Opinion

Higher Education Students' Interpretive Strategies in Visual Text Interpretation

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Abstract

The study identified the students' strategies in visual text interpretation. This study used a content analysis research design. Twenty-five students selected through purposive sampling were the participants of the study. Semi-structured interviews with the teacher and student participants were conducted. Results revealed that students utilized several strategies: perceptual, analytical, socio-cultural, investigative, empathic, and experiential in visual text interpretation. These results imply that students, although exposed to visuals, have not acquired the necessary skills yet in understanding, interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating multimodal texts. They mostly utilized perceptual, analytical, and investigative strategies in interpreting visual texts. The study recommends the use of various visual materials as sources of meaning-making. Teachers may match their beliefs and practices in assessing the viewing skills of students and undergo special training.

Keywords: Visual literacy; Interpretive strategies

Rationale

Visual literacy refers to the ability to interpret, understand and communicate through visual means [1]. In today's digital age, visual communication has become increasingly important, with images, videos, and other visual media dominating communication channels [2]. The need for visual literacy is further compounded by the fact that visual information can often be more persuasive and engaging than text-based information [3].

Educators recognize the importance of teaching visual literacy to students to help them navigate and make meaning of the visual world around them [4]. However, in the Philippine education system, visual text interpretation has not been fully integrated into the curriculum, which can result in several problems for students. Thus, teaching visual literacy can present several challenges, including limited resources, time constraints, and lack of institutionalization in the curriculum [5].

Another challenge in teaching visual literacy is the complexity and ambiguity of visual texts. Kress and van Leeuwen [6] found that visual texts can be difficult to interpret. Teachers may struggle to help students understand the various codes and conventions used in visual texts, as well as the cultural and historical contexts in which they were produced. These make visual texts often open to multiple interpretations [7].

In addition, students often face in visual text interpretation the lack of a clear understanding of the visual elements and how they convey meaning. According to Jenkins and Slaymaker [8], many students struggle to analyze and interpret visual texts because they lack the necessary vocabulary and conceptual framework to describe the visual elements and their functions.

Furthermore, students may struggle with the task of integrating visual and textual information when analyzing and interpreting a

visual text. Hobbs [1] stated that effective visual text interpretation requires students to analyze the interplay between the visual and textual elements of a message and to understand how they work together to convey meaning. However, many students may focus exclusively on one aspect of the message (e.g., the visual or the textual), rather than examining the interaction between the two.

Despite these challenges, researchers have explored various strategies for teaching visual literacy, including the use of multimedia tools [9], cognitive strategies [10], and social semiotic approaches [6]. These strategies have been found to improve students' understanding and interpretation of visual texts. Anent to this, it is crucial to delve into how students extract the meaning of visual texts. However, only a few studies have been conducted in the Philippine context to investigate the strategies students use in interpreting visual texts. Hence, the researcher saw the need to pursue this study.

Research Objective

The study delved into the teaching and interpreting of visual texts in higher education. Specifically, aimed to determine the specific visual strategies that students use in interpreting visual texts in learning Art Appreciation.

Introduction

Visual literacy in higher education curriculum in the Philippines is an area of growing interest, as there is a growing recognition of the importance of visual communication in today's digital age. However, according to Amatorio and Ramboyong (2018), visual literacy is not commonly integrated into higher education curriculum in the Philippines.

De Leon and Borabo [11] also focused on the role of visual literacy in enhancing the critical thinking skills of higher education students in the Philippines. The study found that the use of visual aids, such as infographics and videos, can help students develop critical thinking skills, as it allows them to analyze and interpret information in a more engaging and effective way. However, the study highlights the need for visual literacy in higher education, as it can enhance critical thinking skills, facilitate learning, and prepare students for the demands of the 21st-century workforce.

These can result to a lack of proficiency in understanding and analyzing visual information, such as images, graphs, charts, and diagrams [12]. Also, it can cause several impacts to tertiary students, particularly in academics, communication, and even professional development. It can hinder students' ability to engage with visual materials used in various academic disciplines, leading to reduced comprehension and performance [13]. Inadequate visual literacy skills can impede students' ability to effectively communicate ideas using visual aids, restricting their capacity to convey complex information [14]. Limited emphasis on visual literacy in the curriculum and inadequate instruction on visual analysis and interpretation contribute to students' lack of visual literacy skills [15].

These challenges should be addressed immediately by integrating visual literacy in the curriculum. Incorporating visual literacy instruction across disciplines can enhance the student's ability to analyze and communicate through visual means [16].

Research Design

This study used qualitative content analysis since key themes emerged from the written outputs of participants in artwork and photo text interpretation. Guo et al. [17] have outlined content analysis as a study tool for spotting trends in transcripts of spoken or written interactions.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in a State College in the Bicol region. The institution was purposely chosen since it offers GEC-5 Art Appreciation, a general education course offered to all freshmen students every first semester of the academic year. Art Appreciation is a three-unit course that develops learners' ability to appreciate, analyze, and critique works of art.

The participants of this study were twenty-five freshmen students selected through purposive sampling.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher sought approval from the College President thru the Vice President for Academic Affairs of a State College to gather data from the respondents. After getting the approval, the researcher sought individual consent from the teacher participants who were teaching GEC 5 – Arts Appreciation course. Upon their approval, the researcher administered the interview and retrieved the needed data.

The research has five phases: Phase 1: Performing visual interpretation activities and assessment of students' output. Phase 2: Conducting semi-structured interview; Phase 3: Data collection, Analysis, and Interpretation; and Phase 4 Development of pedagogical model.

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five teacher participants and twenty-five student participants. The student participants were asked questions by different interview guides. These questions were validated by the specified expert in the study as to their correctness, validity, and appropriateness. In addition, the validation ensured that the interview guide questions could answer the statement of the problem. Thus, the semi-structured interview questions were revised and validated by an associate professor at one of the state universities in Camarines Sur.

Data Analysis

The study used deductive qualitative data analysis. Deductive analysis, as defined by Bingham and Witkowsky (2022), entails using evidence to put hypotheses to the test. One way of looking at it is as a "top-down" method of analyzing data.

The research question, "What specific visual strategies do students use in interpreting multimodal texts?" was answered by the teacher and student participants. Both of their answers in the semi-structured interview were coded using Liu's [18] Visual Interpretive Strategies – meta-interpretive strategy, perceptual strategy, analytical strategy, and sociocultural strategy.

Methodological Limitations

Due to CoVid-19 pandemic, the last half of the 2nd semester of School Year 2019-2020 was done via flexible learning; thus, classroom observation was not conducted. Artworks and photos were the visual texts used in the study. But other than these, different types of visual texts such as moving pictures could have been used if face-to-face instruction was possible. A weekly classroom observation or eight classroom observations tantamount to two months could have been done so that enough data could be gathered, but as it is, the focus of this study was on the content analysis of students' visual text interpretation.

Results And Discussion

Visual Strategies Students Use in Interpreting Visual Texts

Table 1 on the next page presents the visual strategies students employ in visual text interpretation based on the 84 statements that were extracted from the interviews. The top three strategies they use are deciphering what each element means (17%) under analytical strategy, incorporating family background, academic background, culture and tradition, place, personality, and beliefs (11%) under investigative strategy, and noticing the visual and design elements (10%) under perceptual strategy. It can also be gleaned from the data that the least strategies students employ are

seeing the interrelationship of the elements (4%) under analytical strategy; identifying visual text, colors, details, and picture and the text, seeing connections from the image to the outside world including oneself under compositional strategy; giving meaning to symbols, including time, type, name and place the artwork, as well as the interpretation of other people under investigative strategy; and, integrating feelings on visual text interpretation (5%) under emphatic strategy.

In visual literacy instruction, students are typically trained to find and associate meaning to every visual element. Visual art and instruction draw heavily on symbolism and abstract representations. The essentiality of each symbolism and representation in visual art becomes more recognizable and comprehensible when students are keen in relating meanings to every detail and component. Associating meaning to every element is also equal to the appreciation of the overall significance and value of the visual works. Likewise, Rusmiana [19] stressed that viewers are required to perceive, select, reject, accept, and evaluate visual elements to understand a text and decode its meaning. Serafini [20], Liu [12] and Cutajar [21] also claimed that students make several interpretations of what they see and observe in the visual texts. In addition, Shen, and Huang [22], Zhou, Wang, and Liu [23], Paoletti, Marzocchi, and Ierardi [24] de Lima, Correia, and Oliveira [25] found visual cues to help students enrich their interpretation (Table 1).

Table 1: Strategies Students Employ in Visual Text Interpretation.

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Core Ideas	F-	%
Compositional Strategy	Identifying visual text, colors, details, and picture and the text	Students are aware that elements and details present in a visual material have meaning to convey which they need to decipher	4	5%
Perceptual Strategy	Noticing the visual and design elements	Students look at what they can explicitly see from the visual including its elements.	9	10%
	Looking at the overall structure.	Students look at how the visual is constructed as a whole.	5	6%
Analytical Strategy	Deciphering what each element means.	Students gave meaning to elements they see from the visual	14	17%
	Seeing the interrelationship of the elements	Students looked at how the elements work together to make meaning.	3	4%
	Interrogating what they see and not.	Students also practiced asking themselves with questions in mind	6	7%
Critical Strategy	Seeing connections from the image to the outside world including oneself.	Students tried to make connections from the image to the society they belong and culture they practice.	4	5%
	Giving meaning to symbols.	Students also identified symbols from the visual text and gave meaning to them.	4	5%
Investigative Strategy	Relating the author's background to the visual text	Students search for the background of the visual text such as artist's life and reason for visual creation.	5	6%
	Incorporating family background, academic background, culture and tradition, place, personality, and beliefs	Students incorporate the background of the author of the visual text they interpret.	10	11%
Empathic Strategy	Describing the likes and dislikes on visual text	Students include their like and dislike about the visual text.	5	6%
	Integrating feelings on visual text interpretation	Students incorporate their emotions and feelings in visual text interpretation.	4	5%
Experiential Strategy	Involving experience in relating visual interpretation	Students relate the visual text to their experiences to make sense of it.	7	8%
Total			84	100%

The next strategy student participants employ in visual text interpretation is incorporating family background, academic background, culture and tradition, place, personality, and beliefs. They were aware of the human hand behind the design of the activity and the appearance of the images. While their strategies were purposeful, they were also fluid, without systematicity.

Boling, Gray, Altuwaijri and Jung [26] asserted that viewers are purposeful and aware of the author and the appearance of the text. Through the application of the investigative strategy, teachers provide students with ample opportunities to get to know the authors of the visual works well. Thus, in using investigative strategy, learners are also able to expand their cognizance, realization and personal knowledge of these relevant philosophies represented by the visual works.

Noticing the visual and design elements is the third frequently employed strategy. Awareness of the visual elements in their most basic forms is equal to the capacity to recognize potential components where meanings of visual text can be attached and associated. Simply, identifying basic elements of visual art prepares students in knowing the outlets or aspects that could be used by the author to represent meanings. Failing to notice important elements in the text such as fonts used, text position, and the frame of images is tantamount to failing to extract the meaning of the visual text. Liu and Lesaux [18], Zhang and Wildemuth [27], Korpi and Englund [28], Park and Lim [29], Rouse and Haas [30], and Kamal et al. [31] claimed that students use elements to discuss the meaning they perceive the visual text conveys.

On the other hand, seeing the interrelationship of the elements is the least strategy student participants used in visual text interpretation. In the students' endeavor to recognize connections among visual elements, they consider the coherence of meanings and how these meanings can be synthesized, collaborated, and harmonized into a noble appreciation of the overall integrity of the visual works. Liu [12] posited that viewers must be concerned about what they notice and analyze elements present in an image and their sociocultural – meaning.

Another strategy employed least by student participants is identifying visual text, colors, details, and pictures. Through the compositional strategy, students are taught and trained to analyze a visual text with depth by always taking into consideration the meaning behind every element or composition of the text, art or works. Liu [12] described that viewers tend to identify visual text elements such as color, shape, line, texture, shape and use these in interpretation.

Seeing connections from the image to the outside world including oneself under compositional strategy is also the least strategy used in interpreting visual texts. Relating the messages conveyed by the visual works to real-life events, situations, realities and scenarios in the society and community is a potential way to enhance the cultural and social significance of visual art. Matusiak [32], Lobinger [33], Mitchell's [34], and Liu [12] stated that viewers consider the social meaning of the text. Rather than identifying relationships between and among elements, viewers focus more on sociocultural issues.

Integrating feelings on visual text interpretation (5%) is under emphatic strategy. Liking or disliking a visual work based on interest is therefore an initiative to employ a more intimate approach to visual analysis. Emphatic strategy enables the students to match the process and endeavor of visual analysis to the personal preferences, interests, choices, views, and principles of the learners.

Based on the findings, the results signify that the students employed very few interpretive strategies. Students mostly utilized perceptual strategy. They are focused more on the literal and structural or perceptual aspects and components of visual works but fail to understand the in-depth meanings behind the visual elements including their organization, interrelations, and combinations.

In addition, it depicts that the students, although exposed to visuals, have not acquired the necessary skills yet in understanding, interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating multimodal texts. Thus, they need much support from the teachers for them to improve their visual literacy [35-38].

Conclusion

Based on the key results and findings, the researcher has come up with the following conclusions: students, although exposed to visuals, have not acquired the necessary skills yet in understanding, interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating multimodal texts. They mostly utilized perceptual, analytical, and investigative strategies in interpreting visual texts. Thus, students produced interpretations based on what they could only see; therefore, literal, and shallow interpretations were employed, which employed a few interpretive strategies in the meaning-making process and produced literal interpretations.

Declarations

Availability of data and material: I hereby declare that the material and data of this study are available.

Funding

I also hereby declare that the study has no financial and non-financial competing interests.

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