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Semiotic Perspective on Interaction and Learner Creativity**



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Narrative Iconic Signs in EFL Classrooms: A Multimodal Social Semiotic Perspective on Interaction and Learner Creativity

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the role of narrative iconic signs in supporting teacher-learner interaction and learner creativity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. It identifies the visual resources used by EFL teachers, determines the extent to which narrative iconic signs are integrated into classroom practice, and examines their contribution to learners' written production.

Methodology: A descriptive mixed-methods was used with 15 EFL teachers and 636 learners from selected secondary schools in Goma. Data were collected through teacher and learner questionnaires, nonparticipant classroom observations, and learner-produced texts. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were examined through thematic and textual analysis, focusing on cohesion, coherence, vocabulary use, sequencing, descriptive language, and creativity.

Findings: Teachers predominantly used static visuals: pictures (86.67%), photographs (80.00 %), drawings (73.33%), diagrams (66.67%), and maps (53.33%). Narrative resources were less common, with pictures sequences reported by 26.67% and narrative picture stories by 20.00% of teachers. Learners expressed positive perceptions of visual resources; 73.90% agreed or strongly agreed that visuals supported comprehension, improved English lessons, and facilitated vocabulary retention. Learner-produced texts showed evidence of idea generation, event sequencing, descriptive expression, and creative interpretation, although grammatical accuracy, cohesion, and lexical choice remained problematic. Teachers identified time constraints, limited training, inadequate materials, and curriculum limitations as barriers.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: Narrative iconic signs are underused but potentially valuable multimodal resources for interactive and creative EFL teaching. Their use should be combined with explicit instruction in vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, coherence, and writing development.

Keywords: *Narrative Iconic Signs, Multimodality, Social Semiotics, EFL Classrooms, Teacher–Learner Interaction, Creativity, Visual Narratives*

1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom communication is increasingly understood as multimodal: meaning is constructed through linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and other semiotic resources (Halliday, 1978; Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014). In EFL education, learners therefore encounter and construct meaning through verbal and non-verbal resources. Visual materials have traditionally been used to illustrate vocabulary and support comprehension (Wright, 1989; Hill, 1990), but multimodal approaches view them as active meaning-making resources (Jewitt, 2014; Kress, 2010). The New London Group (1996) similarly advocates a broader conception of literacy responsive to diverse modes of representation.

Narrative iconic signs are especially relevant because they combine visual resemblance with narrative organization. In Peirce's semiotic framework, an icon relates to its object through resemblance (Peirce, 1931-1958). When pictures, drawings, photographs, or other iconic representations are organized around actions and events, they can form sequences that allow learners to infer relationships, predict events, discuss interpretations, and construct stories. Examples include picture sequences, storyboards, illustrated stories, and narrative picture series (Bal, 2017; Todorov, 1977; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021).

Such resources can provide a bridge from visual interpretation to spoken or written language. They offer learners characters, actions, settings, and possible event relationships while leaving room for different interpretations. This can facilitate idea generation, sequencing, description, storytelling, and creative writing (Maley and Duff, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978, Wright, 1989). They can also make the visual sequence a shared object of interpretation, encouraging questioning, explanation, negotiation of meaning, and collaborative interaction (Long, 1996; Mercer, 2000; Walsh, 2011).

However, the presence of visuals does not automatically produce multimodal learning. Their pedagogical value depends on how teachers integrate them into classroom activities. The present study therefore focuses specifically on the distinction between frequently used static visuals and less frequently used narrative iconic signs and examines their relationship with interaction and learner writing.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of narrative iconic signs in EFL classrooms from a multimodal social semiotic perspective, with particular attention to teacher-learner interaction, learner engagement, and creative written production.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What types of iconic signs are used by EFL teachers, and to what extent are narrative iconic signs integrated into classroom practices?
2. How do narrative iconic signs support teacher-learner interaction and learner engagement?

3. How do narrative iconic signs support learners' written production in terms of coherence, vocabulary use, sequencing, and creativity, and what challenges do teachers face in using them?

2. Literature Review

2.1 From Signs to Narrative Meaning-Making

Semiotic approaches provide the conceptual foundation for the study. Saussure (1916/2011) conceptualized the linguistic sign through the relationship between signifier and signified, whereas Peirce (1931-1958) developed a triadic account of the sign and distinguished icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon is characterized by resemblance to its object. Eco (1976) and Barthes (1964) further emphasize that meaning is produced through interpretation and context. In classroom communication, meaning is consequently not restricted to language; learners interpret images, gestures, spatial relations, and other resources together (Halliday, 1978; Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014).

Building on this semiotic perspective, the present study focuses specifically on how visual signs, particularly iconic signs, function in teaching and learning. The concern is therefore not with maintaining a strict terminological distinction between semiology and semiotics, but with understanding how visual signs contribute to meaning-making in classroom contexts. From this perspective, a single picture may represent an object, person, or action, while a sequence of related images can establish relationships among events, helping learners interpret situations and construct meaning. Such visual resources can consequently provide learners with opportunities to move from visual interpretation to oral and written language production.

2.2 Narrative Iconic Signs and Multimodality

A narrative iconic sign is understood here as a visual sign or group of related visual signs in which recognizable representations are organized around actions or events. A single picture may help learners identify a person or activity; a sequence can additionally show what happens before, during, and after an event. Learners must therefore infer relationships between images and construct an interpretation (Todorov, 1977; Bal, 2017). Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) show that visual representations can communicate participants, actions, direction, gaze, and spacial relations. Narrative visuals thus constitute meaning-making resources rather than mere illustrations.

From a multimodal social perspective, modes offer different resources for meaning-making (Kress, 2010; Jewitt, 2014). Narrative images can provide an entry point into communication for learners who have difficulty formulating ideas from verbal prompts alone. The teacher can ask learners to describe, interpret, predict, justify, compare, and retell, thereby moving from observation to interpretation, interaction, and linguistic production (Long, 1996; Mercer, 2000; Walsh, 2011).

2.3 Narrative Iconic Signs, Creativity, and Writing

Narrative sequences provide structure without prescribing a single linguistic response. Learners can create dialogue, predict endings, or interpret emotions differently (Maley and Duff, 2005). This openness makes narrative iconic signs useful for creative language activities. In writing, they can provide a conceptual scaffold for generating ideas and organizing characters, settings, actions, and events before learners transform those elements into linguistic discourse (Swain, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978; Wright, 1989).

The analysis of learner texts is therefore useful for examining the movements from visual vocabulary, sequencing, descriptive language, and creativity, while recognizing that visual support does not remove the need for explicit language instruction (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Halliday and Hasan, 1976)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

The study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods design. Quantitative data came from teacher and learner questionnaires and were analysed using frequencies and percentages. Qualitative evidence came from observations and learner-produced texts. Participants were 15 EFL teachers and 636 learners from selected secondary schools in Goma.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Three instruments were used: teacher and learner questionnaires, non-participant classroom observations, and learner-produced texts. The questionnaires examined the types, frequency, purposes, and perceived value of iconic signs. Observations focused on how visuals were incorporated into classroom activities and interaction. Learner texts were examined for coherence, cohesion, vocabulary, sequencing, descriptive language, and creativity. Questionnaire data were summarized with frequencies and percentages; observation data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and learner texts were examined qualitatively using textual criteria (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

Table 1. Learners' perceptions of the contribution of visual/iconic signs to learning(N=636)

Statement	Agree/strongly agree(%)	Neutral n(%)	Disagree/strongly disagree n (%)	Total
Visuals support text comprehension	470(73.90%)	80 (12.58 %)	86(13.52%)	636(100%)
Visuals improve English lessons	470(73.90%)	80(12.58 %)	86(13.52 %)	636(100%)
Visuals facilitate vocabulary retention	470(73.90 %)	80(12.58 %)	86(13.52 %)	636(100 %)

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

Table 1 shows that learners generally had positive perceptions of the contribution of visual/iconic signs to English language learning. For each of the three statements, 470 learners (73.90 %) agreed or strongly agreed that visuals supported text comprehension, improved English lessons, and facilitated vocabulary retention. Only 80 learners (12.58%) expressed neutral views, while 86 learners (13.52 %) disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results indicate that visual resources were widely perceived as useful for understanding and retaining-language content. (Wright, 1989; Mayer; 2009; Paivio, 1986).

Table 2. Learners' perceptions of the contribution of visuals to language production (N=636)

Statement	Agree/strongly agree(%)	Neutral n(%)	Disagree/strongly disagree n (%)	Total
Visuals support text comprehension	450(70.75%)	96 (15.09 %)	90(14.15%)	636(100%)
Visuals improve English lessons	438(68.87%)	105(16.51 %)	93(14.62 %)	636(100%)
Vocabulary facilitate vocabulary retention	480(75.47 %)	85(13.36 %)	71(13.52 %)	636(100 %)

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

As shown in table 2, learners generally perceived visual resources as supportive of language production and learning. Vocabulary retention received the strongest positive response, with 480 learners (75.47 %) agreeing or strongly agreeing that visuals facilitated vocabulary retention. In addition, 450 learners (70.75%) reported that visuals supported text comprehension, while 438(68.87 %) indicated that visuals improved English lessons. The findings suggest that visual resources can provide learners with useful support for understanding, discussing, and producing language.

4.2. Teachers' responses

Table 3. Types of iconic signs used by EFL teachers (N=15)

Statement	Agree/strongly agree(%)	Neutral n(%)
Pictures	13	86.67
Photographs	12	80.00
Drawings	11	73.33
Diagrams	10	66.67
Maps	8	53.33
Picture sequences	4	26.67
Narrative picture stories	3	20

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

Note: Multiple responses were permitted; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100 %

Table 3 indicates that teachers predominantly used static iconic signs. Pictures were the most frequently reported resource (86.67 %), followed by photographs (80.00 %) and drawings (73.33 %). Diagrams (66.67 %) and maps (53.33 %) were also relatively common. In contrast, picture sequences (26.67 %) and narrative picture stories (20.00%) were used considerably less frequently.

This finding suggests that although visual resources are present in EFL classrooms, narrative iconic signs remain underutilized.

Table 4. Frequency of use of iconic by EFL teachers (N=15)

Statement	Frequency(n)	Neutral n(%)
Always	2	13.33
Often	3	20.00
Sometimes	6	40.00
Rarely	3	20.00
Never	1	6.67
Total	15	100.00

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

Table 4 shows that the use of iconic signs was not systematic among the participating teachers. Six teachers (40.00%) reported using iconic signs sometimes, while three (20.00 %) used them often and three (20.00 %) rarely. Only two teachers (13.33%) reported always using iconic signs, whereas one teacher (6.67%) indicated that they never used them. Overall, the findings suggest that visual resources were incorporated into teaching practices, but their use varied considerably across teachers.

Table 5. Lessons in which iconic signs are used (N=15)

Lesson type	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	3	20.00
Speaking	5	33.33
Writing	6	40.00
Reading comprehension	7	46.67
Integrated skills	5	33.33
Total	15	100.00

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

Note: Multiple responses were most frequently used in reading comprehension lessons, reported by seven teachers (46.67 %). Writing followed with six teachers (40.00%), while speaking and integrated-skills lessons were each reported by five teachers (33.33 %). Only three teachers (20.00%) reported using iconic signs in vocabulary lessons. These results indicated that teachers tend to associate visual resources particularly with comprehension and productive language activities.

Table 6. Perceived importance of iconic signs in EFL teaching (N=15)

Perceived importance of iconic signs	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Stimulating speaking activities	3	20.00
Supporting writing tasks	4	33.33
Encouraging storytelling	3	20.00
Developing creativity	4	26.67
Promoting classroom interaction	5	33.33
Supporting reading comprehension	5	33.33

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

Note: Multiple responses were permitted; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%)

From the above table, reading comprehension and classroom interaction were the most frequently identified roles of iconic signs, each reported by 5 teachers (33.33 %). Writing tasks and creativity followed at 26.67 % each, while speaking activities and storytelling were reported by 20.00 % each. This suggests that teachers mainly perceive iconic signs as useful for comprehension and interaction, with additional value for productive and creative language activities.

Table 7. Teachers' perceptions of the effect of narrative iconic signs on classroom interaction (N=15)

Teachers' perception	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	3	20.00
Agree	4	26.67
Neutral	5	33.33
Disagree	3	20.00
Strongly disagree	0	0.00
Total	15	100.00

Source: Fieldwork, 2023-2024

Table 7 indicates that seven teachers (46.67 %) either strongly agreed or agreed that narrative iconic signs increased classroom interaction. Five teachers (33.33%) were neutral, while three (20.00 %) disagreed. None of the teachers strongly disagreed. The findings therefore suggest a generally positive perception of the interactional potential of narrative iconic signs, although the relatively high proportion of neutral responses indicates that their benefits may not yet be consistently experienced in all classrooms.

Table 8. Factors limiting the integration of iconic signs (N=15)

Identified challenge	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of teacher training	4	26.67
Time constraints	5	33.33
Lack of English–language textbooks/materials	5	33.33
Curriculum limitations	4	26.67
Large class size	0	0.00

Source: fieldwork, 2023-2024.

Note: Multiple responses were permitted; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100 %

Table 8 shows that the major challenges affecting the integration of iconic signs were time constraints and lack of English textbooks or inadequate teaching materials, each reported by five teachers (33.33%). Four teachers (26.67%) identified lack of teacher training and curriculum limitations as additional challenges. None of the respondents identifies large class size as a barrier. These findings suggest that the limited use of narrative iconic signs may be associated more strongly with teachers' preparation, available instructional time, and access to appropriate materials than with class size.

4.3. Presentation and analysis of learner texts

The texts produced by learners from narrative iconic signs demonstrated several notable improvements in language production and narrative development, vocabulary use, sequencing, creativity, and descriptive language. The visual prompts provided scaffolding that helped learners transform images into meaningful written discourse and organize ideas into sequences of events.

Sample Texts based on learners' interpretation of iconic signs

Group 1: *The text tells about a football specialty African nation illustrated through images. The first image shows a player who plays with a ball, but another one is a goal keeper. on the players' faces, we can read different feelings: nervousness, fear but concentration. The players seem to remember the hardest time they passed though of the training and try to stay calm. Finally, their attitudes show the courage and determination. Through these pictures, we can imagine that the sport is not only a game but also a lesson about courage, confidence and perseverance.*

Group 2: *The pictures alongside the text are about football. The first picture shows a boy, a football player. He looks like a middle player in the football match. he has a ball under his legs. He is playing football. He is dressed with long socks, foot boots, a t-shirt outfit and knickers. The second picture, there another man whom is the garden goals, on his t-shirt he is the number 1, he has also with knickers and dresses with gloves and he puts his hand at his hip.*

The analysis of the pupils' texts, based on Beaugrande and Dressler's (1981) framework of cohesion and coherence, shows that learners were able to interpret iconic signs and construct meaning from visual inputs, although their written production showed limitations in linguistic accuracy and organization. In terms of cohesion, both texts demonstrate basic lexical cohesion through the repeated use of football-related vocabulary, such as player, ball, goalkeeper, and pictures. However, grammatical cohesion is weaker because of errors in sentence structure, grammatical forms and, lexical choice and the limited use of cohesive devices.

in terms of coherence, both texts maintain a clear focus on football. However, Group 1 demonstrates stronger inferential coherence because the learner moves beyond describing the images to interpret emotions and broader values such as courage, confidence, and perseverance. Group 2 remains mainly descriptive, focusing on the players' appearance, clothing, position, and relies more heavily on description and enumeration.

Despite these linguistic limitations, both texts provide evidence of engagement and creativity. The visual prompts enabled learners to generate and develop ideas from what they observed. These findings suggest that iconic signs can support meaning-making, idea generation, and creative expression, while explicit instruction in grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, and written organization remains necessary to improve the accuracy of learners' written production.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive picture of how iconic signs—particularly narrative iconic signs—are used and perceived in EFL classrooms, and how they influence teacher– learner interaction, learner engagement, and written production. Overall, the results reveal a clear imbalance between the pedagogical potential of multimodal resources and their actual classroom implementation. While both teachers and learners recognize the value of visual resources, their use remains largely dominated by static forms, with narrative iconic signs still occupying a marginal position in teaching practice. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the research questions, hypotheses, theoretical framework, and previous studies in multimodality and semiotic theory.

5.1. Dominance of static visuals and limited use of narrative iconic signs

The study reveals a clear dominance of static visual resources such as pictures, photographs, drawings, diagrams, and maps in EFL classrooms. These are mainly used to illustrate vocabulary, support reading comprehension, and explain language content, often promoting surface-level understanding rather than deeper meaning construction. In contrast, narrative iconic signs, including picture sequences and narrative picture stories, are rarely used, with usage rates of only 20% to 26.67%. Moreover, 40% of teachers reported using iconic signs occasionally, while only 13.33% used them consistently. This imbalance supports Hypothesis 3 and reflects a traditional approach in which visuals serve mainly as supplementary illustrations rather than central meaning-

making resources (Kress, 2010). From a multimodal social semiotic perspective, the limited use of narrative visuals restricts learners' opportunities to interpret, construct, and creatively communicate meaning. Their underuse therefore represents a missed opportunity for developing learners' interpretive, narrative, and creative competencies (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021).

5.2. Learners' positive attitudes toward visuals and multimodal learning

Despite the limited classroom integration of narrative visuals, learners demonstrate overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the use of visual resources in language learning. More than 73% of learners agree that visuals improve comprehension, enhance lesson quality, and facilitate vocabulary retention. Similarly, 73.90% confirm that visuals significantly support reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

These findings suggest that learners strongly benefit from multimodal input and are cognitively receptive to visual scaffolding. Visual resources help learners bridge the gap between abstract linguistic forms and concrete meaning by providing contextual cues, imagery, and situational references. This supports theories of dual coding and multimodal learning, which argue that information processed through both visual and verbal channels is more easily understood and retained. Moreover, learners perceive visuals as tools that make lessons more engaging, interactive, and understandable. This positive perception suggests that multimodal pedagogy aligns well with learner needs and expectations. It also indicates that learners are not passive recipients of visual input but active meaning-makers who use images to construct interpretations, infer meanings, and participate in classroom communication. The findings therefore support Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 indirectly, as they demonstrate that learners respond positively to multimodal input and benefit cognitively and affectively from visual resources. However, the full pedagogical potential of these resources is not maximized due to their limited and inconsistent use by teachers.

5.3. Visuals as tools for interaction, engagement, and classroom participation

The findings show that visuals enhance classroom interaction and learner engagement. When visual materials are used, learners participate more actively in discussions and collaborative tasks. Visuals therefore function as both cognitive aids and social catalysts for communication. Narrative iconic signs, such as sequential images, comics, and storyboards, have stronger interactive potential than static visuals. They encourage learners to interpret events, predict outcomes, and construct shared meanings. These processes promote dialogue, negotiation of meaning, and collaborative storytelling. The findings support Hypothesis 1, which predicts enhanced teacher-learner interaction and learner engagement. They also align with multimodal social semiotic theory, which views meaning-making as an interactive process. However, the limited use of narrative iconic signs restricts their potential in classroom practice. Consequently, many classroom interactions remain teacher-centered and text-focused rather than learner-driven and multimodal.

5.4. Impact of narrative iconic signs on learners' written production

One of the most important contributions of this study lies in the analysis of learners' written texts produced under different conditions: with and without narrative iconic signs. The results clearly show that narrative visual input has a positive effect on learners' writing performance. When learners write without visual support, their texts tend to be characterized by weak cohesion, repetitive structures, limited vocabulary, and list-like organization. Ideas are often presented in a fragmented manner, with minimal use of cohesive devices and limited narrative development. This suggests that learners struggle to organize ideas and construct coherent discourse when relying solely on linguistic prompts. In contrast, when learners are provided with narrative iconic signs, their written production improves significantly. They demonstrate better sequencing of events, improved coherence, richer vocabulary use, and greater descriptive detail. Narrative visuals help learners organize their ideas chronologically and logically, resulting in more structured and meaningful texts. Additionally, learners show higher levels of creativity, often expanding or transforming visual prompts into imaginative narratives. These findings strongly support Hypothesis 2, which predicted that narrative iconic signs positively influence learners' written production in terms of coherence, vocabulary use, and creativity. They also confirm that visual narratives function as scaffolding tools that support learners in transforming visual information into written discourse. However, despite these improvements, some limitations remain. Grammatical accuracy is still weak, and cohesive devices are not always used effectively. This suggests that while narrative iconic signs support idea generation and organization, they do not automatically resolve linguistic difficulties. Therefore, visual scaffolding must be complemented with explicit language instruction.

5.5. Teachers' pedagogical practices and constraints

The findings also reveal important insights into teachers' pedagogical practices and the challenges they face in integrating iconic signs into instruction. Teachers acknowledge the value of visuals, particularly for reading comprehension and classroom interaction. However, their use remains largely limited to static resources, and narrative iconic signs are rarely integrated into teaching practice. Several institutional and pedagogical constraints explain this situation. The most significant barriers include lack of textbooks (33.33%), time constraints (28.57%), lack of training (23.81%), and curriculum limitations (23.81%). These factors collectively reduce teachers' capacity to design and implement multimodal and narrative-based activities. The absence of training in multimodal pedagogy is particularly critical. Without adequate professional development, teachers may lack the methodological knowledge required to effectively integrate narrative visuals into language teaching. Similarly, rigid curriculum structures and limited instructional time discourage experimentation with innovative teaching approaches. These constraints explain why, despite positive perceptions of visuals, their classroom use remains irregular and unsystematic. They also reinforce Hypothesis 3, confirming that underutilization of

narrative iconic signs is largely driven by structural and institutional limitations rather than lack of awareness.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

This study examined narrative iconic signs in EFL classrooms from a multimodal social semiotic perspective. The findings answer the three research questions as follows. First, static visual resources were more frequently used than narrative iconic signs. Pictures, photographs, and drawings predominated, while picture sequences and narrative picture stories were less frequently integrated into classroom practice. Second, the findings indicate that visual resources can support teacher-learner interaction and engagement. Learners reported positive perceptions of visuals for comprehension, vocabulary retention, speaking, and writing, while classroom observations showed increased participation when visual resources were incorporated into activities. Third, the analysis of learner-produced texts suggests that narrative iconic signs support written idea generation, sequencing, vocabulary use, descriptive language, coherence, and creative expression. However, weaknesses in grammar, cohesion, and lexical choice indicate that visual scaffolding needs to be combined with explicit language instruction. Teachers also reported training, time, and curriculum-related constraints that limit the regular integration of narrative iconic signs. Overall, the study suggests that narrative iconic signs are underused but pedagogically valuable multimodal resources. EFL teacher education and professional development should therefore provide guidance on integrating picture sequences, storyboards, and visual narratives into speaking and writing activities.

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