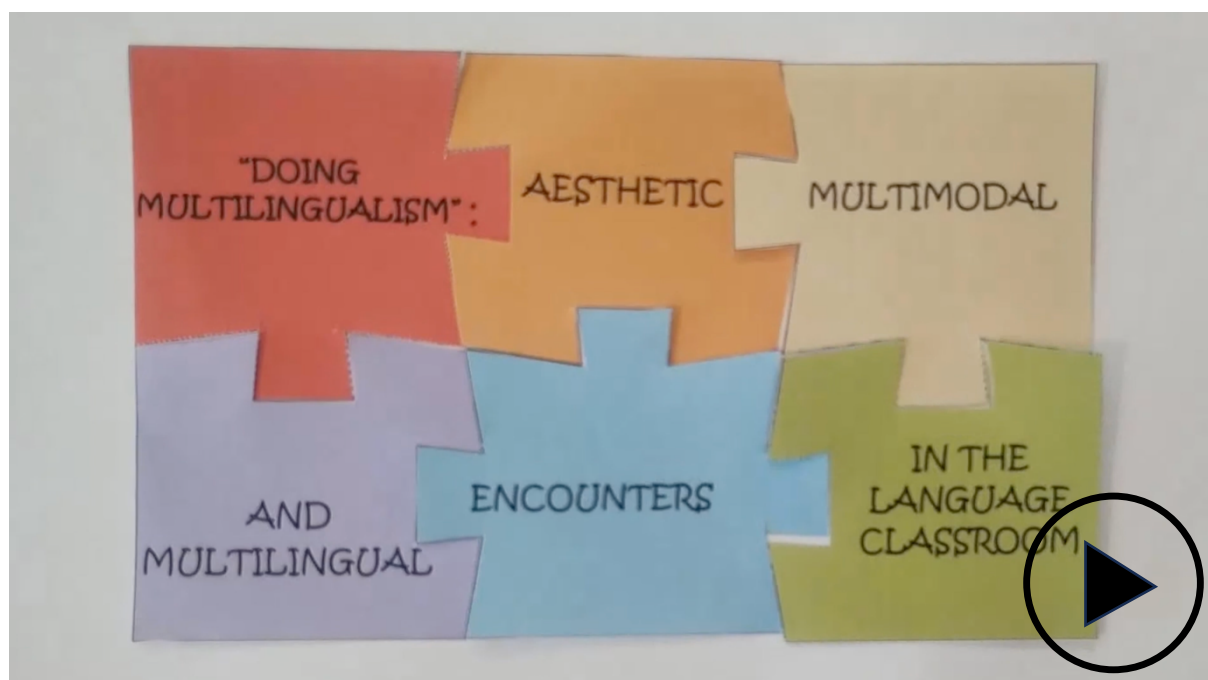


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“Doing Multilingualism”: Aesthetic, Multimodal and Multilingual Encounters in the Language Classroom



Abstract

This video essay explores some ways in which sensorial experiences can enhance affective and cognitive engagement with language and literature in learning situations. It takes into consideration the fact that multilingualism is currently regarded as a resource for language learning and identity development at school. It also attends to the fact that encounters with a diversity of texts and modes is considered an important way to promote literary literacy while developing language skills. The video proposes that material that puts forward the interplay between verbal and visual text and between multiple languages has the potential to invite

exploration, foster affective engagement and inspire multimodal and multilingual creative responses.

Without directing towards specific uses of these materials, the video explores some characteristics of selected spreads from the picturebooks *Storysongs/Chantefables* (2014); *Are You an Echo? The Lost Poetry of Misuzu Kaneko* (2016); *Pablo Neruda Poet of the People/Poeta del Pueblo* (2011) and *Book of Questions/Libro de Las Preguntas* (2022) and presents them as aesthetic pathways to integrate multilingualism in the classroom. At the same time, I hope to show how video essays themselves can work as aesthetic, multimodal and multilingual responses to literature that may encourage learners to showcase their creativity and linguistic repertoire, and as an inspiring form of research dissemination in the humanities.

Keywords: *Multilingualism, Picturebooks, EFL, Multimodality, Poetry, Aesthetics*

Academic guiding text

The background that informs this video essay is the increasing multilingual and multicultural reality of classrooms around the world. Conteh and Meier indicate that “all learners in classrooms have repertoires of languages and/or linguistic varieties which could be activated as vehicles for learning and to foster language awareness and curiosity about their own languages and those of others” (2014, p. 3). In Norway, according to the National Institute of Statistics, 16% of the population have immigrant background, which means that a high percentage of pupils may use a language at home different from the one they use at school (Steinkellner et al., 2023).

In a context in which educational models regard interculturality, metacognition and identity development as central goals, multilingualism has become more relevant than ever (Tiurikova & Haukås, 2022). Thus, an aim of the core curriculum of public schools in Norway is for pupils to “experience that being proficient in more than one language is a resource” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) and a goal for the English subject states that learners should “explore, describe and discuss differences and similarities between English and other languages they are familiar with” and use this information and knowledge in the language learning process (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). This goes in line

with the premises of the Council of Europe, which holds that learners' linguistic repertoires "need to be supported and developed in education systems" (Byram et al. 2013, p.2).

However, even when teachers intend to take advantage of multilingualism, they often report that they lack sufficient knowledge of the ways in which it can be used in the language classroom (Myklevold, 2021, p.73). A real shift in the understanding of multilingualism should rest on the assumption that learning a language is both a cognitive, embodied and affective process (Atkinson, 2014) and crystalize in practices such as translanguaging, which promote the free use of the learners' full linguistic repertoire (García & Kleyn, 2016, p.14). Considering this sensorial and emotional dimension of language learning requires approaches and materials that enhance aesthetic experiences. Literary multimodal texts are ideal to provide such experiences. Encounters with literary texts are a requirement in the curriculum to promote language and literary literacy and to help learners "see their own identity and others' identities in a multilingual and multicultural context" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019).

This video essay explores picturebooks that favour the interplay between poetic language and visual images and between multiple languages. Rather than proposing specific uses for this material the video aims to inspire teachers and readers by presenting the books as potential aesthetic pathways to operationalize multilingualism, not just through cross-curricular work for those learning English and the other languages involved but to invite connections with all the languages in the classroom; as material that "encourages disclosure, discussion of, and reflection on the multilingual phenomenon, and normalizes translingual practices in teaching" (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 31).

I use spreads from *Storysongs/Chantefables* (2014) by Robert Desnos, translated by Timothy Adès and illustrated by Cat Zaza (French and English); *Are You an Echo? The Lost Poetry of Misuzu Kaneko* (2016) written and translated by Jacobson, Ito, and Suboi, with poems by Kaneko and illustrated by Hajiri (English and Japanese); *Pablo Neruda Poet of the People/Poeta del Pueblo* (2011) by Monica Brown and illustrated by Julie Paschkis (2011) and *Book of Questions/Libro de Las Preguntas* (2022) by Pablo Neruda, translated by Sara Lissa Paulson and illustrated by Paloma Valdivia (Spanish and English). Some of them are poetry

collections, others offer facts about the poets' lives (without shying away from some difficult issues) while engaging readers through poetic language and artistic illustrations; in all cases, the reading experience is shaped by the intriguing connections created by the combination of verbal text and the illustrators' artwork.

Poetry is especially suited to be used in the language classroom as it "is both accessible and versatile, and it can serve as authentic texts that represent a variety of voices from different cultures" (Pande-Rolfsen, 2021, p. 59). Simple poems can have deep meaning and display the potential of language for play and creativity (61), as Neruda's poetic questions illustrate. However, as is the case with multilingualism, teachers are not always sure about how to use poetry and often forget about its performative and sensorial dimensions (58) whose visual and aural elements require "multimodal ways of processing" (Coats 2013 p. 133).

The video essay format seemed the most adequate means to explore visual and verbal elements in the selected spreads of the books presented including the aural effects intrinsic to the multilingual experience of poetry. Keeping in mind the potential diversity of this video's audience and the nature of videographic criticism itself, the intention was to find a balance between the scholarly and the poetic, qualities that Ian Garwood ascribes to this form of research (2016). Here, written words on puzzle pieces have an argumentative function whereas different voices contribute to the performative component.

The puzzle pieces guide the viewer's attention to different aspects of the books. The focus is on four features that make the material especially engaging: First the illustrations help to visualize poetic devices such as metonymy, metaphors and contrasts, but they also contain cultural information and recall different pictorial styles, as illustrated poetry books often do (Bjørlo, 2018; Neira-Piñeiro, 2016). Secondly, the integration of words within the pictures underlines writing's iconic dimension by calling attention to formal aspects of the letters. Thirdly, the information contained in the biographical books is also delivered in poetic language and helps readers to understand how the authors' projected their poetic gaze onto everyday things. Finally, the presence of poems in their original languages and in translation does not only bring forward the relevance of English as a lingua franca which enables access to cultural

artifacts from all over the world, it also has the potential to add signifying and emotional layers to these already complex multimodal literary texts.

As Tidigs and Huss indicate, multilingual poetry “suspend[s] an automatized understanding of language and sensemaking, engaging readers in a productive struggle with the text”, inviting them to “leave behind the silent reading practice in favor of loud articulation, in order to make sense of the text’s uncertain semantics and noise” and promoting “the awareness of language as not only meaning, semantics, but also as sounds, noises and visual signs” (2017, p. 231); in other words, it emphasizes the phonemic and graphic materiality of words. Although in the books examined languages are not combined within the poems, seeing and listening to different languages side by side may encourage pupils to reflect on the process of translation and ultimately inspire them to use other languages they know for poetic creation, mixing and playing with them, both orally and in writing.

As for the inclusion of voice, Chiara Grizaffi (2017) observes that it is the manifestation of the video maker’s presence. As a speaker of several languages by choice and circumstance, I open the video using my own repertoire to signal the centrality of the languages and voice(s) in one’s identity. Progressively, the voices of children who potentially could benefit from linguistically inclusive school experiences take over to appropriate words and sentences from the books, in an attempt to provide a multilingual choir, inspired by video essays where multiple languages overlap such as those of Evelyn Kreutzer (2018) and Drew Morton in this special issue. Abiding by the terms of fair use in the tradition in video essays, I have chosen musical pieces that evoke the *cultures* presented in the books but have avoided one-to-one correspondences while playfully underlining cultural mixture.

Barbara Zecchi’s reflections on voices other than English and on accented English as a creative and political tool, as well as her understanding of the video essay as an “accented” counterpart to traditional formal criticism (2022) became relevant in retrospect. Here, some voices are “imperfect” and “accented” and reflect the varying degrees of competence that speakers may have in different languages. Likewise, the technical and conceptual limitations I display in this first video essay add to this meaningful array of accented imperfections. The puzzle pieces mirror the linguistic mosaic of contemporary families and classrooms and suggest that the

integration of all these multiple aspects of the materials and of a diversity of languages can result in a satisfying experience of inclusion and wholeness. However, the clumsy shifts, imperfect footage, and handmade pieces which do not fit perfectly can also be seen as a reminder of the messy nature of the multicultural reality while mimicking the aesthetics of children's schoolwork.

Thus, I also hope that this video essay comes across as a way to work with similar material in a multimodal and multilingual manner in the language lessons. The potential benefits of inviting pupils to bring their linguistic knowledge into the classroom go beyond didactic outcomes for, ultimately, multilingual practices have been linked to "social inclusion and conflict resolution" (Coneth & Meier, 2014, p. 2) and have been said to "contain the elements to disrupt hierarchies and inequities and build a better and more just world" (García and Kleyn, 2016, p. 29).

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Maria Casado Villanueva (b.1982) works as associate professor of English at the University of South-Eastern Norway (Norway). She teaches English literature, film and EFL pedagogy. Her research interest are the modernist and postmodernist short story, the fairy tale, children's literature and literature in EFL.

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