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Multimodal literacy: Meaning negotiations in political cartoons on the refugee crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the topic of multimodal literacy with particular reference to how the analysis of political cartoons can be applied as a critical reading learning activity in English lessons in secondary and higher education. Despite the proclamation of a multimodal turn in the wake of ubiquitous digital communication, educational institutions in general still focus mainly on the modes of spoken and written language. Consequently, students often cannot develop the necessary competences enabling them to become critical readers of the multiplicity of multimodal texts which they encounter throughout their lives. Therefore, multimodal literacy should be integrated into the curriculum. This article demonstrates how political cartoons can be used in the English language classroom to develop students' multimodal literacy. A template for close reading activities is proposed and applied to a cartoon on a current topic, i.e., the refugee crisis, in an exemplary analysis. In addition, possible follow-up activities, integrating further cartoons, are sketched.

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1. Introduction: the multimodal turn of communication

With the advent of the digital age, a "visual or pictorial turn" of communication was proclaimed and, rather recently, a "multimodal" turn has been announced (Jewitt, 2011, pp. 3–4). Educational institutions, however, still focus mainly and often exclusively on the verbal modes, i.e., spoken and written language. The consequence of this is that people are being disempowered "by handicapping them as critical readers of the majority of texts to which they are routinely exposed throughout their lives" (Chandler, 2007, p. 225). Besides, English language learning (ELL) textbooks usually contain multimodal resources. They must be fully understood in order to be used effectively in class. Moreover, "[m]ultimodal practices in ELL classrooms often foster greater student participation, freedom to communicate, collaboration and negotiation of meanings" (Ajayi, 2012, 17). It is thus highly desirable that TESOL professionals take an intensive interest in multimodal communication as well as pedagogical and didactic means to develop their students' understanding of the various modes of communication and their intersemiotic interplay (Royce, 2002, p. 192). Multimodal literacy and how it can be taught should therefore be part of the curricula for English in secondary and higher education. This article wants to demonstrate how political cartoons can be used as frameworks for teaching multimodal competence in these contexts.

Different semiotic modes, especially nonverbal ones, interact with each other in a cartoon and jointly generate the meaning of the artefact. Just like language, multimodal artefacts can be analyzed as discourses or texts which contain "systems of knowledge and belief", constructions of "social identities", "social relationships" (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 64–65

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quoted in; Fill, 2010, p. 156) and ideologies. All of this is particularly true for political cartoons. They usually address prominent societal issues and debates, and assume the role of commentator and critic.

A selection of four cartoons on the refugee crisis in Europe and their potential use in English lessons in secondary and higher education will be explicitly discussed in this paper. The cartoons will be analyzed as multimodal texts. The contributions of the different modes to the meaning-making process will be explored, popular stylistic means will be identified, and it will be shown how they function in the different modes. Moreover, recurring themes will be identified and discussed. The main learning objectives are a better understanding of:

(1) the different kinds of modes, especially those that are nonverbal,
(2) the process of meaning-making,
(3) the functioning of recurring stylistic means in different modes,
(4) their creative and ideological potential, and
(5) the overall construction of a multimodal artefact, i.e., in this case, a political cartoon.

2. Literature review and classification of political cartoons as multimodal artefacts

Research on multimodality typically investigates how meaning is generated through the interplay of different semiotic resources, which are often called "modes" (e.g. Kress, 2010, pp. 27–28; Jewitt, Bezemer, & O'Halloran, 2016, p. 3). Bezemer and Kress (2016, p. 7) define modes as "socially shaped, culturally available *material* resources" or "*means* (…) for making meaning". Modes are always combined, i.e., used "in *ensembles*" (Bezemer & Kress, 2016, p. 7), and they have "different potentials for making meaning" (Kress, 2010, p. 79). Examples of modes are written and spoken language (verbal modes); pitch, intonation, speech rhythm, typography (paraverbal modes); and images, body language, traffic signs and color (nonverbal modes). Political cartoons, which are the object of this investigation, are multimodal artefacts, which always consist of a drawn image (which sometimes contains a series of images), and may also contain a short text.[1] An image in general constitutes a complex nonverbal mode in that it embeds many other nonverbal modes, such as angle, space, color, body language (if people are depicted) etc., and they can all contribute to the overall meaning (Machin, 2007). Political cartoons as multimodal artefacts minimally consist of an ensemble of nonverbal modes and maximally of an ensemble combining nonverbal modes, the verbal mode of written language and the paraverbal mode of typography. The different modes jointly create the meaning of the political cartoon.

3. Research questions and goals

The major research questions addressed are: How can a political cartoon be used:

(1) to teach how different modes interact in meaning-making, and
(2) to expand students' critical reading abilities?

The framing questions for the critical reading activities in the classroom are: Which modes are used in the cartoons and how do they interact to create meaning? Which meanings feature prominently in the cartoons? How are they constructed? Which themes are dominant? Which narratives of the refugee crisis are told? Which alternative stories could have been told?

The basic goal of the paper is to show how political cartoons can be used as a critical reading learning activity in English lessons in secondary and higher education. For this purpose, an exemplary, detailed multimodal analysis of a political cartoon will be carried out and possible follow-up activities with further cartoons will be outlined. The underlying assumption is that the students have no previous theoretical knowledge of multimodality. The major learning objective is to familiarize the students with the potentials of different modes for meaning-making, especially the non- and paraverbal ones. Moreover, their awareness of the manipulative potential of multimodal forms of communication will be increased.

4. Material and methods

A template for close reading activities of political cartoons is developed in this article that can be used by English teachers in secondary and higher education to develop their students' multimodal literacy. It is based on an inductive approach and detailed in an exemplary analysis of a political cartoon on a current topic that has dominated societal discourse in Europe these last few years: the refugee crisis. Variations and useful follow-up activities to train students' competence in multimodal analysis and critical reading will be sketched by integrating some more cartoons.

To identify suitable materials, I used an electronic archive of political cartoons which can be accessed on the Internet (http://www.politicalcartoons.com). The database was searched using the search options "All Artists", "Location: All",

[1] For a more detailed description of the genre of political cartoons see, for example, Tehseem and Bokhari (2015).

"Language: English", "Type: All" (i.e., cartoons in color and black and white), "From" January 1 "To" December 31 in 2015, and the search term "refugees" was used. This resulted in 291 hits. Some cartoons were selected that address recurring themes and perspectives on the refugee crisis, which should represent prominent narratives.

The study is rooted in social semiotics which explores "signs and their use in context to communicate wider ideas, moods and attitudes and identities". Moreover, it is "interested in why specific means were used to create these" (Machin & Mayr, 2015, p. 19). Characteristic of the chosen approach are "detailed observational accounts of these modes as they are realized in a given social context" (Jewitt, 2011, p. 30). Halliday's (1976, 1994) systemic functional linguistics framework can be well integrated here and serve as a guideline for pedagogical-didactic proposals regarding the questions that could be asked to stimulate and structure discussions of multimodality. Thus the *ideational* (1), *interpersonal* (2) and *textual* (3) metafunctions (Halliday, 1976) can be implicitly addressed by questions like (1) How are different modes used to represent people, events, qualities, ideas … ?; (2) What is the relationship between the depicted people, what are their roles and identities?; (3) How are the different modes organized to bring across which kind(s) of meaning? (Ajayi, 2012; Royce, 2002, p. 193, p. 20). A multimodal analysis can also ask for the *represented participant(s)*, *process(es)*, *circumstances* and *attributes* of the participants (Halliday, 1994; Royce, 2002, pp. 193–194). Moreover, the relations of the different modes can be part of the guided classroom discussions: Do image and text express the same meaning (*intersemiotic synonymy*), opposed meanings (*antonymy*), is one a subclass (*hyponymy*) or part (*meronymy*) of the other, is there an obvious *collocation*? (Royce, 2002, p. 194).

From a social semiotic perspective, a political cartoon offers a "window" into "broader discourses, histories and social factors" within a specific cultural context (Jewitt, 2011, p. 30). This encompasses a focus on the kind of motivation that prompts the cartoon artist to foreground a certain interpretation of events through his or her composition of the multimodal artefact (Jewitt, 2011). These typical perspectives and methods of social semiotics and the embedded systemic functional linguistic approach form the core of the critical reading activities in the classroom.

5. Analyzing cartoons on the refugee crisis

The lessons start with the assumption that the students do not have any prior theoretical knowledge of multimodality. An inductive approach is used, i.e., a multimodal artefact – in this case a political cartoon on the refugee crisis – is presented, and the students have to do a close reading of it under the guidance of the teacher. The main goals of the classroom activities that are described on the following pages are:

- to raise students' awareness of the fact that not only verbal modes, but also non- and paraverbal modes can be used for meaning-making (Activity 1),
- to grasp the particularities of images as frequently employed nonverbal modes in contrast to language (Activity 2),
- to make the students discover which meanings particular modes contribute to the meaning of the whole ensemble and to understand that the arrangement of the different modes also influences the meaning construction (Activity 3), and
- to familiarize students with frequently used rhetorical stylistic devices like metaphor and their construction by different modes. In addition, students' critical reading skills can be promoted by sensitizing them to the subjective nature of the representation of events in the cartoons and to alternative ways of presenting them (Activity 4).

In what follows, a teaching proposal will be detailed. The activities can serve as a template for lessons on multimodality using political cartoons. They will be marked as Activity 1 to 4 in order to link them to the goals detailed above.

5.1. Exemplary detailed analysis of the cartoon 'Shark Zone'

The lesson starts with the presentation of the cartoon 'Shark Zone' by Nath (2015), as reproduced in Fig. 1.

Activity 1: The first question the teacher asks is how to make sense of the cartoon, i.e., which elements can be identified that add some meaning component? The students will, for example, mention the images of the sharks, the texts, the warning signs and the EU-flag. The teacher will then explain that all these elements can be classified as 'modes', i.e., "means (…) for making meaning" (Bezemer & Kress, 2016, p.7). Moreover, the terms verbal, non- and paraverbal modes will be introduced by the teacher. To make sure that the students understand the concepts, they will be asked to work in pairs and identify all verbal, non- and paraverbal modes in the cartoon. The results will be discussed and thus, the texts in the cartoon will be identified as written verbal mode, the typography as paraverbal mode and all else as nonverbal modes.

Activity 2: The teacher will ask what distinguishes language as a verbal mode from images as a ubiquitous nonverbal mode. The students are expected to mention that language is a rather explicit and direct form of communication, i.e., it is usually clear what is meant. Images, however, are a more implicit, indirect means of communication, they often leave more room for interpretation. Depending on what the students come up with, the teacher can also introduce the following cognitive particularities of images in contrast to language (without having to mention the technical terms). According to Stöckl (2011, pp. 48–49), images:

- can be perceived simultaneously as a whole,
- can potentially be processed quickly, i.e., understood fast,



Fig. 1. Shark Zone (Nath, 2015).

- can be stored and recalled easily from memory, i.e., they have a strong effect on cognition,
- are directly linked to emotion and appeal mostly to emotions,
- are semantically dense and contain a number of possible meanings, and
- are vague and underdetermined semantically: They constitute an analog form of communication in contrast to language, which is a digital form of communication.

Activity 3: The next question is what first catches the eye when looking at the cartoon and why. Students should come up with the answer that the images of sharks are most prominent in the cartoon as they are foregrounded and the biggest part of the ensemble. Moreover, the warning signs in the foreground of the cartoon are very noticeable. Their yellow background color attracts attention, as well as the bold print and the uppercase letters in which the warning is written. The speech bubble might also be mentioned and the fact that all elements that first catch the eye are placed rather in the center of the cartoon.

Students will then be asked to reflect on the message of the cartoon as if it simply consisted of the foregrounded part (the warning signs and the images of sharks). They are expected to discover that the meaning would then be literal: 'Beware of the water as there are sharks in it' and that the background of the cartoon contextualizes the information in the foreground and adds further details of meaning.

Students are instructed to work in pairs and perform a detailed analysis of the whole cartoon. They are instructed to also pay particular attention to how the meanings are linked and relate to one another. The students' analyses should yield the following results: The background of the cartoon provides the context, which is the European Union (EU). It can be identified by the written mode and the nonverbal symbolic mode in the shape of the EU flag; based on convention, the yellow stars arranged in a circle against a blue background will be identified as a symbol of the EU. The EU territory is set behind a wall. A wall represents a barrier. If an outsider wants to get inside the EU, they have to overcome the wall and even more barriers or obstacles: the sea, the sharks, the fence (that carries the shark signs), the elevated coastline and the uphill slope. The written mode ('That should keep the migrants at bay') establishes cohesion with other modes by the deictic or indexical 'that'. What exactly 'that' refers to in the cartoon is left open to interpretation: 'That' could refer to the fence and the warning signs of sharks which are most prominent. It could also refer to all barriers depicted in the cartoon. This is a good example which can be used to demonstrate that even the verbal mode, which often is characterized as a digital, i.e., very explicit and clear, form of communication, leaves room for interpretation. Furthermore, it remains unspecified in the cartoon whether there really are sharks in the water or if this is just a trick to prevent people from crossing the water. In any case, the written verbal mode is specific enough in its meaning to add the information that the barrier or barriers are to keep migrants from entering the EU. An opposition – 'them' (the migrants) versus 'us' (the EU) – is thereby constructed. The phrase 'keep at bay' can be interpreted literally and metaphorically. On the one hand, it takes up the literal context which is depicted in the cartoon, so it also contributes to the cohesion of the modes – a bay is actually depicted in the cartoon. On the other hand, the phrase is conventionally used idiomatically or metaphorically, meaning 'to keep somebody or something away or under control'. Overall, the written mode thus fulfills the function of a cohesive device in the cartoon, and it contextualizes and specifies the meaning of the multimodal artefact. The text is 'spoken' by one of the two people standing behind the wall. The men are set within the territory that has been identified as the EU. Consequently, they can be identified as Europeans or EU officials, as the glasses and the hat they are wearing suggest they might be bureaucrats. Both men are smiling. This nonverbal mode (body language, in this case facial expression) sends the message that the men are pleased with the barriers guarding their space or territory, the EU, against migrants.

If the students do not come up with all these aspects, the teacher will try to elicit missing parts through guiding questions and supportive comments which will direct the students' attention to the respective phenomena. The teacher might have to ask for example: "Take a closer look at the two people behind the wall. What does their facial expression communicate? Who do you think they are?".

Activity 4: At this point of the close reading of the cartoon, the students' attention will be directed to the dominant (nonverbal) element of the cartoon again, i.e. the sharks. The teacher will ask for the meaning of the sharks in the cartoon (this can be a revision of what has already been said). Then the teacher sensitizes the students with regard to the subjectivity of the message sent in the cartoon by asking: Why did the cartoonist choose sharks specifically, what message do they – as the dominant element of the cartoon – send? Students would be expected to detail that the meaning connotation of a shark is potential 'danger (to human life)'. Using such a 'barrier' implies that the EU wants to protect itself and feels threatened by migrants. The sharks are to scare off migrants. At the same time, the message is that migrants risk their lives if they try to enter EU territory. This is true as migrants have lost their lives on their journeys across the Mediterranean Sea. The sharks function as an intertextual device in this respect; they establish coherence to background knowledge of the refugee crisis. Further possible interpretations are that the sharks, which might in addition be associated with 'loan sharks', refer to ruthless, dangerous persons. This connotation of 'ruthless people' could refer to people smugglers who only care about their profits and put refugees' lives at risk. It could also be an accusation towards the EU or EU officials, that they endanger migrants' lives by not providing a safe route to Europe and an immigration process that does not involve potentially deadly risks. The teacher will explain that in each of these cases, the sharks represent a metaphor theme: One thinks of one thing, the "Topic" or "Target" (here: the people smugglers or the EU) as if it were another thing, the "Vehicle" or "Source" (here: sharks). Both are linked by similarities or analogical thinking, i.e., certain "Grounds". This linking process is called "Mapping" (Goatly, 2007, p. 11). Thus, the topic (the people smugglers or the EU) and the vehicle (sharks) are mapped here on the grounds that they are both (seen as) ruthless and endangering peoples' lives.

The teacher will then stimulate students' imagination and ask how the meaning of the cartoon would have been different if there had not been sharks in it. Possible answers would be that the dangers for immigrants would not have been conveyed so intensely and the reproach of ruthlessness targeting EU-officials would not be included. Further activities to activate students' creativity and raise their sensitivity as regards alternatives to the particular meaning the cartoon conveys are to ask them to reflect on the meaning of the cartoon if one or two modes are changed. Moreover, a group activity could be to let the students draw a cartoon themselves which negotiates the topic of the refugee crisis or any other topic that the students choose. This should further increase their awareness of the meaning potentials of different modes and how they can be arranged to send a certain message.

5.2. Suggestions for follow-up activities

Other cartoons on the refugee crisis can be used in the English language classroom following the template developed in the preceding section. Variations and useful follow-up activities to train students' competence in multimodal analysis and critical reading will be suggested and sketched in the following sections. I will also explicitly refer to some cartoons that could be integrated into classroom activities for these purposes. [2]

5.2.1. Barriers

'Barriers' turned out to be a prominent topic in the narrative of the cartoon 'Shark Zone' and have already been discussed extensively (see 5.1). This theme features in many of the other cartoons on the refugee crisis in various forms, for example as fences (Constantin, 2015), turnpikes (Bertrams, 2015a), barbed wire (Bertrams, 2015b) or (guarded) shorelines (Komarnitski, 2015a). This prompts the questions of why the cartoonists choose to depict them and what their functions can be. These issues can also be addressed in the classroom discussion. Students would be expected to discover that the depicted barriers link the cartoon to the real world, as refugees often have to overcome material barriers on their way to Europe which consist of, above all, fences, barbed wire at country borders and the sea. The depiction of borders captures how difficult and dangerous it is for migrants to enter the EU. Barriers constitute either obstacles or protection, depending on the perspective. They mark an outer and an inner area, the latter being a place into which others or outsiders are not supposed to enter – literally and metaphorically.

5.2.2. The German chancellor Angela Merkel

The German chancellor Angela Merkel is a central figure in the context of the refugee crisis. This is mirrored in the cartoons as she repeatedly appears in them. In order to gain better insight into cartoonists' interpretations of political events and societal discourses in the context of the refugee crisis, it is therefore worthwhile to present students with a collection of cartoons depicting Angela Merkel (the EU's leading politician at the time the cartoons were created) and to discuss the messages they send about her stance and actions regarding the refugee crisis.

While also relating to the previous theme of 'barriers', a particular reference to the German chancellor is included in a cartoon by Kamensky (2015a), as reproduced in Fig. 2.

[2] All the cartoons that are mentioned can be found on the platform http://www.politicalcartoons.com.



Fig. 2. Refugee politic [sic] of Angela Merkel (Kamensky, 2015a).



Fig. 3. Lady Merkel (Komarnitski, 2015b).

The meaning of the depicted hands would be a particularly interesting topic for classroom discussion. To the teacher's question, what do the hands mean?, students who are familiar with the German chancellor Angela Merkel should be able to identify the form as a typical hand gesture of hers. The teacher could then introduce the concept of metonymy at this point. The hands are a metonymy, a *pars pro toto* (i.e., the part stands for the whole). In this case, a relation of contiguity exists between the form – the hands in this particular pose – and the meaning. A double metonymy can be identified in this case, as Merkel represents the German government. The cartoon highlights her decisive role in the refugee crisis. According to this narrative, it is Merkel (or the German government) alone who decides whether refugees may enter or not. It is not clear whether the 'guarded' area is the EU or Germany. However, a (small) space is left open between her hands so that refugees can pass through.[3]

[3] Other cartoons that could be used in the classroom to explore further which role Merkel is assigned in the refugee crisis are for example the following ones which are all variations of the "mother" theme: Bertrams (2015d) (Merkel is portrayed as a sullen looking Holy Mother next to a manger full of happy and hopeful looking babies of all colors), Kamensky (2015c) (the chancellor is depicted in a burka as "Allah-Mother Angela Merkel" in stormy weather) and Kamensky (2015d) ("Refugee Mother Merkel" is feeding more and more birds in a series of four pictures and finally runs away).



Fig. 4. Next please (Hajjaj, 2015a).

Another cartoonist presents Merkel as the Statue of Liberty (Komarnitski, 2015b) (Fig. 3). Students would particularly be asked why this representation of the German chancellor was chosen. They should come up with the answer that she is portrayed here as incorporating the values enshrined by the Statue of Liberty; Merkel and the Statue melt into one. The teacher would add that more than a metonymic relationship is established between Merkel and the Statue of Liberty; a blending strategy is employed which intensifies the message.

During the close reading activities – performed in analogy to the ones detailed in 5.1 – the classroom analysis of the cartoon should further result in the following findings: The German chancellor is portrayed as the leading figure of Europe (she is standing 'on top' of a pedestal displaying the symbol of the EU) and as the only one who still protects or lives the values of the 'free world', or at least the one who most clearly represents them (through her actions). This is also expressed explicitly through the written verbal mode, i.e., the text in the speech bubble, which is the same text that appears on the Statue of Liberty (from the sonnet "The New Colossus", which Emma Lazarus wrote in 1883).

In contrast, the Balkan states are depicted much smaller in the lower part of the cartoon and are specifically criticized for rigorously guarding their borders with the help of military force. The guard speaks military jargon – "Halt!" is used in English military contexts but is also the common German word for 'Stop!'. His message is reinforced by the paraverbal mode – the exclamation mark. Via the verbal mode, cohesion is thus established to the German chancellor and her policy. "Halt!" can therefore be interpreted as not only referring directly to refugees who want to enter the Balkan states, but also as a message to Merkel that she should stop her policy of open borders.

This cartoon in addition shows how well suited the depiction of people is to convey emotions. Here, the facial expression of the 'Merkel statue' communicates sadness, while the border guard's facial expression conveys fear in the face of the "MASSES" that have explicitly been 'invited' by Merkel. The cartoon could at the same time be read as depicting the EU being personified as Merkel, which highlights her role as a leader of the EU. Personifications of the EU feature prominently in the corpus. The next section will therefore explore them in more detail.

5.2.3. Personifications of the EU

The discussion of Hajjaj's (2015a) cartoon shown in Fig. 4 in the classroom could include the following questions: "Which adjectives would you use to characterize the lady depicted in the cartoon?", "What does she stand for?", "Do you know what rhetorical means is employed here?", "Who do the hands sticking out of the water represent?", "What do you call this rhetorical device?" and "Why do you think the cartoonist chose this particular depiction? What does it communicate?". The classroom discussion should lead to the following insights: The personification of the EU in the cartoon portrays it as a literally well-fed and metaphorically rich woman who is self-confident, haughty, righteous and bureaucratic even in the face of literally and metaphorically drowning people, i.e., refugees who fight for their lives (when crossing the sea in damaged boats).

Moreover, metonymy in the form of *pars pro toto* is employed in the cartoon: The hands reaching out of the water stand for the refugees. They can be identified as refugees by establishing coherence with real-world events through knowledge of current political events. The metonymy of hands reaching out of water standing for refugees is employed repeatedly in the cartoons from the corpus (e.g. Hajjaj, 2015b; Kamensky, 2015b; Schot, 2015).[4] This example is well suited to demonstrate how personifications function as multimodal means in order to convey emotions and attitudes by employing certain postures, body language, facial expressions and gestures.

[4] Other personifications of the EU show it as a well-fed (rich) and haughty lady (e.g. Bertrams, 2015b), as a Pinocchio – the embodiment of a liar (Bertrams, 2015a), as an old sick man (Hajjaj, 2015c), or as a relaxed and careless woman (bent over a pinball machine with a cigarette in her mouth) who plays with refugees (Bertrams, 2015c). Only one positive personification of the EU could be found in the corpus: De Reijger (2015) depicts her as the comic book hero Superman, carrying a boat full of refugees.

6. Concluding remarks

I hope to have shown that political cartoons are rich in multimodal resources and therefore a useful tool for developing students' multimodal literacy. Moreover, they can be employed to improve students' understanding of how different modes interact and how prominent rhetorical stylistic means such as metaphor, metonymy and personification are constructed in the different modes. The activities outlined in section 5 can serve as a template for the use of political cartoons as critical reading learning tools in English lessons in secondary and higher education. Multimodality is ubiquitous, and therefore multimodal literacy is an important skill that should be developed in schools and universities. This article is also intended as a plea for "New Literacy Studies", i.e., it wants to "encourage a shift from educators' traditional perceptions of literacy as an autonomous set of skills to be mastered to a view of literacies as a range of social practices" and "broaden the definition of texts" (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2008, p. 42–43) in educational settings.

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