

**RLMSEE-2020****The Russian Language in Modern Scientific and Educational Environment****SEMIOTIC RESOURCES OF MEDIA COMMUNICATION: ON  
THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF MULTIMEDIA LITERACY**

Zagidullina Marina Viktorovna (a)\*, Shafaghi Maryam Mohammad Ebrahim (b)

\*Corresponding author

(a) Chelyabinsk State University, Br.Kashirinykh, 129, Chelyabinsk, Russia, marta@csu.ru

(b) Allameh Tabataba'i University, Dehkade-ye Olampik, West Hemmat Highway, Tehran, Iran,  
maryam.shafaghi@mail.ru**Abstract**

The participants of the scientific conference PMMIS-2019 “Journalistic text in a new technological environment: achievements and problems”, supported by RFBR, paid a significant attention to the role of images in current communication. The extension of the visual component in modern informational streams is obvious; that is why the “media literacy” becomes more and more important in the communication field. In the educational environment, with respect to intercultural aspects, media literacy needs to be considered as a hybrid approach to visual culture. Language is now just one among many semiotic resources in communication, this is why the process of teaching language for foreigners needs to be adapted to the new media-communication environment and mediatised everyday life. In this article, the authors show in several examples how media literacy depends on cultural background and can be implemented into a multicultural educational environment. The ethnologic-pedagogical approach (ethnopedagogy) is applied: cognitive processes of language acquisition are considered as a hybrid of national forms of media literacy skills and language faculty. Two methods were combined: an analysis of a current philosophic field explaining the peculiarities of communication in modern technological conditions, and an ethnographic study of Iranian learners’ attitude to visual tools of Russian language studying.

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## 1. Introduction

In her research, the famous Russian specialist of teaching Russian as a foreign language (RFL), Khavronina has repeatedly drawn the attention of RFL specialists, philologists, and teachers to the problems of ethnopedagogy and to the so-called “ethnic-centered method” – the need to take into account the ethnical cultural background of students who base any forms of cognitive activity on the experience they have received earlier in their native culture (including the experience of cognitive actions acquired while mastering a new language, see Khavronina & Mitrofanova, 2017).

The thesis about the ethnopedagogical aspects of the organisation of education can be expanded through a multisemiotic approach to modern communication. According to Michael Halliday, who develops Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of language as just one of many semiotic systems within the framework of semiology, language competes in communication with other systems (Halliday, 2018). Processes of communication (sending and extracting communicative meanings) depend on the choice of recipients who have many options besides the language code. Modern communication creates conditions for complementing to previously “elusive” semiotic resources (for example, “body language” – gestures, facial expressions, body position, etc.; replacing written messages with voice messages; using emoticons in written messages; including hashtags in a message to indicate one's own positions; expanding the possibilities of quickly constructed collage images as exponents of meanings, etc.). The range of semiotic resources is constantly expanding and renewing. Social media platforms develop their own specific “language” (which is close to the concept of “format”), based on non-verbal forms of messages (for example, TikTok). These processes are based on the bottom-up model (originating in anonymous practices and passing through “natural selection” among the mass of users). In such conditions, the concept of ethnopedagogy which is sensitive to national forms of knowledge transmission, is also expanding in connection with the emergence of the national specifics of global platforms and tools for information and communication exchange. In this article, the idea of “a visual key” to the process of language acquisition is explored.

## 2. Problem Statement

Social networks (for example, Facebook) offer users many options which are implemented in different national mediasystems in different ways. These national forms of non-verbal communication exchanges can be viewed as a kind of challenge to the natural languages themselves – to what extent such communications replace and displace natural languages? Thereby these challenges problematize not only the development of foreign languages, but also users’ native languages (Elleström, 2019). In continuation of the ideas of Khavronina, the classification of modern non-verbal semiotic resources in their ethnic specificity is of high scientific interest; this has enabled the authors to rely on these resources in their study of Russian as a foreign language. In this article, one aspect of language acquisition through the multisemiotic approach is investigated: the advantages and disadvantages of the “visual path” to foreign language acquisition under the present growing trend of internationalisation of education. The choice of this aspect draws on widely explored “visual turn” problem – understanding the role of images in current culture.

### **3. Research Questions**

The research question of this article is following:

RQ. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the “visual key” in the acquisition process of a foreign language?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Answering the abovementioned question, the authors of this article aim to describe the specifics of language teaching in the era of semiotic resource diversity and media literacy, replacing the former understanding of literacy as the acquisition of a natural language. The purpose is two-fold: on one hand, the philosophic understanding of the current communication specifics must be taken into account, on the other—the practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language should be considered as a source of answers on the research question.

### **5. Research Methods**

To achieve the aim of this investigation, two methods were combined: (1) an analysis of the philosophic field on visual turn and on the multisemiosis of current communication; (2) an ethnographic study, exploring the opinions of a group of Iranian learners about visual tools in their practical work to acquire Russian language.

### **6. Findings**

The visual turn in current communication has been extensively and intensively analysed since the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even if the dominance of visual culture in current communication is obvious, its place in the educational process is has not yet been properly defined. This is why, in this article, the authors have complemented their theoretical (general) understanding of current communication as “a realm of visibility” with interviews of Iranian learners of Russian language on the role of visibility in their acquisition of this language.

#### **6.1. Ethnopedagogy within the frame of the visual turn in culture**

For the purpose of the article, it is important to mention some aspects of research results in the field of Communication Studies’ related to the ethnopedagogy.

As Friedrich Krotz (2009) suggested, there are four metaprocesses which explain the social life of mankind: globalisation, individualisation, commercialisation and mediatisation. These four dimensions organise a sort of “global cultural matrix” which “works” in different fields of human activity despite (geographical) spaces and social hierarchies. For the field of education, this approach opens an important perspective: the former limitations and boundaries (including the symbolical “walls” between different variants of religious, mentalities, cultures etc.) are become blurred, and the definition of “ethnicity” loses its clearness. Instead of these “traditional” barriers between people, other types of division appear, among

which media literacy is leading (Kellner & Share, 2019; Kafai et al., 2019; Livingstone, 2004; Ptaszek, 2019; Petranová et al., 2017; Weninger, 2018; Yeh & Wan, 2019). Being a rather broad phenomenon, media literacy is dependent on media inequality, different levels of access to modern tools of communication, divergent forms of expert knowledge, sharing on social media platforms etc. Ethnopedagogy built its approach on the traditional understanding of “ethnicity”, but media literacy era shows that this approach should be reconsidered by teachers because learners can be more divided because of this “media-dimension” than by ethnic, racial, gender or cultural criteria.

Media literacy is understood by the majority of researchers as an important part of education (see a literature review in Zhang et al., 2020). However, a more general philosophic question arises – how does this era of media literacy change the culture of mankind. The rupture between a “narrow” understanding of media literacy within the educational framework and its “wide” understanding as a basis of the global cultural shift must be bridged.

As McLuhan noticed, “the medium is the message”, and this sentence helps us consider the visual turn in its cognitive meaning (see a review of a semiotic approach to this aspect: Trifonas 2020; see also about the link between the visual turn and educational field: del Pozo et al., 2020). So, the most important question for the educational field related to the teaching of foreign languages is about the language itself: what sort of language (which type of communicative *code*) will learners acquire under the conditions of the visual turn? Here, the “medium” is a visual form of human communications (represented by video, films etc.) and the message is the language per se.

Michael Halliday supposed that different semiotic resources concurred for their dominance in communication. Kay O’Halloran, developed this multimodal approach, suggesting that a complexity of communication can be considered as an “assemblage” of these semiotic resources (see in details in her latest work, in co-authorship: Tan et al., 2020). In that case, the “message” can be extracted as a sum of all resources rather than dominance of one of them.

Thus, to understand the message of a participant of political debates, one can analyse not only words meanings but rather intonations, gestures, mimics and other resources (or media, in the direct sense of this word). The place of words (their meanings) do not play their exclusive role as it was in the past. The “platform communication” opens-up the possibility to fix all these resources, to make them “replicable” (as before, a book or a newspaper could be re-read, now a digital video can be re-seen; moreover, users can find any moment of this digital content with a navigator tools, he can stop it, examine it carefully etc.). The new technical conditions of communication have pushed the language (as a semiotic resource) from the centre of communication to its periphery. Therefore, a new generation of learners has to answer this challenge, the same applies to their teachers.

Globalisation (being closely related with communication and its technologies) reduces the significance of ethnopedagogy: cultural diversity can be ignored in international classes because students from different cultural ~~areas~~ backgrounds (including different religions and mentalities) have to integrate into the cosmopolitan ensemble. But the question about different cognitive mechanisms of the language ability is still opened, even under globalisation. As Khavronina emphasised, these different cognitive mechanisms should be taken into account by teachers of foreign languages (Khavronina & Mitrofanova, 2017, p. 72).

## 6.2. Visual turn in the acquisition of foreign language: the learners' opinions

The ethnography method was applied to answer the RQ (What are the advantages and disadvantages of the “visual key” in the acquisition process of a foreign language?). 14 Iranian students learning Russian in Tehran (in their 4<sup>th</sup> year, Department of Persian and Foreign Languages of Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran) were invited to provide their opinion about visual opportunities in their studies. They answered using voice-messages or typing their answers (all answers were in Russian). The open questions were asked to clarify the role of visuality in students' studies, including a question on the difference between Iranian and Russian visual cultures.

All collected answers were interpreted, applying the grounded theory process which is relevant to ethnographic (weak-structured) data: the inductive approach was applied; the opinions of students were generalised and classified as follows:

1. Dominance of visual culture over textual culture. In students' opinion, visuality is the most important way of communication in the current information field: “I think that nowadays people watch videos more often than they read texts”; “Today, visual media occupy an important place in our life. I prefer image and video because I can easily catch the sense”.

2. Importance of visual tools in students' study of Russian. Five advantages were mentioned: (a) easiness of understanding and memorising language information with video-support, (b) an opportunity to watch and listen to Russian language situationally, in the communicative context, including intonations, mimics, gestures of a speaking personage; (c) a combination of language acquisition and immersion into Russian culture; (d) increasing the motivation to learn Russian language: “We can solve our language problems and learn Russian more easily using media literacy, using YouTube, applications such as Instagram and Telegram”; “Media and pictures are very important for learning Russian. I use media a lot; when I watch and listen to Russian language, I have a better idea of the situation, I can understand how people look and how they speak, without media I would not be able to understand everything well”; “Watching movies helps us better understand the atmosphere of a story”; “I have watched some Russian films – “Gentlemen of Fortune”, “Zigzag of Fortune” – it is very interesting to learn about Russian culture, especially during the Soviet era”; “Watching videos, films, etc. introduces us to this country and its culture, and as a result we are more interested in learning the language of this country”; “: I usually try to watch the news of the day in Russia and various famous Russian programs in order to get to know better both Russian celebrities and the culture of Russian people”; “Image, video and audio have a greater influence on me than text when learning Russian and getting to know Russian culture. Since Russian has a complex grammar, and if we want to get to know Russia only through text, most of our time is spent on translating and analysing grammar. And today, by viewing images and videos, the culture of the country can be acquired faster”.

3. Conflict between visual culture dominance and language acquisition. The students noticed two disadvantages of visual tools usage in a process of language acquisition: (a) neglectation of writing skills, (b) decline of reading culture.

“Of course, this method <watching videos and films to learn foreign languages> has disadvantages. I've always felt it. As I have always been watching (I watched Russian TV, music, films), I now have realised that I cannot write at all. I prefer speaking rather than writing. Now the problem is that

my ease of writing lags far behind my oral skills. If you only watch video and listen to speeches, you will not master your writing skills”; “In addition, today's youth are not very interested in reading long texts”; “I want to say something important – you need both the words in the book and the pictures in order to understand and get a good level of Russian language”.

4. Difference between Iranian and Russian visual culture was described in contradictory manners: some students believe that in Iran, visual culture is developing better than in Russia, other students think the opposite, and some students believed the visual cultures of the two countries were similar:

“To compare Iranian and Russian visual cultures, for example, films: beyond the mental and religious difference, they are similar, “Zigzag of Fortune” could have been shot in Iran by an Iranian film director”; “Because of the difference in climate, as well as because of religion (climate has a direct impact on people), these countries have different cultures, as well as different visual cultures”; “Although both countries have many things in common, they differ from each other at the same time. For Russians, the visual culture is similar to that in Western countries”; “In my opinion, visual culture in Iran is more important than in Russia. Because Iranians spend more time in cyberspace”.

As one can see, the students are united in defining the significance of visual culture in a language acquisition's process, but their comparisons of two countries' visual cultures differ. Additionally, one student provided an opinion about a cognitive difference between two cultures: “I noticed a difference between Russians and Iranians (and Russians and other peoples). When I think something in Persian and translate it into Russian, then my translation is no good. When I think in Persian and translate into English, then it's okay, a native English speaker will understand me. When a Russian tries to speak English, it is impossible to understand a single word. I think that the structure of the Russian language and the Russian brain is very different from other languages and brains (at least, English and Persian)”. The interesting parallels to this opinion one can find in Aliyari et al., 2017; Golkar et al., 2018.

## 7. Conclusion

As the research results show, with the visual turn playing a crucially important role in human communication, ethnopedagogy needs to be re-conceptualised in terms of mediatization of the world. The ethnic and cultural diversity is no longer related to religious beliefs and “rules” or taboos and limitations, but mostly on media literacy and visual culture acquisition by students. Now, one can find some biased ideas in the educational field which should be eliminated. For example, the well-spread opinion that Iranian students “read” a row of pictures from the right to the left, is false: the-right-to-the-left order is only for reading written texts, it is not “a cognitive frame”. However, the dominance of visual culture in the process of language acquisition marginalises writing itself (and all textual culture as literature, poetry etc.). Grammar rules, punctuation, spelling become unimportant for new-learners because the communication platforms offer a lot of opportunities of visual (and aural) patterns of foreign languages. Language itself becomes problematised because it converges with other semiotic resources: when watching a film, learners understand language patterns just as a part of a complex of other semiotic resources. For future investigations, the authors suggest that the destiny of writing should be analysed and predicted in the pedagogical practice.

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