Teaching to Read Multimodal Texts at Tertiary Education: Learning about Gender and Culture with Oxfam Intermón's Covers

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Abstract:

Using multimodal texts in a language classroom offers many opportunities for the development of multiliteracies and the acquisition of different types of competences. The study, thus, aims to deepen into the different social competences university students can acquire when multimodal texts from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are used in a language classroom. The texts selected are useful to introduce gender issues in the classroom. The methodology is qualitative. For its framework of analysis, the study draws on the main principles of visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) so that students learn how to analyse visuals. It was decided to use texts from the NGO Oxfam Intermón in which women from other cultures appeared because they allow students at tertiary level develop critical thinking and respect for cultural diversity, which will contribute to the development of social competences. The study reveals that multimodal texts from NGOs are useful to develop critical thinking, to bring cultural aspects into the classroom and to work on social competences.

Keywords*: Multimodality, gender, competences, visual grammar, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)*

1. Introduction

It is essential that Universities prepare students for the labour market so that the teaching-learning process has a clear application to live from the beginning to the end. In this sense, the creation of the European Higher Education Area (hereafter EHEA) promoted some principles that facilitate that students become the protagonists of their learning process by acquiring some competences such as leadership, conflict solving, taking decisions, summarizing, etc. (Benito & Cruz, 2005; Bueno González & Nieto García, 2009; López Noguero, 2005; Martínez Lirola, 2007; Ramos, Chiva & Gómez, 2017). Moreover, the EHEA highlights the importance of autonomous learning, which involves that students need to 'learn to learn' and acquire tools that make them be researchers and organize their own learning. In addition, lifelong learning is another principle that makes clear that everything that needs to be learned is not learned at the University.

The creation of a new University adapted to the changes of the XXI century requires paying attention to new literacies, i.e., students need to be able to work with texts with music, visuals, and other forms of communication (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010; Lemke, 2012; Livingstone, 2008; Merchant, 2009; Royce & Bowcher, 2007). Consequently, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) need to be incorporated into the classroom on a daily basis in order to facilitate students' learning process and to help them see a practical application of the use of ICT in the classroom.

In this sense, it is necessary to develop a new pedagogy that integrates the tools offered by the 2.0 society so that there is a close relationship between what is taught in university classrooms and the developments that are taking place in society due to their connection with the labour market. For this reason, it is necessary to promote the use of virtual platforms, the use of ICTs and any other tool that enhances a multimodal teaching and learning so that teaching is as effective as possible and it is adapted to the changes required by our globalized society. Students need to develop multiple literacies to establish a connection between what they learn in the classroom and real life.

The concepts and applications of multiliteracies have spread in recent years thanks to the work of Unsworth (2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). He focuses on how they are involved in the classroom, paying particular attention to the relationship between text and image and the way in which meanings are constructed according to the different modes of communication chosen. In this sense, the different semiotic resources that are used in the classroom need to be observed and analysed in order to systematize the way in which they contribute to facilitate learning, to motivate students, to establish relationships between the classroom and real life, to introduce culture and social values in the teaching-learning process, to promote the acquisition of competences, etc.

Moreover, adapting to the changes proposed by the EHEA requests changing from the 'teaching university' to the 'learning university', i.e., the acquisition of contents is not the centre of the teaching learning process but the creation of critical, creative

and cooperative professionals that are able to solve problems in a changing and globalised labour market. The emphasis in the new University is not on the acquisition of contents but on the development of competences (Tsay & Brady, 2010; Wang, 2009). Consequently, emphasis in now on the output and the input is not so important (Ahmar & Mahmood, 2010; Ghaith, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2007; Slavin, 1989; Torre Puente, 2008; Rué, 2007).

In this sense, social competences are not paid special attention at the University. For this reason, this article will focus specifically on the acquisition of social competences such as the development of critical thinking and social awareness because we are interested in observing the feelings and opinions that students have when they analyze authentic texts produced by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in concrete by the international NGO Oxfam Intermón[1]. These texts have been selected because they represent women from other cultures. In this sense, they will allow readers in general and students in particular to approach the different social realities of the women represented and to observe traditional stereotypes affecting women from very different cultures. This representation is important to the extent that NGOs have become sources of information to the media (Gómez Gil, 2005; González Luis, 2006) and therefore they have the capacity to influence public opinion in the North.

Generally, the contact we have with other cultures is through the media most of the time (van Dijk, 2009). Consequently, the media in general and the press in particular have power over readers. As Martínez Lirola (2013, p. 196) states, "[…] the press has the power to transmit the said issues in one way or another, which invariably has an effect in the readers' ideology and opinion". In this sense, there is a possibility that NGOs may also change the stereotypes and prejudices towards other cultures. In addition, using texts from NGOs in the teaching-learning process can help students to deconstruct certain stereotypes that connect the reality of countries in the South with poverty, war and desolation, in Martín Nieto's words (2009, p. 156): "The iconic collective imaginary of the Third World has been in the past by the image of communities ravaged by ethnic and armed conflict, natural disasters or malnourished children. The abuse of these images in the media of developed

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[1] This NGO has been renamed Oxfam Intermón from October 15, 2013. Therefore, for this research, we will refer to this NGO as Oxfam Intermón, although one of the multimodal texts analyzed is still using the old name.

countries creates a distorted picture of those developing as obvious causes of poverty and contributes to the promotion of stereotypes"[2].

Therefore, it is essential to know how to analyze the images that NGOs offer in their publications over human beings who are culturally different because their gaze on poor countries is constantly present in the daily press and helps to shape public opinion. In this sense, being able to analyze critically the discourse proposed from NGOs on poor countries is important since discourse also contributes to create relationships of power and domination between cultures, people, countries, ultimately, between human beings (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 2000; Martínez Lirola, 2017; Viola, 2000). Moreover, in the case of languages, students must work with real language and real texts so that it is easy for them to establish connections between what is learned in the classroom and real life (O'Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007).

Consequently, introducing students to the principles of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) is essential in order to learn how to read images; this is the first step to observe the relationship between teaching with real texts (in this case from a NGO) and the introduction of cultural and gender aspects in university classrooms. In this sense, our main research questions are the following: how can multimodal texts help develop multiliteracies at the University?; how can texts from NGOs serve to introduce cultural issues at tertiary level? and, how can multimodal texts help develop social competences that will be useful for students in their professional career?

This study intends to show students a different perspective about the social reality of countries in the South so that they can develop their critical thinking; this will allow them to deconstruct multimodal texts from other cultures in their daily lives. This exercise in deconstruction will focus on gender because women are normally very stereotyped and the modification of prejudices related to gender is normally complex. Moreover, this study will offer an example of tertiary education curriculum design and practice.

The article is organised in the following sections: section two offers the theoretical background of the article paying attention to some important aspects of multimodality, section 3 concentrates on the research framework and pays attention to the objectives of this research, its context and the methodology used. Section 4 concentrates on the analysis of two multimodal texts used to introduce gender and

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[2] Original quotation: "El imaginario icónico colectivo del Tercer Mundo ha pasado en épocas anteriores por la imagen de las comunidades asoladas por los conflictos étnicos y armados, los desastres naturales o por la infancia desnutrida. El abuso de estas imágenes en los medios de comunicación de los países desarrollados crea una imagen distorsionada de los que están en vías de desarrollo ya que obvia las causas de la pobreza y contribuye al fomento de los estereotipos" (Martín Nieto, 2009, p. 156).

culture in a University subject. Finally, the article finishes with the discussion and conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

A multimodal text one that combines different modes of communication (written text, images, diagrams, music etc.) to express its meanings, in Baldry and Thibault's words (2006, p. 21): "[…] multimodality refers to the diverse ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resource systems are both codeployed and co-contextualised in the making of a text-specific meaning". Using multimodal texts implies that students learn to read modes of communication different than language (Molina & Alonso, 2016; Mulatsih, 2016; Triviño Cabrera, 2018; Zammit, 2019).

Language classrooms are especially appropriate to introduce multimodality and to develop multiliteracies due to their communicative nature; they are the appropriate context to produce situations that request the use of some skills that are requested in real life. There are many teachers that have incorporated multimodal perspectives and tools in their teaching practices in the last decades, as Knox makes clear (2008, p. 140): "Multimodal perspectives on language and language education have only recently appeared in the literature on L2 teaching and learning. A brief consideration of the classroom practices of teachers and students shows, though, that multimodality is something that language teachers have understood intuitively for a long time". In this sense, the classroom can be understood as a multimodal context, in Martínez Lirola's words (2013, p. 198): "We understand the classroom as a multimodal learning environment in which modes of communication, different to language, are present to facilitate the teaching-learning process".

In addition, choosing an active pedagogy in which multimodal teaching is present requires developing new skills that allow making the most of different multimodal tools that can be used in the classroom (i.e., using videos, multimodal texts, internet, music, etc.); these skills involve the deconstruction of different modes of communication, understanding texts as complex phenomena composed by different semiotic resources with specific function to communicate a message to the reader with a very specific intent, reading, analyzing and studying multimodal texts used in teaching practices so that the teaching-learning is effective and students make the most of it at the same time that they develop their full potential (Livingstone, 2008; Merchant, 2009; Painter, 2018; Walsh, 2009; Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke & Harrison, 2009).

Using multimodal teaching practices requires the development of different literacies in University classrooms, i.e., multiliteracies. Simpson and Walsh (2010, p. 26) point out that this term is not new: "Evolving from the theorising on the New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000), the term 'multiliteracies' was concerned with the many types of communication handed in new and different social and cultural contexts, and for both print and electronic texts".

Learning to analyze multimodal texts will allow university students to develop their critical thinking. This is important taking into consideration that the nature of our societies is eminently multimodal in the XXI century. In this sense, it is important to

take real texts to the university classroom because students encounter with them daily. If we do not learn to read, their meanings remain hidden and we ignored all that they are trying to communicate.

Furthermore, it is interesting to analyze the texts of NGOs because they allow our society to bring the faces and images of other human beings who are culturally different. Thus, throughout history, relations between the North and the South were essentially relations of power and inequality. Thus, learning to unravel the stereotypes, the prejudice and the power relations that are hidden behind various social discourses, can contribute to create fair and egalitarian relationships in society. In this sense, the selected texts used in this article try to analyze how the NGO Oxfam Intermón builds these relationships between North and South.

3. The research framework: objectives, context and methodology

Our main objectives with the research presented in this paper are to introduce students to visual grammar and to work with texts that allow students at tertiary level develop critical thinking and respect for cultural diversity, which will contribute to the development of social competences. For this reason, we want to help students develop their critical thinking, paying special attention to the representation of women from other cultures.

The practice described in section 4 took place during the academic year 2017-2018 in the subject English Language V of the degree in English Studies at the University of Alicante. There were 95 students registered in the subject (78 women and 17 men) and the total number of people who participated in practice were 90, i.e., there were 5 students who did not to class that day. The subject is designed to help students develop the five skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction) at level C1.

As regards methodology, it is mainly qualitative-descriptive since it is based on the teacher's notes during the teaching-learning process. The main principles of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) were introduced in order to help students to read images. We wanted to combine reading and writing in the proposed practice. Having taught students to analyse images and to read multimodal texts following the principles of visual grammar, a practice was prepared in the classroom so that they could apply those principles to multimodal texts in which women from other cultures appear represented in the covers of the Oxfam Intermón's magazine. The teacher collected all the covers of the magazine Intermón Oxfam from 2012 until 2018, i.e., twenty-one covers (there are three issues published each year). Out of the twenty-one covers, there are 17 where only women are represented (80,91%), just 1 where there is a man (4,76%) and 3 where there are people from both sexes (14,28%). The texts presented in section 4 are a sample of the type of texts students were asked to analyse.

We were interested in bringing gender issues into the classroom because women of other cultures have been heavily stereotyped socially and the media has offered a distorted image of them. We also chose visuals of the said women to observe if students were sensitive to these aspects. Thus, we chose a text with a woman from

the Dominican Republic, who belongs to a country with which Spain has historical ties and another visual with a woman from Ethiopia, which is a country with less historical connections with Spain. Once students had practiced with these texts, they were asked to choose a multimodal text on a social topic and to write an essay on it.

In this sense, the practice consisted on the distribution of the two texts presented in sections 4.1 and 4.2 in groups of 5 to 7 people in order to further implement the principles of the model of visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) so that students can discuss and express their views on the reality of women from other cultures that transmit the texts under analysis.

Once each group had written down the main issues addressed in each text and students had written their opinion on the reality of the women that was reflected in each text, each group had to choose a spokesperson in order to express the conclusions reached after the analysis in front of the class. Once all the groups presented their views, the teacher led a discussion so that students could develop critical thinking and social competences such as leadership in the teaching-learning process. The practice described in this section is meant as an example of activity that integrates the development of written and oral skills. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 offer a summary of the main issues addressed in the analysis written and oral analysis carried out by the groups.

4. Analysis of some multimodal texts: developing social awareness

We promote an integrative model of teaching that helps students acquire contents and competences that are useful for the labour market they will enter as soon as they finish their degrees. This model gives importance to emotional Intelligence covering personal and social competencies (Armstong, 2006): the main personal competencies are self- awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation and the main social competencies are: social awareness and social skills. For this research we will focus primarily on social competencies. Following Armstrong (2006, p. 4-5), social awareness includes the following competences:

(i)   Empathy: Sensing others' feelings and perspective, and taking an active interest in their concerns.
(ii) Service orientation: Anticipating, recognising, and meeting customers' needs.
(iii) Developing others: Sensing what others need in order to develop, and bolstering their abilities.
(iv) Leveraging diversity: Cultivating opportunities through diverse people.
(v)   Political awareness: Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships.

The fact that students were asked to analyse multimodal texts in which women from other cultures were represented involves the acquisition of social awareness since it refers to how people handle relationships and awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns. Analysing texts critically contribute to the development of anthropological ways of looking at images. In this sense, following the model proposed by Armstrong (2006), we believe that students can work mainly on

empathy, leveraging diversity and political awareness with the practice described in section 3.

Working with the texts selected has given students the opportunity of understanding a global issue such as the situation of women in countries of the South, which involves the development of social consciousness. In this sense, they cannot only see through the images to women of other cultures, but also in the classroom these images are deconstructed and the mechanisms of power and control behind them are revealed. Following Kruger (2012, p. 17): "I argue that TESOL teachers should add dimensions of social consciousness to their curriculum in order to equip learners with the necessary skills to contribute positively to both local and global society. One possible way to achieve this would be to introduce concepts of peace education to the curricula". The following sections offer the analysis of two multimodal texts based on the analysis students had done in the practice described in this article. We have chosen these two texts because they represent women from other cultures in a positive way, which contrasts with the general representation of the said women, normally associated with poverty and sadness.

4.1 Analysis of multimodal text 1

Multimodal Text 1: Mhrat Haile knows that the river water is not good for health since she is part of the water committee in her village in Ethiopia. © Pablo Tosco / IO. Journal n. 27 (May, 2013)[3].

Intermón Oxfam[4] covers usually follow the same structure that is constantly repeated. Thus, at the top, there appears a set of small headlines of different colors that highlight the topics that are going to speak on that issue of the magazine. The top also shows the data concerning the number of the journal, the frequency and the corresponding date. Then the name of the publication, "Revista IO" appears highlighted and, below it, the picture takes up most of the cover. Finally, we can see the logo of the NGO located in the center of the bottom. The most prominent elements are undoubtedly picture and IO acronym, highlighted in green, the color used by the NGO in its logo (therefore it allows an immediate identification between NGO and publication) and written to a

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[3] Original text: Mhrat Haile sabe que el agua del río no es buena para la salud desde que forma parte del comité de agua de su pueblo, en Etiopía. © Pablo Tosco / IO. Revista nº27 (mayo, 2013).

[4] We use the name Intermón Oxfam when analyzing this cover because this magazine belongs to the period in which this NGO still had this name.

larger than the other letters on the cover. Thus, the look ranges from the acronym "IO" and the picture.

The image is the most prominent feature of the composition. The information value (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) of it is distributed from the center to the margins and from the top to the bottom. Thus, the most prominent element of the picture is the woman who appears in the center of the image, called Mhrat Haile. We know this information thanks to the caption on the next page. None of the headlines located on the top of the cover are hierarchical according to their size, so we can only relate the headline corresponding to the image after reading the caption. In this sense, thanks to the data provided by the latter, we can connect the headline "Etiopía. El milagro del agua"[5] with the cover image. The woman has been captured in a medium shot, so that it is observed the environment in which she operates surrounding her figure. Thus, we can consider that the image has tried to capture the environment in which the protagonist of the image inhabits.

Furthermore, analyzing the visual from the top to the bottom, it is clear that the river and the natural environment that surrounds the woman appears at the bottom of the image. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), on the one hand, the lower part of images offers the "real" information, the specific one or its practical consequences. On the other hand, the top of the images is associated with the "ideal" details, i.e., the information that is presented as idealized. In this sense, the river and the environment in which the woman is placed show the lines where the image is divided between an upper and a lower plane. In order to extract the full meaning of this picture, the image serves to illustrate a story found in the inside pages of the publication on the construction of a source in the locality in which the protagonist of the image inhabits.

Thus, we consider that there are two extremely important elements that connect the top and the bottom parts of the image. So, the river is at the bottom: it possesses an earthy color, it seems to be dirty and also it runs wild (which is also highlighted by the presence of the plant environment by flowing). However, the top of the image shows that the protagonist of the photograph carries an earthenware jar with water: it is now controlled by the construction of a source by Intermón Oxfam and it is no longer necessary that the protagonist of the image is to take water from the river. Thus, it can be understood that the top of the image shows an ideal situation because human beings have been able to control nature to the extent that now the people living in this town in Ethiopia, including the woman of the image, have drinking water, which involves that they do not have to use the water of the polluted river, which appears at bottom of the image.

In addition, on top of the image, we also find the smiling face of the woman. In this sense, it can be considered that this reflects the "ideal" information to the extent that the actual product that she bears in her hands, the water in the earthenware jar, generates happiness in people. There are two curious facts: the woman's dress is

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[5] Original text: "Ethiopia. The miracle water".

blue, a color that is often associated with water, and the headline that accompanies this story on the cover is also blue (a shade of blue similar to the dress of women just used).

As for the features that characterize the main protagonist of the image, it is outstanding that it has been captured individually. The NGO has tried to put a face to the project of Intermón Oxfam. However, she does not interact with the reader because she does not look at the camera. However, it gives a positive image of her to the extent that she appears smiling, clean and happy. Despite this, it is interesting to point out that, having been captured in a medium shot, it is observed a certain social distance towards her, a fact that, somehow, is countered because it has been captured horizontally, that is, imposing an equal footing to the public.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the woman represented looks like a statue that goes back to Greek and Roman iconography as we can see when we compare it with sculptures like the one shown in the following image:

Visual 1: *Isis*. Roman sculpture

Source:http://cvc.cervantes.es/artes/museoprado/citas_claroscuro/escultura_griega/galeria_escultura_griega.htm

Furthermore, the woman in the visual under analysis also resembles the iconography that is sometimes used in documentary photojournalism, as we can see by comparing it with images like the following:

Visual 2: Werner Bischof. *Famine in India*
Source:
http://www.magnumphotos.com/image/PAR52107.html

In this sense, the cover under analysis can be understood the reverse of this picture: the same composition is used as the position of the bodies of the protagonists of the images, but the image of Bischof appeals for mercy, while Intermón Oxfam's picture promotes a more positive image of the protagonist of it. Thus, we agree that using this image Intermón Oxfam actually contributes to a positive image of women from other cultures. This fact makes this cover a perfect example so that university students can develop their critical thinking and can deconstruct some prejudices and stereotypes of women from other cultures.

4.2 Analysis of multimodal text 2

Multimodal Text 2: Flor Deli Cabrera, milk producer and leader of the Federation of Independent Farmers (*Federación de Campesinos Independientes*) Mamá Tingó, Dominican Republic. © Pablo Tosco / Oxfam Intermón. IO. Journal n. 30 (May, 2014)[6].
This multimodal text shows the new look of the journal after the NGO changed its name. Thus, it is observed that, if in the previous multimodal text, the image was located in the center of the cover, now it invades the cover's margins. Thus, all textual elements are positioned far above the image. The headlines located in the upper part of the image have the same characteristics as the previous multimodal text. The only element that varies is the first line of the headline because it was

[6] Original text: Flor Deli Cabrera, productora de leche y dirigente de la Federación de Campesinos Independientes Mamá Tingó, de la República Dominicana. © Pablo Tosco / Oxfam Intermón. Revista nº30 (mayo, 2014).

previously gray and now it is white. In this new composition, there is no acronym and the name of the NGO does not appear either. Just the word "Revista" (Magazine) appears with different warm colors. Finally, the last change in this cover is that the Oxfam Intermón logo now stands in the lower right corner of the page instead of in the center. This may be due to the fact that this part of the image is the last to be read, so that the logo closes the entire composition.

If we focus on the image that appears in the cover, the protagonist is again a woman. Information value is distributed from the center to the margins. The protagonist of the picture appears smiling at the camera and challenging the reader with her eyes in the foreground and in the center of the image. The margins of the image are blurred, a fact that allows further highlighting of her figure. Moreover, the building in the background of the image marks a line on the composition and it further serves to frame the face of the woman, who stands out in a bright blue sky.

The woman has been characterized individually, so that her face is fully recognizable. She has also been captured in the foreground and therefore the social distance with the public is close. This fact emphasizes that she has been portrayed horizontally, so that she established an equal footing with the reader. The woman appears smiling and happy and although she is looking at the camera to be photographed, she does not intend to move to compassion, but instead she appears empowered. In addition, her clothes are brightly colored, which adds some vividness to the image.

In this case, we think that this image may also refer to the Western pictorial iconography to the extent that there are numerous portraits of women with the same composition. Take for example the following painting:

Visual 3: Tiziano. *Violante. Portrait of woman* Source: http://isthar-mitologia.blogspot.com.es/2012/04/tiziano.html

The fact that the images used by NGOs refer to Western iconography can also be used so that students recognize the same visual style of composition. That is also important to the extent that it comes with the same visual characterization for people in both countries of the North and South. In this sense, a distinction is created based on the source or the culture of the people who are depending on rich and poor countries. This can lead to the idea that all people are equal regardless of their culture or origin.

Finally, once students analyzed multimodal texts from Oxfam Intermón where women from different cultures appear represented, it is clear that the representation

of the said women is characterized by them being dignified, empowered and positive. This breaks the traditional stereotypes that they have been associated with such as their representation as poor people, dirty, with no resources, lacking autonomy or work and with no power to better their social situation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The multimodal texts already analysed were selected so that students could think of other people's needs and feelings and could develop their sensitivity and understand others' perspectives of live, work, etc. In this way a real development of social awareness took place since the texts selected gave students the opportunity of situating themselves in other parts of the world (Ethiopia and the Dominican Republic) and deepen into the social situation of women who work in the countryside in order to feed their families.

Classrooms at elementary, primary, secondary and tertiary level are multimodal environments that allow the development of teaching practices in which multimodality is highlighted in different ways: using ICTs in different moments of the teaching-learning process, using multimodal texts to teach (videos, web pages, texts that combine image and written texts, multimedia presentations, electronic dictionaries, etc.).

Multimodal teaching practices support that students become the protagonists of their learning process since they have to decide which multimodal resources they want to use in order to learn, they might have to choose multimodal texts to be analysed in order to analyse certain aspects such as the representation of women from the South (see the texts analysed in sections 4. 1 and 4.2).

Students could decide to use the tools proposed by google drives in order to prepare any activity proposed. The use of *facebook, dropbox, whattsapp* or any other ICT could facilitate their learning process and contribute to the development of multiliteracies due to the fact that students use ITCs with pedagogical or learning purposes to facilitate the way they learn and to establish connections between the activities proposed in the classroom and real life.

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