Creating Student Centred Language Learning Environments through the Innovative Multimodal Pedagogic Use of Eurovision Music

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Abstract

This paper presents and critically discusses the innovative educational research project called 'Teaching through the Eurovision: a multimodal research project' launched in 2014 in Maltese schools and later (i.e. ongoing) involving other schools around Europe (Newspoint, 2016). Adopting an innovative multimodal approach (based on Norris, 2004; Kress, 2010 and Cremona, 2015), the project proposes Eurovision Song Contest [ESC] related material as a tool facilitating student centred language learning contexts. This ESC related material includes songs, music videos, interviews, images and other online material.

The first section of the paper sets the background by discussing the Eurovision Song Contest and its popularity around Europe and in Malta. Section 2 identifies the multimodal principles adopted by the project and the way each Eurovision related text is multimodally and critically interpreted before being used/imported in class. The third section then presents insights from a Maltese case study illustrating how Eurovision related music and material were used to teach literacy skills to 11 and 12 year old students. In conclusion, the paper suggests that the insights included in this paper should be seen as just a first step. This paper should serve as an initial discussion about the pros and cons which teachers and students involved in the project identify as outcomes of the study. In this way, through this kaleidoscope of critical multimodal reflections, the project is constantly evaluated hoping for the further creation of effective and student centred pedagogical situations.

Keywords: Eurovision Song Contest, Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, Multimodality.

1. The Eurovision Song Contest: Setting the Background

The Eurovision Song Contest [ESC] is a music competition held annually in May. Since the first edition, the ESC has been among the longest-present annual broadcasts to date (D'Anastasi, 2015). The contest was originally created by the European Broadcasting Union [EBU] back in 1956 shortly after two catastrophic and devastating World Wars (BBC, 2010), with the main intention to urge peaceful cultural exchanges and to reunite Europe (Spence, 2012).

Today, the contest boasts 62 editions, where over 40 countries from Europe have the opportunity to compete together, all hoping to win the annual musical event which, given the scale of the production and annual viewing figures, is considered to be one of the major television spectacles in Europe (Jordan, 2011). The last editions of the ESC were viewed by over 204 million viewers (Eurovision.tv, 2016) in countries around Europe, Australia and China. The abovementioned millions watch the annual entertaining event where nations put themselves on show (Fricker and Gluhovic, 2013) and vote for other countries through expert jury members and public tele-voting (Garcia and Tanase, 2008). Thus, what started as a music festival, evolved to a media event with songs being performed and judged for the show rather than for musical quality and artistic ability (Torres, 2011).

Malta – an island in the Mediterranean Sea located 60 miles south of Sicily – started participating in the ESC in 1971 (Eurovision,tv, online). Notwithstanding the 30 participations in the contest, the island has never managed to win it (Cremona, 2016). Despite never winning the contest and only managing to place second twice (in 2002 and 2005), and third twice (in 1992 and 1998), the Maltese people view the ESC as a national event (Rix, 2013). Year after year, a high 92% of the 400,000 inhabitants watch the ESC in May (Xarabank, 2015) while an even higher 95% in February watch the national festival [i.e. the Malta Eurovision Song Contest] through which the Maltese next ESC participant is selected (PBS, 2017).

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2. Launching a multimodal educational project

Therefore, keeping these indicative and significantly high statistics and figures in mind, critically using this highly popular phenomenon [i.e. the Eurovision Song Contest] as a pedagogic tool (Quinn and Eckerson, 2010) within the formal classroom (Rugutt and Chemosit, 2009) – in my view – could easily help students learn better and increase their motivation in class (Young, 2014). Since education is "integrated into contexts in which the language is meaningful and useful, such as in everyday or playful situations" (European Commission, 2011:14) using such a popular music context in class could facilitate learning and increase student centred learning situations.

- Based on this reasoning, in 2014 I launched the on-going *Learning through the Eurovision* research project (Newspoint, 2016) as part of my academic work at University related to multimodality and to my teaching experiences in the field of modern foreign languages. Since its launch, the project has already included lessons and sessions in Malta, Sweden, Ukraine, Spain, Italy and Germany. During the project I mainly work with teachers in primary and secondary schools. Together with the teachers who freely show interest to participate in the project – we select a syllabus topic from those set as curricular topics of the particular scholastic grade. Then, together (i.e. the teachers and I) we design a set of lesson plans through which the selected topic(s) may be taught.

While designing the set of lesson plans, a number of ESC related resources (i.e. including songs, music videos, interviews with singers, photos, stage design etc) are critically evaluated and later adapted, edited or changed completely to fit the purpose of the particular lessons and the particular learning context. The design and/or evaluation of these resources are based on an original MIRROR multimodal theoretical framework (Cremona, 2015) which involves the following steps:

Monitoring available ESC related texts and choosing the actual texts to use in class;

Initial descriptive interpretation (per individual text i.e. song or other ESC related material);

Representational multimodal semiotic interpretation (per individual text, i.e. this includes among others analyzing the lyrics, the music, the clothes used during the performance, the layout of the stage, the colours used etc);

Represented social interpretation (per individual text);

Overview of the themes observed: later comparing individual trends with common trends derived from texts as a whole (where possible)

Reorganising and presenting the text according to the needs of the students in the particular learning context.

Therefore, in summary, the theoretical multimodal MIRROR framework adopted by the *Learning through the Eurovision* project views each ESC related resource as a collection of modes, which are culturally shaped semiotic resources having specific potentials through which they can produce certain communicative effects and not others (Stein, 2008; Kress, 2010). While designing the resources of the lesson plans, together with the participating teachers we aim to:

- initially highlight and identify the modes available in the selected ESC related text(s);
- after this, we move on to critically interpret which of the available modes can help to produce the most effective resources through which a more student centred learning environment may be created or facilitated. This involves distinguishing between *embodied* modes and *disembodied* modes basing on the distinction proposed by Norris (2004). Embodied modes classify language with other modes like gesture, gaze, or posture which "*can* play a *superordinate* or an *equal* role to the mode of language in interaction, and therefore, these modes are not merely embellishments to language" (Norris, 2004, p. x). On the other hand, *disembodied modes* "include among others music, print, layout, colour, clothes and any other mode deriving from the setting or material world where the interaction is happening. These too can take a superordinate role in interaction and at times even "overrule" embodied modes" (Norris, 2004, p. x).

3. A Maltese Case Study

After the explanation of the Multimodal theoretical framework adopted throughout the project, in this section I will now give an example of two sessions conducted in a Maltese school as part of the project. In my write-up, the modes used in each step of the lesson will be presented *using an italicized **bold** font*. This should facilitate the indication of how multimodality served to create and/or lead to more student centred multimodal resources.

The aim of the two 45-minute lessons was to create a student centred learning environment where a class of 30 eleven to twelve-year-old students initially identify, then explore and later themselves write a dialogue.

The first lesson started by a guess the tune game (***music** as a mode*) where students heard two very popular Eurovision instrumental tunes (*i.e. **lyrics** as a mode were left out with the intention to involve the students even more in the guessing*) and played in reverse (*i.e. **sequence** as a mode was changed).* The two songs were tunes, which in the past represented Malta in the ESC. Once the students guessed the tunes, they were next asked to identify the two singers who represented Malta with the particular songs (*i.e. **participants**: individuals featuring in a multimodal text*). Students could easily identify Ira Losco who sang for Malta in 2002 and 2016 and Gianluca Bezzina who represented Malta in 2013.

After this introduction, the students were given a handout (*i.e.* which included ***written graphics**, **visuals** including **photos** of the two **animate participants** and **colour***) consisting of an imaginary dialogue between Ira and Gianluca. In the dialogue, the singers talked about their past experiences in the ESC. This, gradually led students to start familarising themselves with the dialogue genre. Various students from the classroom were asked to read the dialogue in class taking the roles of the two singers (i.e. thus the reading *of the **written graphics** was complemented with other modes such as **body language, movement, proxemics, gaze** and **gestures**).*

After this, students were asked to identify the salient characteristics of the dialogue genre. This student-based discussion was then followed by the filling in of a note highlighting these characteristics. Students were then asked to form groups of three. Each group then received an envelope with another imaginary dialogue. In the envelopes students could find bits of shredded paper with the different dialogue sentences (i.e. jumbled ***written graphics** and not in the correct **order** thus adopting the **mixed sequence** and **layout** mode*). The dialogue this time consisted of a discussion between Ira Losco and her partner. This activity was based on the concept of ***context** as a mode* since Ira was all over the Maltese news shortly before the lesson was conducted, since she gave birth to her first son Harry. Students were asked to reorder the different bits and pieces in the envelope and this was the first time they built up their 'own' dialogue.

In the second 45-minute session students were then given the opportunity to refer back to the content covered in the first lesson and were given time to draft, edit, compose and read their own dialogues. With them in class, the students had 13-year-old singer Gaia Cauchi as guest. Gaia is the Maltese personality who brought the first Maltese victory ever of the Junior Eurovision Song Contest (i.e. the children version of the ESC). Seen multimodally, Gaia was the ***multimodal animate participant*** serving as a text through which students could write more creative dialogues based on the first-hand information obtained from the singer.

4. Conclusion: A first step to be followed by the next steps

Since the project is innovative in nature, this paper should serve as a first attempt through which I gave an outline of the way multimodality is being used to create student centred language learning contexts. This first attempt however should be followed up by further analytical steps. In fact, in the near future (Cremona, in print) I will be discussing pros and cons encountered by participating teachers and students in particular situations where the project was launched. This requires an in-depth discussion which is not possible to include in this paper due to word limit constrains.

However, the insights discussed above should already – when viewed critically – serve as a very clear indication of the way the multimodal use of Eurovision Music can gradually help students and their teachers not only reach the curricular aims of the lesson but also start moving from a stage where the teacher guides them as a facilitator (in lesson 1) to a stage where (in lesson 2) the students themselves end up the main protagonists leading the language lesson.

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