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Author(s): Melo-Pfeifer, Silvia; Kalaja, Paula

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Chapter 15

Conclusion: Lessons Learnt with and through Visual Narratives of Lived Multilingualism, and a Research Agenda

SÍLVIA MELO-PFEIFER and PAULA KALAJA

This chapter wraps up the main conclusions of Chapters 2 to 14 (discussed under ‘lessons learnt’ in each) and adds a critical and reflexive stance towards the use of visual narratives to study the complexity of lived multilingualism, as subjectively perceived and (re)constructed by individuals. The validity of visual narratives as research data as well as their epistemological nature in the fields of Applied Language Studies, Sociolinguistics and Teacher Education will be addressed in order to draw a research agenda, including research objects, methods, and deeper reflexivity.

Introduction

Visual methods are currently involved in the renewal of Applied Language Studies, Sociolinguistics, and Teacher Education. Indeed, these methods, in their diversity of forms and materiality, are playing a role in the reshaping of methodological landscapes and empirical research, by approaching new or reshaped realities through new semiotic resources. Visual methods such as visual narratives are thus inscribed in the ‘growing interest in multimodal approaches in applied linguistics, and in biographically oriented research’ (Busch, 2017: 49). Visual methods allow, for example, new approximations to audiences such as those with limited literacy and linguistic skills (Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013; Martin, 2012; Chapter 4 by Melo-Pfeifer & Schmidt in this book; Molinié, 2009; Moore & Castellotti, 2001). We could also think about using these methods in researching different aspects of Deaf audiences. From this perspective, regardless of the method used, resorting to a ‘multimodal voice’ allows researchers to revisit research and education scenarios, research settings and contexts, research topics, approaches to individuals and, most importantly, issues related to (Melo-Pfeifer & Simões, 2017):

- interdisciplinary dialogues, opening up new paths in the cooperation between Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Publicity, Design, Cinema and Journalism, just to refer to disciplinary areas that resort to heuristic terms like *frame*, *positioning*, *perspective* or *plot*;
- ethics in the selection of data collection instruments and the interpretation of collected pools of data, as it calls attention to the ideological positioning of the researchers themselves (for

ethical issues, see Chapter 4 by Melo-Pfeifer & Schmidt and Chapter 5 by Molinié in this book).

Therefore, resorting to visual methods challenges a ‘lingualist’ methodological, epistemological and heuristic landscape (Block, 2014) which tends to value text and discourse above all the possible array of outputs individuals may be called on to produce. ‘Most qualitative researchers analyze data that are *words*. But people do not make meaning or express it only through words’ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 65). This ‘linguistic bias’ or ‘lingualism’ is challenged by the confrontation with the semiotic complexity of visual materials: multisemiotic and multimodal analyses do not exclude verbal data; instead verbal data should be combined with visual features (as illustrated by much of the research reported in this book). Thus, the interpretation of the verbal data should be assessed, contextualized and interpreted in dialogue with non-verbal elements.

The increased value given to visual methods has accompanied the discussions about the status and role of emotions, representations, motivation, the symbolic and the ‘untold’ (even the ‘untellable’), as psychological aspects involved in teaching and learning a language (Williams, Mercer & Ryan, 2015). These methods focus on the individual’s complexity and holistic nature, which can be difficult to describe resorting to words only. Consequently, to the well-established *narrative turn* (Pavlenko, 2007; see also Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014; Chapter 11 by Brandão and Chapter 12 by Pinho in this book), we can add an on-going and emergent turn: the *visual turn* (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018). The first turn values linguistic and discursive productions of individuals; the second highlights the role of multisemioticity to better understand individuals’ experiences. Both are attracted by the ‘lived lives’ and by the way individuals interpret, reconstruct and “narrate” their lives. Just like verbal narratives, visual narratives can also provide insights into the subject (a student, a teacher, a child, a refugee, etc.), the object (language, multilingualism, teaching and learning experiences, etc.) and the context (life, teaching and learning circumstances).

The term *visual narratives* is frequently used to refer to visual materials produced by individuals. Even if the use of the concept *narrative* in this field can be subject to critical scrutiny, we will adopt it here, as we agree with Squire (2008: 4) in the following:

unlike many qualitative frameworks, narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points. Since the definition of “narrative” itself is in dispute, there are no self-evident categories on which to focus, as there are with content-based thematic approaches, or with analysis of specific elements of language. (...)

Narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation, or the best level at which to study stories.

In this sense, it is useful to address visual narratives resorting to conceptual tools of narrative analysis, such as *frame*, *temporality*, *spatiality*, *subject/characters* among others, reinforcing the demand for an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis.

In the next sections, we will reflect on the lessons learnt using visual materials in research on lived multilingualism and on the perspectives opened up by the use of such materials. In doing this, we will revisit Chapters 2 to 14 of this book, to establish a dialogue with other research available in Applied Language Studies and Teacher Education.

Lessons learnt

The majority of the studies reported in this book reveal a preference for combining verbal and non-verbal material in the collecting and analysis of data. The studies are usually anchored in a case-study paradigm – cases that may be isolated (as in Chapter 2 by Chik or in Chapter 11, by Brandão in this book) or be composed of groups of teachers or learners – in which the amount of visual data is, frequently, reduced or, at least, modest. In case of studies resorting to a significant amount of data (see Chapter 8 by Ahn and Chapter 10 by Umino & Benson in this book; also Melo-Pfeifer, 2017), the authors show that it is possible to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in data analysis and interpretation.

The studies in this book show the complexity of the research on multilingualism and multilingual repertoires, whether they refer to lived multilingualism in migratory contexts or foreign language learning in formal settings (school, university). In the following sections, we will provide a more detailed account of the lessons learnt, resorting to visual materials, in two specific fields: 1) the heuristic validity of using visual narratives in the study of individual multilingualism; and 2) the epistemological status of the data collected.

The heuristic validity of using visual narratives in the study of individual multilingualism

The studies reported in this book establish a dialogue with previous research on multilingual subjects using visual materials. In Foreign Language Education, such methods have been used in research and in teacher and student education, being integrated in classroom activities and in teacher education, as

a pedagogic strategy. The topics traditionally addressed in Applied Language Studies and Teacher Education range from social representations about languages and cultures, bilingualism and multilingualism or heteroglossic repertoires and language teaching and learning (Busch, 2017; Castellotti & Moore, 2009; Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen, 2013; Martin, 2012; Melo-Pfeifer, 2015; Molinié, 2009; Moore & Castellotti, 2001 and 2011; Perregaux, 2011). While the chapters reported in this book also address these themes, they cover further contexts and audiences (e.g. the establishment of communities of practice abroad or perceptions of social integration by refugees). The chapters of this book show that visual materials can be used to foster interaction in the classroom, to elicit (further) information on specific themes (related to specific research goals) and to nurture individual reflexivity, all of them increasing our access to the psychological sphere of individuals.

More specifically, the studies reported are multifaceted in the way they address different aspects of multilingualism, crisscrossing theoretical approaches from *foreign* and *heritage language education*, *cultural studies*, *literacy and multiliteracy studies*, *linguistic and social integration* and *PLLT*, among others. *Identity* is a concept regularly used across the contributions, namely, by Ibrahim, Sylvén and Pinho (in Chapters 3A, 7 and 12 in this book). We can recall the tripartite framework developed by Ibrahim, much of the visual material presented integrates individuals' perceptions of person-place-experience in multilingual settings, sometimes presented in polarized, hybridized and/or contradictory ways (see Chapter 3 by Ibrahim, Chapter 5 by Molinié and Chapter 6 by Skinnari in this book; and also Melo-Pfeifer, 2017).

The research reported acknowledges that semiotic repertoires – where languages combine with other 'meaning makers' (objects, forms, colours, size, selection and disposition of visual elements) – are complex ensembles allowing access to the psychology of the multilingual self, by uncovering multilingual experiences and perceptions, as well as their affective and emotional impacts on the individual. Thus, lived multilingualism is always the multilingualism experienced by an individual, under certain circumstances and with different consequences on his or her life-story and psychological development, namely, depending on whether multilingualism was chosen or imposed by the circumstances. It is also the *hic et nunc* recall and (re)interpretation of this lived experience during the data collection by the researcher(s) that should also be taken into consideration when addressing the validity of visual narratives as heuristic tools: under which research circumstances were the data collected? How can we describe the relationship between researcher(s) and the multilingual individuals being researched?

Visual narratives give us access to those experiences and how they develop and evolve, what impacts and consequences those circumstances can have on an individual's identity. This broad access is largely caused by the reflexivity inherent in the production of such visual narratives and,

eventually, their subsequent verbal description and interpretation. Consequently, the analysis of visual narratives through interpretation of metaphors becomes a very promising approach to understanding the symbolism attached to biographic and educational paths (see Chapter 5 by Molinié, Chapter 9 by Paiva & Gomes Junior and Chapter 12 by Pinho in this book).

Just like verbal narratives, visual narratives (sometimes accompanied by objects) leave sediments of interpretation at the surface of what appears as obvious, allowing a second layer of analysis that goes beyond the immediate materiality. Furthermore, whether through their retrospective (e.g. with a focus on the reconstruction of past events) or prospective nature (e.g. with a focus on envisioning future linguistic, educational or professional experiences), visual narratives allow us to gain deep insights into: 1) individuals' linguistic imagination, 2) their transsemiotic repertoires, and, 3) how they live, interpret and reconstruct their experiences. So, these methods reveal the nuanced complexity of individuals' psychologies in terms of beliefs, emotions, values, motivations and agency, self-esteem and identity.

The epistemological status of the data collected

The study of visual materials, just as when using other materials, is situated and can be the object of different research approaches, perspectives and interpretations. Both production and interpretation of visual materials are situated and contingent. The validity of the data collected and their interpretation seem to depend on several aspects, such as:

- the coherence of the selected theoretical framework and of previous empirical results, regardless of the methodologies employed;
- the consistency of the methodological framework, designed to reach specific goals and conceived through an appropriate task design (Chapter 13 by Pérez-Peitx, Civera & Palou in this book);
- the clarification of the cultural and social context in which the materials are produced (Chapter 2 by Chik in this book);
- the transparency of research aims and processes as well as of task instructions for all the individuals involved in the research process;
- the transparency and accurate account of the relationship between researcher and participants, including the following issues: insider/outsider status, positionalities (such as race, gender, social class, professional ranking, sexual orientation) and researcher's reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 63; Chapter 4, by Melo-Pfeifer & Schmidt in this book);

- the existence of redundancy and hierarchies in different layers of meaning in the visual materials and the possibility of resorting to systematic comparisons of the productions through structured and regular data collection (see Chapter 14 by Mäntylä & Kalaja in this book);

Another aspect to bear in mind in the interpretation is the articulation between an etic point of view (i.e. based on interpretations by a researcher) and an emic one (i.e. based on interpretations by participants in a study). The second perspective implies an approximation to or adoption of individuals' perceptions and their own reading of their lives (namely of the circumstances under which they developed their linguistic repertoires). Data collected by using visual methods, just as when resorting to merely verbal methods, give us an account of situated emotional landscapes and are signs of the 'performance of the self', mainly when the context underlying the data collection implies a certain posture (a teacher or a future teacher, a pupil, an exchange student, etc.) or a certain hierarchy. We should bear in mind that the 'insider/outsider status issues can affect whether one has access to participants, as well as to the kinds of stories they will tell the researcher' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 63; see also Chapter 2 by Chik in this book). Therefore, as in other narratives told by an "I", the subject performs and stages his or her "self" in visual narratives. This does not mean that they deliberately fail to give an account of the truth, but that they are able to reconstruct, reinterpret and resignify experiences and emotions depending on the different contexts where they are called to "read" their narrative out loud. Moreover, every context has its own interpretative limitations and affordances, which can help to explain variation in individuals' accounts (see Chapter 6 by Skinnari in this book) in different times and spaces, and with different interlocutors.

These considerations are useful to understand some criticism of the analysis of visual materials, specifically its volubility, instability and uncertainty (especially, when carried out without follow-up interviews or collection of written reflections about the visual materials produced; see Chapter 6 by Skinnari in this book). Even if we recognize that the subsequent explanation of the visual material necessarily adds new elements to the analysis, we need to acknowledge that no narrative is neutral: the choice of words or non-verbal elements is the product of a complex process of selection and materialization. This means that the selection of an element always entails a more or less conscious choice and, consequently, abandoning some elements in favour of others (see Chapter 9 by Paiva & Gomes Junior in this book). As a result, even when subjects are called to interpret their productions (with shorter or longer distance regarding the moment of production), it is not possible to ascertain the legitimacy, "veracity" or completeness of their own interpretations (see Chapter 4 by Melo-Pfeifer & Schmidt and Chapter 6 by Skinnari in this book), because of, among other aspects, the asynchronicity between the moments of production and interpretation. Finally, we should also

remember that any interpretation is a product of co-constructed and negotiated discursive procedures (prompted, for example, by question-answer protocols, usually guided by the researcher), in the presence of one or more interlocutors and taking place in particular contexts. Having stated this, the so-called “original sense” may not be unequivocally reconstructed in such a dialogical situation in the presence of an audience just because the words are assigned to an author. The most we could say is that, in such situations, we are dealing with a process of dialogical co-interpretation (see Chapter 4 by Melo-Pfeifer & Schmidt and Chapter 6 by Skinnari in this book; also Melo-Pfeifer & Ferreira, 2017).

Such prejudices towards the interpretation of visual data arise, in our opinion, from two beliefs: one regarding the transparency of language; another related to the objectivity and intentionality of the author. However, neither is language (or different languages) unequivocal, nor are individuals consistent or static in the interpretations they make of their intentions, emotions and actions. As stated by Esin and Squire, ‘visual materials can certainly constitute narratives, though (like other narratives) they may not be easily or similarly read’ (2013: 4). Consequently, using methodologies that focus on the analysis of linguistic objects is insufficient to cope with non-linguistic materiality. As we saw in the different contributions to this book, the “visual grammar” of the visual compositions requires researchers to develop and adopt *ad hoc* and *in situ* multimodal methodologies, integrating verbal and non-verbal elements as equals. This means that, as always, the goals of the research have to be taken into account in the selection of the visual material to be collected, as well as in the necessity – or not – of eliciting further material: advantages and limitations have to be carefully evaluated and stated, in order to be clear about the “real” results of the studies. Some researchers (see e.g. Chapter 3 by Ibrahim, Chapter 5 by Molinié or Chapter 7 by Sylvén in this book) combine different research materials and opt for the combination of visual narratives and several sorts of additional information (artefacts, interviews and/or written texts).

Finally, we should acknowledge that, because of the complexity of the research projects reported in this book, all authors assume the impossibility of generalizing research paths, research questions and results, accommodating the instability and the incompleteness of the analysis as part of the research process. This positioning, however, is not exclusive of research using visual methodologies: it is a sign of the epistemological evolution in the Social Sciences and Humanities, and, more specifically, in Applied Language Studies, Sociolinguistics and Teacher Education (McIntyre & Rosenberg, 2017). Another parallel sign of this evolution is the acknowledgement of the need to address reflexivity in research, seeing the results as consequence of choices (for example, on what to ask or what to draw), subjectivities (such as motivations, attitudes or emotions) and agency of both researchers and participants.

A research agenda

The commonalities we have pointed out in the previous two sections allow us to propose some suggestions for further developments regarding the use of visual methods, without calling into question the quality of research carried out so far. Enlarging the list of suggestions by Melo-Pfeifer and Simões (2017: 21–22), we would underscore the following themes:

- diversifying data collection instruments, through the use and intersection of different semiotic sources; this suggestion entails a more articulated, systematic and complex use of visual data collection methods;
- diversifying: 1) participants (that could range from children to adults); 2) languages chosen as a research object; 3) language status (as most of the studies tend to focus on English as a foreign language); and 4); research focus, ranging from multimodal translanguaging practices (the combination of linguistic and other resources) to representations of complex psychological states and dimensions, such as beliefs, emotions and values;
- developing diachronic and longitudinal research methodologies to analyze the evolution of individuals' representations regarding their lives, repertoires, belongings and identities; for example, these methodologies could be based on a continuous data collection or on the interpretation of the same visual material at different moments of a life-span, in order to cover a wider range of psychological status and its evolution;
- developing studies that are quantitatively more relevant, as these are quite rare, which would allow an interplay of quantitative and qualitative analyses;
- advancing towards more collaborative scenarios of production and interpretation of visual materials, implying moments of co-production (in peer-groups) and of co-interpretation, with individuals being called upon to be co-ethnographers of their own productions as well as of the productions of their peers (member checks). Such an evolution would involve the individuals in the production process (during or after the production), as well as in the discussion of conclusions made by researchers. This possible development entails a reconsideration of subsequent individual interviews and text production as the only means to access further information. We thus claim that it is possible to conceive of more collaborative, interactive and dialogic methodologies of data collection and (re-)interpretation, what could improve the emotional involvement of the participants (see the final reflection in Chapter 7 by Sylvén on this matter);

- combining the description and interpretation of elements present in the visual materials and reflecting on the invisibility of others elements (see Chapter 4 by Melo-Pfeifer & Schmidt and Chapter 8 by Ahn in this book); making this reflection together with the multilingual subject would allow him to rethink and reconsider the dimensions described and foster his reflexivity about the hidden psychological dimensions of his productions;
- addressing reflexivity and being critical throughout the research process and providing the reader with “thick descriptions” of the research context as preliminaries to judge on the validity, reliability, credibility and transferability of the work being carried out through visual narratives and of its results;
- increasing interdisciplinary dialogue with research disciplines assuming “visual”, “multimodal discourse”, “ethics”, “esthetic” and “narration” as integral parts of their research *habitus*, to bring more complexity to research perspectives and analytical procedures.

These expansions of research aims and research procedures would allow visual methods to become part of the canon of methodologies in Applied Language Studies and Teacher Education, alongside the use of other linguistic and semiotic resources, and promote a less structuralist (and less positivist) vision of and access to the multilingual individual and their subjective psychologies.

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