Rojo (2005), therefore, to understand a PLT as a speech genre is to consider its own historicity. Thus, it is not about understanding it as an assembly of fixed synchronic properties, but to observe its transformations, an inherent characteristic of the dynamism involved in human activities.

1 The Portuguese language textbook and multimodal genres

Two aspects will be taken into consideration in this section: the first one is related to the textbook concept we assume in this work; the second is related to understanding the role of multimodal texts, which are present in books with didactic purposes to school the reader.

Bunzen & Rojo (2005, p.88) state that PLT presents a hybrid and interspersed compositional form⁷, as in the case of the novel. With this statement, the authors try to point out the fact that the book articulates other genres, voices and styles inside it. Thus, the PLT author builds his/her discourse through the intercalation of other discourses, which leads the authors to understand PLT’s compositional structure as being multimodal:

As it is composed by a net in which concrete texts/utterances produced by the textbook authors interface with other verbal texts in several genres and with non-verbal texts (images, illustrations, etc.) with the main purpose of teaching determined contents or practice certain skills (BUNZEN & ROJO, 2005, p.89)⁸.

⁶ “re(a)presentar, para cada geração de professores e estudantes, o que é oficialmente reconhecido ou autorizado como forma de conhecimento sobre a língua(gem) e sobre as formas de ensino-aprendizagem.”

⁷ Bunzen and Rojo (2005, p. 88), drawing on Bakhtin’s assumptions, clarify that the hybrid construction is the utterance whose syntactic and compositional indexes belong to only one speaker, but where, two utterances, two ways of speaking, two styles mingle, in which there is no formal, syntactic and compositional boundary. Yet, in interspersed genres, these boundaries are marked.

⁸ “Uma vez que ela é composta por uma rede em que os textos/enunciados concretos produzidos pelos autores dos livros didáticos dialogam com outros textos verbais em gêneros diversos e com textos não-

If we agree with the authors, we can understand PLT as a multimodal speech genre by excellence, due to its graphic project and the multimodal genres selected as teaching objects, with didactic purposes, for instance, comic strips, cartoons, advertisements, etc.

The second thought which we believe to be important considering the focus of our study deals with the dialogue between images and written words. According to BRAIT (2009), the verbal-visual dimension of language is a basic trait of the subject and his/her identity, as this dimension is present in our social lives daily (through the Internet, billboards and wall panels, scattered all over the city, etc.). In other words, images are one of the contemporary language forms of communication. In this perspective, we believe that a “schooled” eye is not enough to see everything there is to see, it is necessary to develop specific reading skills for the genres that join visual and verbal language.

Textbooks have been through many changes over the last few decades, influenced by several interests: The National High School Textbook Program (Programa Nacional do Livro Didático para o Ensino Médio - PNLEM) evaluation, economic and political issues, students, publishing houses; ultimately, the textbook industry, in general, has undergone changes. The PNLEM (2009) has prioritized books that present a selection of texts, which offer students contact with genre diversity as one of the criteria for textbook evaluation. Moreover, a qualification criterion establishes that “the books should resort to different visual languages” (p.17)⁹. Within this context, we find it necessary to reflect upon the criteria of image use in textbooks, in order to try to understand the approach used in reading PLT activities, focusing on the development of reading skills, mainly those that deal with multimodality, as well as the esthetic appreciation of images.

Such thoughts also make us consider that when images are brought to the PLT, they become part of schooled genres. For example, we believe that by introducing a cartoon (a genre from the journalistic sphere) in textbooks, due to space constraint or

verbais (imagens, ilustrações etc.), com a finalidade principal de ensinar determinados conteúdos ou exercitar determinadas capacidades.”

⁹ “a obra recorra a diferentes linguagens visuais”.

genre didactic purposes as a teaching object, the genre socio-historical condition, its characteristics and aims can be set aside, especially when the genre specificities in their verbal, visual and nonverbal elements are not considered, which, in turn, can make it impossible for the reader to actively understand (VOLOŠINOV, 1986) the whole utterance.

2 Reading in the dialogical perspective

We consider, with VOLOŠINOV (1986), reading as a process of active understanding, which requires the reader to take a stand in relation to the discourse of the other, aiming at analyzing his/her words, to confirm, adopt, antagonize or criticize them, in constant evaluative appraisal, and in reply, in the dialogical relationship established during the reading process. On this subject, PONZIO (2008) points out:

With regard to this special object (the text), which is specific to all human sciences that deal with humankind as a text (written and oral, verbal or non-verbal) producer, the Bakhtinian method unfolds itself, seeking active understanding, dialogical understanding, as its main element (PONZIO, 2008, p.188)¹⁰.

Within this perspective, meanings are built in the interaction between subjects (reader and author), mediated by the text in a dialogical relationship, in which meanings are built in the question and answer game that is established in the understanding process. Based on Bakhtin (1986b), we can say that, at this moment, the meaning reveals itself in its full depth in the encounter with another meaning, someone else's. The basis of our study is the concept of reading as *active understanding*. As such, we consider reading as

a social practice in which the author and the reader act in an enunciation situation. Within this concept, reading is seen as an active understanding process in which several meanings that circulate in the

¹⁰ “Em relação a esse objeto especial (o texto), que é específico de todas as ciências humanas que se ocupam do homem como produtor de textos (escritos e orais, verbais e não verbais), perfila-se o método bakhtiniano, que assume a compreensão ativa, a compreensão dialógica, como seu principal elemento.”

text are instituted from the dialogical relationship established between the author and the reader, between the reader and the text and among the multitude of social languages that permeate these instances. [...] reading, within this concept, is a dialogical process that promotes an encounter between discourses and utterances, which together build the meaning of texts (PAES DE BARROS, 2005, p.32)¹¹.

Taking the Bakhtin Circle studies into consideration and focusing on the interrelationship of concepts, the “dialogue” stands out as a key-concept, through which Bakhtin perceives the relationship between culture and society, broadening the empiric thought of the dialogue, showing clearly the dialogic movement interspersed in the apparently monologic discourses. In this sense, with Bakhtin (1986a), we consider that the dialogical elements, in other words, the extra-linguistic ones constitute the whole of the utterance and are linked to other utterances. Thus, utterances reflect the conditions and aims of each sphere of human activity through thematic content, style and compositional form (BAKHTIN, 1986a), aspects which are inseparably linked in the whole utterance. Besides these assumptions, we have also considered the characteristics of verbal-visuality and whether these aspects are relevant in teaching and learning reading.

In the past few years, several studies have shown the need to look at the different languages that constitute a text, either printed or digital. Therefore, in our studies, we take into consideration the social semiotics assumptions, in which language is not only a representation of social practices, but an instrument that influences, creates and transforms social reality. In this perspective, texts are multimodal constructs and writing is one of the representation modalities. In his book, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, Van Leeuwen (2005) states that a social semiotics analysis is composed of several dimensions: discourse, genre, style, and modality. The author asserts that these dimensions never occur in an isolated manner and that they are part of every communicative event and semiotic artifact. Only if we observe each one of them, together, is it possible to have a complete and multidimensional image (reading).

¹¹ “uma prática social em que atuam autor e leitor em uma situação de enunciação. Nessa concepção, a leitura é vista como um processo de compreensão ativa no qual os diversos sentidos em circulação no texto são instituídos a partir da relação dialógica estabelecida entre autor e leitor, entre leitor e texto e entre a multiplicidade de linguagens sociais que permeiam essas instâncias. [...] a leitura, nessa concepção, é um processo dialógico que promove um encontro entre discursos e enunciados, que acabam por construir conjuntamente os sentidos dos textos.”

In this point of view, we defend the need for teaching and learning reading based on *visual literacy*, considered herein not only as the ability to extract meaning from images (DEBES, 1968), but also as development of skills needed to attribute meaning to images based on the historical contexts in which they were created and circulate, considering all the meaning components as semiotic constructs, indispensable for their understanding. In this perspective, we believe that the presence of images, in their multiple dimensions, in the daily life of the subject, demands a reflexive attitude from the school about the different languages and the teaching and learning of multi-literacies, including visual literacy, its representation forms and interactions.

Reflecting upon the literacy practices in which students engage themselves nowadays, Paes de Barros (2009), based on enunciative and discursive assumptions and on some Social Semiotics assumptions, coined what he named *multimodality observation strategies*. These strategies were used in this article for the analysis of the selected samples. They are:

1. *Selection and verification of verbal information* – refers to the activation of skills needed to understand and appreciate reading verbal texts, as part of the process to understand the meaning of the text as a whole.
2. *Organization of visual syntax information* – refers to the observation of pictographic elements in order to select and organize information relevant to the construction of meaning.
3. *Integration of verbal and non-verbal information* – refers to the ability to observe and combine the verbal information with the pictographic materiality, relating them in the act of building text meanings.
4. *Perception of the whole unified in meaning that is composed by the integration of verbal and non-verbal materials* – refers to the activation of several linguistic-discursive and reading skills, as well as the organization and observation of information, through which the reader builds a meaningful whole (PAES DE BARROS, 2009, p.166).

These reading strategies, together with the Bakhtinian theoretical assumptions, for instance, the *speech genre* and *dialogism*, are fundamental for the analyses presented, because we consider multimodal texts as concrete utterances, whose discursive project articulates the verbal and visual materialities with the same degree

of importance. This concrete utterance is comprised of a certain ideological sphere and circulates in another sphere (the scholar one, within the PLT).

3 Methodological route and data analysis

We intended to carry out documental analysis research within a qualitative and dialogical approach, in line with the theoretical enunciative and discursive presuppositions of the Bakhtin Circle. First of all, we selected the two largest public schools in Mato Grosso and, then, we chose the textbook series to be analyzed.

The textbooks were recommended by The National High School Textbook Program (Programa Nacional do Livro Didático para o Ensino Médio – PNLEM) in 2009 for the 2009-2011 period, and chosen by Portuguese Language high-school teachers from public schools in Mato Grosso. They are: *Português: ensino médio* [Portuguese: high school textbook] (henceforth called SER 1) and *Português: língua, literatura e produção de texto* [Portuguese: language, literature and text production] (henceforth called SER 2), published in 2005. Both series are divided in three volumes, for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd years of high school.

Afterwards, we carried out a quantitative assessment of the multimodal speech genres found in the books. Data from this stage of the research, presented in the table¹² below, revealed that the *more privileged* multimodal genres by the authors of both series are:

Multimodal speech genres	Quantity	% SER 1	Quantity	% SER 2
	SER 1		SER 2	
Total	763		394	
photograph	234	30.67	79	20.05
illustration ¹³	189	24.77	11	2.79
painting reproduction	172	22.54	112	28.43

¹² We clarify that, due to space constraint, only multimodal genres that are more representative in absolute and in percentage terms are shown in the table at this stage of the research. The total number of multimodal genres represents the whole for both series, but we stated the individual numbers only of those genres that are more recurrent: photography, illustration, painting reproduction and cartoon.

¹³ In this context (speech genres occurrence), pictorial images which are associated with genres such as book excerpts, novel passages, song lyrics, poems, etc. are considered “illustrations”.

cartoon	61	7.99	134	34.01
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TABLE 1: Distribution of multimodal genres in SER 1 and SER 2

During the next stage, we assessed the position/function of multimodal genres in PLT, namely: illustrate, develop/understand concepts, grammar activity, reading activity, literature activity, text production activity, and unit opening. Data reveal that, out of the total amount of multimodal genres found in both series (763 genres in SER 1 and, 394 in SER 2), most is purely illustrative (59.50% in SER 1 and, 48.48% in SER 2). When comparing the function “illustrate” with the other described functions, we were able to observe that this is the prevailing function in both series.

Belmiro (2003), reflecting upon the presence of images in textbooks, defends visual education as part of students’ cultural formation process and questions if the textbook “conformed by interests of all sorts, such as economic and political ones, besides the community that gives life to it, i.e., students, publishing houses, among others, can give room to the surrounding visuality, maintaining image creating vivacity” (BELMIRO, 2003, p.309)¹⁴. Based on the author’s thoughts, we can say that the data revealed that images in multimodal genres seem to be *included* in the book’s graphic project, due to the requirement of evaluation criteria for textbooks, but they do not seem to be organized in a way that helps to understand the book with regard to the content worked in the chapters. In our point of view, the simple insertion of the genre does not guarantee that students will observe the image, or that he/she will associate it to the concepts studied and make it meaningful in this context.

When looking at “reading activities”, the focus of our study, their distribution showed the lowest percentage, when compared to the other described positions. 4.19% of multimodal genres were found in SER 1 and, 8.88% in SER 2. In other words, these are very inexpressive percentages of the function that can contribute to school “competent” readers, an aim that the author of SER 1 embraces, for example: “Thus, all parts have the same objective: *schooling of readers and text producers who are competent*; the ways to achieve it are distinct, but complementary (SER 1, 2005, p.5; our emphasis).

¹⁴ “conformado por interesses de diferentes ordens, como o econômico, o político, além da comunidade que o faz existir, como o público estudante, as editoras, entre outros, pode consagrar espaço para a visualidade circundante, mantendo a vivacidade criadora da imagem.”

In contradiction to this, the percentages found in relation to “reading activities” for SER 1 (4.19%) show that multimodal genres do not seem to represent a didactic choice for these activities.

In general, it is possible to consider that the preferred use of genres with visual and/or verbal-visual languages shows a didactic proposal that *includes* but does not considers them in all their specificities. From our point of view, we believe that this choice does not seem conscious or planned; it may be motivated by other circumstances, such as, the requirement of the PNLEM 2009 edict, which, as mentioned before, recommends the use of illustrations that help in the understanding and reading of the text, besides resorting to different visual languages. In this document, we can find:

...it is expected that:

✓ the illustrations help in the understanding and enrich the reading of the text, they must also reproduce the ethnic diversity of the Brazilian population appropriately, without expressing, inducing or reinforcing biases or stereotypes.

...the books resort to different visual languages; that the scientific illustrations indicate the proportion of objects or beings represented... (PNLEM, 2009, p.16-17).

Despite these recommendations in the document that configures PLT writing, the books do not accomplish it satisfactorily, considering the treatment given in the series we analyzed, according to what our data have demonstrated, its occurrence is significantly reduced, especially when we take into account that the three volumes of each series are meant for students during their three high school years.

Regarding the incidence of multimodal genres in *specific reading activities*, we present, in the table¹⁵ below, their occurrences, in absolute numbers and percentages, pointing out the genres whose occurrences were more significant and incidental in both series:

Multimodal genres in reading activities	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
	SER 1	SER 1	SER 2	SER 2

¹⁵ The total numbers in the table represent the series as a whole, in other words, the number which represents all multimodal genres found in all textbook volumes. Due to space constraint, we only enumerated the genres whose occurrences were more meaningful and incidental in both series.

Total	32		35	
comic strip	10	31.25	21	60.00
advertisement	3	9.38	6	17.14
Cartoon	1	3.13	5	14.29
Total	21		35	

TABLE 2: Distribution of the most significant and incidental multimodal genres in reading activities in SER 1 and SER 2

When analyzing Table 2, we can identify that the authors' choices in the reading activities in both series involve the "comic strip" genre. A hypothesis that can be drawn from this datum is that this genre may constitute a reading object that also allows for the development of reading skills related to verbal texts, besides contributing to visual literacy, as it articulates visual and verbal languages. Thus, we selected two activities related to the comic strip genre in specific reading activities as the analyses samples for this article.

The observation parameters that guided our analysis of the selected activities have been described in the chart below:

<i>Multimodality Observation Strategies</i>	Parameters for activity observation
Selection and verification of verbal information	Activities that allow students to: 1. recover lexical elements; not only to verify a given morphological, phonological, syntactic or semantic fact, but also, allow them to a) observe the lexical and discursive choices, relating them to the production context and genre circulation; b) perceive the genre style (to observe the treatment given to certain lexical elements in the activities: as a constitutive part of a given genre; for example, the use of verbs in the imperative form, which is characteristic of the printed advertisement genre style).
Organization of visual syntax	2. reflect on the choice of colors, disposition of the elements, specificities of the images as constituents of meaning.
Integration of verbal and non-verbal information	3. observe genre elements (compositional construction, thematic content and style), relating them (images and verbal text) amongst themselves and with their production and circulation context; for example, when reading a cartoon, pictorial elements, not only recovered by the text, but also relating them to the social moment in which they were created, with the circulation vehicle, etc.
Perception of the whole utterance	4. perceive, through the integration of all elements (the compositional construction, thematic content and style), relating

19. Read the comic strip to answer the questions.

[presentation of the comic strip]

The humor of the comic strip is based on the different meanings attributed to the verb *remember*, by the mother and the children.

a) How did the children interpret the verb in the question asked by the mother in the first strip?

b) What, exactly, did the mother want to say?

c) What made it possible for you to identify both interpretations? Justify your answer.

This activity focuses on the reading process built on isolated elements from the text, searching for a reader appreciation of the effects produced by the written verbal text. It is possible to notice that the orientation basis to interpret/understand the text is given in the form of finding information, leading the reader to think about the semantic possibilities of the verb *remember*.

We can see a text concept as a place in which meanings are built, as an understanding process that goes beyond the recognition of phonemes and graphemes, however, it does not seem sufficient to trigger the reader's *active response*. Bakhtin (1986a) states that utterances present an end, which is observed by the responsive utterances of the others, even if these are done in the form of silent responses, responsive attitudes for a given understanding.

Regarding this example, the meaning effects of the verb *remember* interface with other utterances, tangled in the genre composition (as we can see in the facial expressions of the characters), which means that in its integrity the text meaning depends on the verbal-visual information that it is composed of and that potentiates the multitude of meanings.

We believe that a great deal of caution is needed when speech genres are made didactic, so as not to set aside what makes them concrete utterances, as they are product (while a unique event) and process (while a link in the communicative chain) at the same time (SOUZA, 2002, p.86). This is so because genres (in this case, the comic strip genre) are always given in a situated context which, as we were able to observe, was not made evident in the activity. According to RAMA *et al.* (2004), comic strips are composed of visual language, vision plan, characters, visual metaphors, speech bubbles, etc., all elements of the *compositional construction*. To build meaning and to be able to

understand comic strip humor also depend on the observation of these elements and the understanding of what the relationship established between them means.

Observing the third strip, we can realize that the mother is very expressive, with her mouth open and her eyes shut tight. To have the student ask himself/herself what this expression means can help him/her to formulate hypotheses, to reflect upon the meaning effects: her facial expression and her speech in the bubble “AARGH!” suggest a negative reaction to the children’s mouth odor. Nevertheless, as we were able to observe, the non-verbal aspects of the genre are not recovered by the activity, setting aside the multiple understanding constructions that could be weaved in its reading.

This activity’s described characteristics lead us to perceive an attempt to retrieve text meanings; we were able to notice this, reflecting on the *element selection* and *information verification*, observed in the attempt to advance from the lexical elements and their semantic relationship in the characters’ speech (which seemed to focus on discursivity). Nevertheless, such intent is not fully effective, in view of the lack of questions about visual syntax organization, to deal with, for example, the meaning of lexical and discursive choices in the relationship with images, which are also part of *what we want to say*, in the discursive project of the comic strip author.

Second activity¹⁶: Taken from volume 1 of SER 1 (p.151) and the comic strip *Robotman*, written by J. Meddick, is its teaching object. The comic strip is constructed in the following way:

1st strip: It presents a man wearing glasses, seated in a rocking chair, with his arms resting on the armchair, and with his forefinger up, who says: “This chair will help me become a story teller! Watch me...” (*Robotman* appears staring at the man.)

2nd strip: We can see the man, who is still seated in the chair, with his arms resting completely on the armchair. Dashed lines indicate the rocking of the chair. He says: “An interesting thing happened to me at the post office today...”

Robotman says: “Hmm... You have to try harder.”

3rd strip: We can see the same image, the dashed lines around the man suggest that the rocking of the chair has increased.

The man goes on: “The clerk asked me: ‘Want some stamps?’ I answered: ‘One of these days we will have self-licked envelopes’. Then...”

Robotman still stares at him: “A little bit more.”

¹⁶ Reproduction of the comic strip related to this activity was not authorized by the textbook publishing house; thus, we will describe the comic strip and the activities that deal with it in the book.

4th strip: The man appears to have fallen backwards and *Robotman*, looking at the scene, says: “Cool... This part was interesting.”

CHART 2: Description of the comic strip *Robotman*, written by J. Meddick

The comic strip is followed by four questions, reproduced below:

5. Considering that the comic strip uses verbal-visual language, in which the verbal part corresponds to the textual context and the visual one to the situational or extra-textual context, what kind of referral is there in the first strip, considering the demonstrative pronoun **this**?
6. In the second strip, there is a word that refers to the sense of time. Point it out and make comments about the type of referral it makes.
7. Make comments about the referrals made by the personal pronouns that mark the first and second person of the discourse, taking as examples **you** from the second strip and **I** from the third.
8. What does the humor in the last strip consist of? Compare your answer to the concepts of endophoric and exophoric referrals. (SER 1, 2005, p.151, author’s emphasis).

In the set of questions above, we can observe the author’s effort to make the inclusion of a multimodal genre evident, as well as the attempt to explore it through some of its compositional elements, mainly in question 5:

5. Considering that the comic strip uses a verbal-visual language, in which the verbal part corresponds to the textual context and the visual one to the situational or extra-textual context, what kind of referral is there in the first strip, considering the demonstrative pronoun **this**? (SER 1, 2005, p.151, our emphasis).

This attempt, in our view, ends up not being entirely accomplished, since, although the author starts the activity with a question that demonstrates the existence of verbal and visual languages in the text, the activity is restricted to its textual component, specially to the formal aspects of the language and the recovery of the lexical elements that explore the meanings of meaningful verbal links; in other words, an attempt to explain what a *referral* is, using the text as a pretext to teach and learn grammar.

We can say that the author’s discourse underlying the activity perceives the grammatical and textual elements as important content to teach and learn reading. We also observed that the author’s concern lies in the formal aspects of the language, bearing in mind that in the book’s previous pages (p.146-147), the concepts related to

cohesive resources, including the *referral*, are practiced. Thus, it is possible to notice that the real objective of this activity is to review these previously studied concepts.

The importance of the morphological elements and their semantic or synthetic relationships in the text cannot be denied, but it is important to observe that focusing only on the verbal elements greatly reduces the multiplicity of meanings of this utterance. Working with linguistic elements should be a part of the understanding process and not just an end in itself. Therefore, we defend that the integration of all these elements, and the relationship between them as well as the context demonstrated by the visual aspects of the comic strip would make it possible for the student to realize the whole of the utterance, and make him/her laugh (active response) immediately, or it would make him/her reflect on the possible meanings, preparing him/her for the answer that comes next. For BAKHTIN (1986a), what we understand somehow actively responds to the discourses. The speakers will always respond to utterances. One way or another, utterances always respond to other previous utterances, as a speaker will never be the first being to talk in the universe. All utterances constitute a link in the organized chain of utterances, being related to other utterances, grounded on them or conflicting with them.

In this example it was not possible to identify this dialogic movement between the reader and the author, bearing in mind that the questions did not focus on exploring the *comic strip* genre in its elements of meaning. We are able to observe, indeed, a recovery work of the lexical elements to teach and learn *referral*, but this recovery contributes little or nothing to the learning/development of reading skills, once the lexical items are not linked to the non-verbal components, to the production context or to the comic strip circulation as constituents of meaning of this genre. In this sense, in order to understand the use of the pronoun “this”, in the expression “this chair”, the observation of visual elements in the strips, such as the characters’ reactions in each scene portrayed, would make the student not only understand the concept (referral), but also the meaning effect produced by the lexical choice of the pronoun “this” as a means to capture the comic strip humor.

Final considerations

Regarding the mobilization of reading skills through activities, we can say that the guidelines found in the teaching manuals do not accomplish this purpose entirely, since they indicate that the verbal-visual language should be considered when working with texts, nevertheless, such intent is not materialized, as shown in the data we presented.

Thus, we observed that the textbooks analyzed contribute very little to the development of specific skills related to students' visual literacy. We believe that it is necessary to propose activities that go beyond the reading of what is written verbally, making it possible for the student to take effective ownership of the diversified literacy forms to be able to respond to contemporary reading demands, taking a critical stand in the most varied situations and contexts. In this sense, the insertion of multimodal genres in PLT reading activities should have as its main goal to teach students to read them, to make them meaningful in their relationship with other languages, discourses and socio-historical contexts. This work can lead students to formulate their own responses by understanding the most varied utterances they will encounter in their lives.

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Translated by Grazyana Anna Bonomi - ginabonomi@gmail.com

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