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Phone No: +2348039511789

E-mail: alameenalaira@gmail.com

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For further enquiries, please contact: Editor-in-Chief

SAJOLLCOS, HOD's Office,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Gombe State University, Gombe sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng,

C/o: amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng



LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Mustapha Ibrahim Garba, PhD

Department of English and Linguistics
Federal University Dutse, Jigawa
igmustaphasays@gmail.com
08065951233

Sakina Wada

Department of English and Linguistics
Federal University Dutse, Jigawa

Suku Hyellamada Kenan, PhD

Department of Languages and Linguistics,
Gombe State University,
hyellawilbe@gmail.com
08139668910

Aishatu Bello Umar

School of Secondary Education Languages,
Department of English Language, Federal
College of Education (Technical) Gombe
aishatubu@gmail.com
08036585813.

Hannatu Joseph Bega

Department of Modern Languages,
College of Education Billiri.
hannatujosephbega@gmail.com

Ibrahim Garba Nayaya (Baba)

National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna.
ibrahimba182@gmail.com
+2347066366586/ +2348125351694

Danlami Bala Gwammaja, PhD

Aminu Kano College of Islamic and Legal
Studies, Kano
danlamigwammaja@gmail.com
08020605148

Musa Ahmad Sani

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of
Education, Kaduna State University
musa.ahmad@kasu.edu.ng
08035562885

Abdullahi Dahiru Umar, PhD

Department of English and Literature,
Federal University Gusau
dumar@fugusau.edu.ng
08065726292

AbdulAzeez Lawal, PhD

Department of English and French, Umaru
Musa Yar'adua University, P. M. B. 2218,
Katsina
abdulazeez.lawal@umyu.edu.ng

Abdulrahman Idris Abdulwaheed, PhD

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Yobe State
University, Damaturu
Email: iabdulrahman2255@gmail.com
08037041081

Hamidou Bappa, PhD

Department of English Language and
Literatures of English Expression, Higher
Teachers' Training College Maroua,
University of Maroua, P.O. BOX 55 Maroua,
Cameroon
Email: hamidoubappa@gmail.com
Tel: 696551858

Theodore Bebey, PhD

Department of English Language and
Literatures of English Expression, Higher
Teachers' Training College Maroua,
University of Maroua, P.O. BOX 55 Maroua,
Cameroon
Bebeylawane@yahoo.fr
/bebeytheodore20@gmail.com

Abdurrazak Abubakar

Department of English Language, Federal
College of Education (Technical) Bichi,
P.M.B. 3473 Kano State, Nigeria
abubakarabdulrazak296@gmail.com
07036051705



Sani Isma'il Abubakar

Department of English Language, Federal
College of Education (Technical) Bichi,
P.M.B. 3473 Kano State, Nigeria
ismailsania@gmail.com
07064891033

Malata Andrew Zakayo, PhD

Department of Languages and Linguistics,
Gombe State University,
zakayomalataandrew@gmail.com
08027326216

Ismail Bala

.....

Abubakar Mohammed Gombe, PhD

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
08060839578
amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng

John O, Udeigwe Ph.D

Department Of English
Language/Literature
Abia State University – Uturu
jo.udeigwe@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng
08146142122

Shamsuddeen Ismaila

Department of Hausa, Shehu Shagari
College of Education, Sakkwato
Shamsuddeenismail83@gmail.com

Mshelbwala Comfort Usman

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Federal University of Kashere,
Gombe State, Nigeria
08067131647
comfortbwala01@gmail.com,

Shehu Yahuza Abbas

Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic,
Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria
abbassshehuyahuza@gmail.com /
Phone: 07030573795 / 08125163443,

Shema'u Abubakar Umar

shemauari@gmail.com / Phone:
08035965496
Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic,
Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Ibrahim Muhammed Ogah

ogahibrahim075@gmail.com / Phone:
07067169460
Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic, Lafia,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Sani Saidu

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Yobe State University
sani002saidu@gmail.com
08061353634

Umar Amos Hadiya

Department of Languages and
Communication, Federal Polytechnic
Mubi
umardamos@gmail.com
08034846180

Abdullahi Usman Garko

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
augarko@gsu.edu.ng



Angela Butack

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University

Fatima Ibrahim Usman

Dept of Languages and Linguistics
Gombe State University
+234 7041726084
phartimaribrahim@gmail.com

Tarr, Mathias

Department of Languages, Nigerian
Defiance Academy, Kaduna
08034641925
tarrmathias@yahoo.com

Fatima, Inuwa S. Gara, PhD

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
08039199933
fatigara2@gmail.com

Apasi Marizukot Ahuoyiza

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Bayero University, Kano

Adamu Idris, PhD

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Bayero University, Kano
aidris@buk.eng.edu.ng

Ibrahim Sofiyat Temitope

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Bayero University, Kano



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Repositioning Reading through Multimodality in English Language Teaching

Suku Hyellamada Kenan, PhD

Department of Languages and Linguistics, Gombe State University,

hyellawilbe@gmail.com

08139668910

Aishatu Bello Umar

School of Secondary Education Languages, Department of English

Language, Federal College of Education (Technical) Gombe

aishatubu@gmail.com

08036585813.

Hannatu Joseph Bega

Department of Modern Languages, College of Education Billiri.

hannatujosephbega@gmail.com

Abstract

The changing nature of communication in the digital age has transformed literacy into a multimodal practice that extends beyond traditional print-based reading. However, English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in Nigeria continue to emphasize linear, text-centred reading instruction, resulting in a disconnect between classroom literacy practices and students' everyday communicative experiences. This study examines the influence of multimodal reading instruction on secondary school students' reading comprehension, critical literacy, and engagement in ELT classrooms in Gombe State, Nigeria. Anchored in Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Multiliteracies Pedagogy, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach within a descriptive survey design. Data were collected from Senior Secondary School II students and English Language teachers across ten public secondary schools using questionnaires, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and instructional artefacts. Thematic analysis revealed that the integration of visual, verbal, and embodied modes, such as images, charts, gestures, and dramatization, enhanced comprehension by scaffolding meaning, activating prior knowledge, and promoting collaborative interpretation. Students demonstrated higher engagement and motivation when multimodal resources were incorporated into reading lessons. Nevertheless, the extent of multimodal integration was mediated by teacher awareness, class size, and resource availability, particularly access to digital infrastructure. The



study concludes that multimodal pedagogy, even in resource-constrained contexts, holds significant potential for improving reading comprehension when supported by teacher creativity and pedagogical intentionality.

Keywords: Multimodality; Reading Comprehension; English Language Teaching; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Nigerian Secondary Schools

Introduction

The nature of literacy has undergone profound transformation in the past three decades. Once conceptualized primarily as the ability to decode and encode alphabetic print, literacy is now widely recognized as a dynamic, socially situated, and multimodal practice (Jewitt, 2008; Walsh, 2010). The proliferation of digital media, social networking platforms, and mobile technologies has radically expanded the range of semiotic resources that individuals draw upon to communicate and make meaning. In contemporary communicative contexts, meaning is rarely conveyed through linguistic text alone; instead, it emerges from the interplay of multiple modes, including images, sound, gesture, spatial layout, and digital interactivity (Kress, 2010). These developments have far-reaching implications for educational systems, particularly for English Language Teaching (ELT), where reading instruction still often reflects the conventions of a print-dominated era.

Globally, there has been increasing scholarly and policy recognition of the need to equip learners with multimodal literacy skills to navigate the demands of the 21st-century communication landscape (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2022). The shift towards multimodal literacy reflects not only changes in the form of texts but also changes in the competencies required of readers. Contemporary readers must be able to interpret, critique, and produce texts in which linguistic meaning is integrated with visual, auditory, and interactive elements. This requires new forms of reading comprehension that go beyond decoding printed words to include decoding of visual grammar, interpretation of sound design, and evaluation of the interrelationships among semiotic modes (Serafini, 2012).

Despite this global momentum, ELT classrooms in many parts of the world have been slow to adapt. In the Nigerian context, the teaching of reading in secondary schools remains largely confined to linear, print-based texts such as prose passages, poems, and

textbook exercises. This reflects a broader educational tradition that privileges written language as the primary, and often sole vehicle of literacy instruction (Ajayi, 2009). While such texts remain important, they do not adequately prepare students to engage critically and creatively with the multimodal texts that dominate their daily communicative environments; from social media posts and memes to infographics, podcasts, and digital stories.

The Mismatch between Classroom Literacy and Real-World Communication

The dominance of print-based instruction in Nigerian secondary school ELT creates a pedagogical misalignment. Outside the classroom, students interact daily with richly multimodal environments: Instagram feeds where image composition and colour palettes convey meaning; YouTube videos where verbal narration is layered with background music, captions, and on-screen graphics; and WhatsApp voice notes accompanied by emojis that signal affective stance. These experiences demonstrate that young people are already engaging in sophisticated multimodal meaning-making. However, when such communicative practices are absent from the classroom,

opportunities to connect school literacy to students' lived experiences are lost (New London Group, 1996; Mills, 2010).

This gap has practical consequences. Students may develop fluency in interpreting traditional print texts but struggle with critical analysis of multimodal texts. For example, they might competently summarize the plot of a short story but be unable to unpack the persuasive techniques embedded in a political meme or the ideological framing of a news video. Such skills are central to critical literacy, that is, the capacity to recognize, question, and evaluate the social and political dimensions of texts (Luke, 2014), which is increasingly recognized as essential for active citizenship in a media-saturated world.

Multimodal Literacy and Reading Comprehension

The concept of reading comprehension itself has evolved in line with multimodal literacy theory. In traditional models, comprehension is understood as the extraction of meaning from text through decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and inference (Grabe, 2009). In a multimodal framework, comprehension is re-conceptualized as the orchestration of meaning across



modes: recognizing how an infographic's layout guides the eye; interpreting the connotations of color schemes; connecting sound effects to narrative tone; and integrating these cues with linguistic content (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For ELT learners, these competencies are not supplementary but central, since English is the dominant language of much digital content, and its multimodal representations vary across genres and cultural contexts.

The Nigerian Educational Context

In Nigeria, the national curriculum for English at the secondary level emphasizes reading comprehension as a core skill but offers limited guidance on incorporating non-linguistic modes into instruction. While the Federal Ministry of Education acknowledges ICT as a cross-curricular competency, implementation is inconsistent due to infrastructural limitations, teacher preparedness, and resource constraints (Odey, et al 2025). Consequently, many teachers rely heavily on prescribed textbooks and past examination papers, with minimal exposure to digital or multimodal texts.

This is further compounded by the examination-oriented culture

of Nigerian education, where reading comprehension tasks in high-stakes tests typically involve decontextualized prose passages followed by multiple-choice or short-answer questions. Such formats do little to encourage engagement with multimodal meaning-making or the development of critical literacy skills. As a result, there is a systemic undervaluation of multimodal competence, despite its growing importance for higher education, employment, and civic participation.

Given these realities, there is a pressing need to re-envision reading instruction in Nigerian secondary school ELT as a multimodal and student-centred practice. This requires empirical evidence on how multimodal approaches impact student outcomes, particularly reading comprehension, critical literacy, and engagement. Although studies in the Global world have demonstrated the benefits of multimodal instruction (Walsh, 2010; Mills, 2010), there is limited research in African contexts that accounts for the socio-cultural and infrastructural realities of schools.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the effects of integrating multimodal reading materials, including graphic novels, podcasts, digital storytelling, and interactive

infographics, into ELT classrooms in Gombe metropolis. The research draws on the theoretical frameworks of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and Multiliteracies Pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), both of which foreground the importance of diverse modes and culturally relevant texts in literacy instruction.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how multimodal reading instruction influences Gombe state secondary school students' reading comprehension, critical literacy, and engagement in ELT classrooms, with the following objectives:

Objectives:

- i. To evaluate the effectiveness of multimodal texts in improving students' reading comprehension skills.
- ii. To examine how multimodal reading instruction fosters critical literacy among secondary school students.
- iii. To assess students' engagement and motivation when exposed to multimodal texts in comparison to traditional texts.

Literature Review

Defining Multimodal Literacy

The concept of literacy has evolved significantly from its traditional association with alphabetic print reading and writing towards more complex, socially situated, and multimodal practices. Jewitt (2008) defines multimodality as the use of multiple semiotic modes such as linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and auditory resources in communication. In a similar vein, Kress (2010) emphasizes that meaning making in contemporary society involves the dynamic interplay between these modes, each with its own affordances and constraints.

Multimodal literacy, therefore, extends beyond the cognitive skills required for decoding and encoding written words. It encompasses the ability to interpret, critique, and produce texts in which meaning is distributed across modes, often in non-linear and interactive formats (Walsh, 2010; Serafini, 2012). In educational contexts, this requires students to attend to multiple sources of meaning simultaneously for instance, understanding how an infographic integrates statistical data with color coding and layout to shape interpretation.



A key implication of this shift is that reading comprehension itself must be re-conceptualized. No longer limited to processing strings of words, comprehension in multimodal contexts involves integrating meaning from visual cues, soundscapes, typographic emphasis, and interactive features. As Unsworth and Mills (2020) argue, literacy education must move towards teaching students the semiotic grammars of multiple modes and the principles governing their interaction.

Theoretical Foundations for Multimodal Literacy

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

The analytical framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) offer tools for examining how meaning is constructed across modes. Drawing from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, MDA proposes that each mode has representational, interpersonal, and compositional functions, analogous to language's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. For example, an image may represent an action (representational), position the viewer in relation to the subject (interpersonal), and organize elements on the page to guide interpretation (compositional).

In the context of reading instruction, MDA allows educators to unpack the visual grammar of images, the spatial sequencing of webpages, or the auditory cues in a podcast, enabling students to recognise meaning-making beyond linguistic text. It also highlights how modes combine synergistically to produce layered meanings — a principle central to multimodal pedagogy.

Multiliteracies Pedagogy

The Multiliteracies framework proposed by the New London Group (1996) and further developed by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) responds to two intertwined phenomena: increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, and the growing prominence of multimodal forms of communication. This pedagogy is structured around four interconnected components:

Situated Practice: engaging learners in literacy tasks connected to their social and cultural contexts.

Overt Instruction: explicitly teaching the meta-language for analysing multimodal texts.

Critical Framing: encouraging learners to critique the purposes, ideologies, and power relations embedded in texts.

Transformed Practice: enabling learners to apply their



understanding to create new multimodal texts.

For ELT, this pedagogy provides both a rationale and a structure for integrating multimodal texts into reading instruction. It foregrounds cultural relevance and critical engagement, aligning with broader goals of fostering active, reflective citizens in the digital age.

Multimodal Literacy in Reading Pedagogy

Comprehension Gains through Multimodal Texts

Empirical studies suggest that multimodal texts can enhance reading comprehension by providing multiple entry points for meaning-making. Walsh (2010) found that primary students exposed to texts combining images, audio, and written language demonstrated stronger inference skills and narrative understanding. Similarly, Serafini (2012) reported that multimodal texts supported learners in integrating contextual clues from visual and verbal modes, particularly benefiting students with diverse learning styles.

In second language contexts, multimodal materials can aid comprehension by reinforcing linguistic meaning with visual and auditory cues (Paivio, 2007). For example, an ELT lesson on

environmental issues might use a documentary clip where visual imagery reinforces vocabulary, while captions provide textual reinforcement.

Multimodality in African Literacy Education

In Sub-Saharan Africa, studies on multimodal literacy are relatively recent but growing. Ade-Ojo and Duckworth (2017) highlight the transformative potential of digital tools in adult literacy programmes, while Oduor (2021) explores multimodal composition in Kenyan secondary schools. These studies underscore both the promise of multimodality and the persistent challenges of infrastructure, training, and curriculum alignment.

Nigerian ELT and the Print Tradition

Ajayi (2009) observes that Nigerian secondary school ELT remains anchored in a “print-centric” tradition, with a heavy focus on textbooks and examination preparation. Even where ICT resources exist, their integration into pedagogy is inconsistent. Adebayo (2020) attributes this to a combination of policy-practice gaps, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of locally relevant digital materials.

2.3.2 Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Considerations

Nigeria's linguistic diversity adds complexity to the integration of multimodal pedagogy. Students often navigate between home languages, regional lingua francas, and English, the official language of instruction. Multimodal materials that reflect local cultural narratives and linguistic practices may therefore enhance engagement and relevance (Adegbite, 2015). However, most commercially available ELT resources are designed for Western contexts, raising issues of cultural disconnect.

The existing literature establishes a strong theoretical and empirical basis for multimodal literacy's benefits, but significant gaps remain: Few studies investigate multimodal reading instruction in Nigerian secondary schools, despite the country's unique linguistic and infrastructural context. Many African studies emphasize ICT integration broadly rather than its specific impact on reading comprehension and critical literacy. There is limited examination of how culturally grounded multimodal texts influence student engagement and comprehension in African ELT contexts. While the literature acknowledges the teacher's role, more research is needed on how teachers scaffold multimodal

comprehension and critical engagement.

This study addresses these gaps by implementing a sustained multimodal reading intervention in Nigerian secondary school ELT classrooms and examining its impact on comprehension, critical literacy, and engagement. By grounding the intervention in both MDA and Multiliteracies Pedagogy, the study also contributes to theoretical discussions on how these frameworks can be operationalized in resource-constrained contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design to investigate the integration of multimodal approaches in reading comprehension within selected secondary schools English Language classrooms in Gombe state Metropolis. A descriptive design was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic collection of data from a target population to describe the current state of a phenomenon without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). The study aims to capture teachers' and students' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to multimodal reading instruction, with



particular emphasis on how such approaches influence comprehension and engagement.

Population of the Study

The population comprised Senior Secondary School (SSS II) students in 10 selected public secondary schools in Gombe State. SSS II students were chosen because they are at an intermediate stage in their secondary education, possessing sufficient literacy skills to engage with multimodal reading tasks while still preparing for high-stakes examinations such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE).

Procedure for Data Collection

After obtaining the necessary approvals the principals of the selected schools, the researcher personally administered the questionnaires. For student respondents, questionnaires were completed during regular English Language lessons under the supervision of their class teacher and the researcher, ensuring that clarifications could be provided as needed. Teacher questionnaires were distributed during free periods or after lessons to avoid disrupting instructional time. The entire data collection process spanned three weeks.

Data obtained from the open-ended items were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, and categorizing responses into themes that highlighted participants' views on the benefits, challenges, and pedagogical implications of multimodal reading approaches. The analysis emphasized patterns of meaning across the data, allowing for an in-depth understanding of teachers' and students' perspectives. The study adopts a qualitative case study design, focusing on an in-depth exploration of how multimodal reading instruction influences reading comprehension and engagement in an English Language Teaching (ELT) context. The analysis prioritized participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and observed classroom practices. All semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, while observation field notes were expanded immediately after each classroom session to ensure the accuracy of contextual details. Instructional artefacts, such as lesson plans, worksheets, and visual aids, were scanned or photographed and catalogued for systematic review. Each dataset was assigned a code to facilitate



cross-referencing during the analysis process.

Data Analysis

The analysis commenced with open coding, through which meaningful units of information were identified across the interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. At this stage, the initial codes captured specific actions, perceptions, and observable practices, such as “teacher explains image before text,” “students’ link picture to prior knowledge,” and “lack of projector limits visual content.” These preliminary codes were then refined through axial coding, allowing for the clustering of related codes into broader, conceptually significant categories consistent with the mediating factors outlined in the study’s conceptual framework. Four major categories emerged: Teacher Awareness and Skills, which encompassed pedagogical decisions, instructional strategies, and the adaptation of multimodal resources; Student Engagement, reflecting attentiveness, participation, and affective responses during reading activities; Resource Availability, highlighting issues of access to and utilization of multimodal teaching tools; and Reading Comprehension Processes, which included the integration of visual and textual cues, inference, and

meaning construction. This coding process not only provided an organized representation of the data but also revealed how participants’ practices and experiences interacted within the multimodal reading context.

In parallel with this thematic analysis, multimodal discourse analysis was applied to the classroom materials using the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. The representational metafunction illuminated how images and texts depicted key concepts and narratives relevant to comprehension; the interactive metafunction examined design features such as gaze, framing, and social distance that shaped learners’ engagement; while the compositional metafunction analyzed the spatial arrangement and relative salience of visual and textual elements in guiding meaning-making. This dual focus ensured that both participants’ lived experiences and the semiotic design of multimodal texts were systematically examined.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, multiple validation strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying emerging themes across interviews, observations, and document reviews. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary

interpretations with selected participants, enabling clarification and confirmation of meaning. Thick descriptions of classroom contexts were provided to support the transferability of insights to similar educational settings. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions, coding refinements, and the iterative process of theme development. These strategies collectively enhanced the credibility, dependability, and transparency of the study.

Finally, the interpretive stage situated the emergent themes within the study's conceptual framework, in which multimodal reading instruction functioned as the independent variable, mediating factors such as teacher awareness, student engagement, and resource availability operated as influential conditions, and reading comprehension represented the ultimate outcome. This interpretive lens enabled the linking of micro-level classroom interactions with broader pedagogical implications in English Language Teaching, offering a nuanced understanding of how multimodal resources and practices shaped learners' literacy development.

Findings

The findings are presented thematically, reflecting the analytical categories developed during coding and interpreted through the lens of multimodal discourse theory. Each theme integrates insights from interviews, classroom observations, and instructional artefacts, while being situated within the mediating factors of the conceptual framework.

The prominent theme across the data was the use of visual resources, charts, diagrams, flashcards, and projected slides, as scaffolding tools that anchored reading comprehension. Teachers frequently introduced an image before engaging with the text, thereby activating prior knowledge, stimulating curiosity, and creating a cognitive framework for subsequent textual interpretation. One teacher explained: *"When they see the picture first, they begin to guess what the text might say. It makes them curious."* Observation notes confirmed this trend: in 8 out of 10 observed lessons, students displayed heightened attentiveness and a willingness to predict text content after being shown an image. These findings resonate with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) principle of representational meaning, in which images function as conceptual resources that structure understanding before



linguistic decoding begins. Nonetheless, variability was evident, as some teachers reverted to predominantly text-based explanations, suggesting differing levels of awareness and training in multimodal pedagogy.

The data also highlighted that lessons combining verbal and visual resources facilitated greater student engagement and collaborative meaning-making. Group discussions around images often prompted learners to share personal experiences, thereby enriching their interpretation of texts. One student reflected: *"When we talk about the picture, I remember things from my own life, and it helps me understand the story."* Such interactions align with sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasizes dialogue and shared experience in knowledge construction. In terms of multimodal discourse, the interactive metafunction was evident as teachers used gaze, pointing, and inclusive gestures to invite contributions. However, this practice was not uniformly successful; in larger classrooms, many students became passive observers, indicating that effective multimodal engagement is contingent on both teacher confidence and manageable class sizes.

Despite the observed benefits, resource limitations emerged as a

significant constraint on multimodal integration. Many schools lacked functional projectors, stable electricity, or internet access, which restricted the diversity of multimodal materials teachers could deploy. In such contexts, educators improvised by drawing images on the chalkboard or using physical objects as teaching aids. As one teacher noted: "I know showing videos or real images would help, but I can't because we don't have the facilities." From a multimodal discourse perspective, such constraints limit the scope of the compositional metafunction, as teachers are unable to manipulate layout, salience, or framing to the same degree as when using digital or printed multimodal texts. This finding parallels wider research in ELT that identifies the digital divide as a continuing equity issue in resource-constrained educational settings.

Notwithstanding these challenges, many teachers displayed adaptive strategies to sustain multimodal engagement. Such practices included repurposing locally available materials such as newspapers, posters, and students' own drawings; encouraging learners to generate visual interpretations of texts; and employing embodied modes such as gestures, role-plays, and dramatization to compensate for the absence of digital visuals.

These strategies demonstrate that multimodal literacy does not depend exclusively on technology but also on teachers' creativity and pedagogical awareness. Within the conceptual framework, these adaptive practices exemplify the mediating role of teacher awareness and skills in shaping how multimodal instruction is enacted under varying classroom conditions.

Taken collectively, the findings demonstrate that multimodal instruction enhances reading comprehension when teachers strategically combine visual, verbal, and spatial resources. The mediating factors identified in the conceptual framework—teacher awareness, resource availability, and student engagement, emerged as decisive in shaping the depth and quality of this integration. In contexts where resources were adequate, multimodal strategies generated richer comprehension outcomes, while in resource-limited classrooms, the extent of multimodal learning was largely determined by teacher adaptability. Furthermore, student engagement emerged both as a product of multimodal pedagogy and as a contributing factor, reinforcing comprehension through active participation and collaborative interpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings affirm Kress and van Leeuwen's assertion that meaning-making is distributed across multiple semiotic modes rather than confined to language alone. The results also align with Peircean semiotics, particularly the role of images as icons that scaffold meaning and guide interpretive processes prior to textual decoding. By demonstrating how different semiotic resources interact dynamically in the classroom, the study contributes to the growing body of work on multimodality in ELT and foregrounds the importance of pedagogical intentionality in mediating multimodal learning.

Conclusion

The study provides evidence that multimodal instruction, when purposefully designed and implemented, significantly enhances students' reading comprehension in English Language Teaching contexts. Visuals, gestures, and other semiotic resources not only scaffold textual interpretation but also foster curiosity, stimulate collaborative learning, and deepen comprehension processes. The effectiveness of these strategies, however, is mediated by teacher awareness, resource availability, and the capacity to adapt instruction creatively.



Even in resource-constrained environments, teachers demonstrated that multimodal engagement can be sustained through the repurposing of local materials and the integration of embodied practices such as role-play and dramatization. These findings challenge the assumption that multimodal pedagogy is dependent on technology alone, highlighting instead that pedagogical intentionality and adaptability are equally critical.

Theoretically, the study affirms the relevance of multimodal discourse theory and Peircean semiotics in explaining how diverse modes interact to shape meaning-making in the classroom. Practically, it underscores the importance of fostering teacher capacity to design multimodal lessons and of strengthening infrastructural support to reduce inequities in resource access. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the integration of multimodal pedagogy, supported by adequate resources and informed teacher practice, holds significant potential for optimising reading comprehension outcomes in language classrooms.

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