

## The English Textbook: A Multimodal Comparison between Malaysian and IGCSE Syllabus

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### Abstract

The English language has been a dominant force in many aspects of life, where it is utilized in areas such as trade, official matters, and education. Due to its widely recognized status, the English Language Teaching (ELT) sector has seen an incline in English learners. In Malaysia, there are three main recognized pathways for education on a primary and secondary basis. However, this paper will only focus on the English textbooks provided in both the SPM and IGCSE syllabus for Form 5 and Year 11 respectively. The paper will analyze the various methods used by the textbooks to convey information to the students via the Theory of Multimodality. It will then investigate the usage of multimodal techniques present in the textbooks in assisting students in English language learning. Finally, it will attempt to uncover the criteria that could improve the English textbooks based on student preferences. The expected results are that the English textbooks utilize similar modes in terms of multimodality to convey information. However, the IGCSE English textbook might utilize more linguistic means as compared to the SPM English textbook, which might utilize more visual means. Furthermore, the space of the content in the IGCSE English textbook may be different from the SPM English textbook. Multimodality is also expected to play a vital role in assisting the students in learning the English language more efficiently compared to a monomodal approach. Finally, students are expected to prefer more pictures and less words in textbooks to attract their attention.

**Key words:** english language teaching, english textbooks, multimodal, SPM and IGCSE syllabus, textbook comparison

### Introduction

The English language can be traced back circa 600 A.D, where the first Old English speakers arrived in Britain. (Hejrná & Walkden, 2022, pp. 308-309). Since its introduction, the language has garnered many users to-date that have implemented it into their linguistic repertoire. The era of the British Empire, where the colonization of many foreign lands occurred, alongside the emergence of the United States as a global power can be said to have boosted the language's popularity and importance (Mohammed, 2020; Winaldo & Oktaviani, 2022), placing English as one of the most globally utilized languages in the world. Today, there is no doubt that the English language has been a dominant force in many aspects of life as areas such as trade (Mohammed, 2020; Winaldo & Oktaviani, 2022), official matters (Rustamov & Yaxshilikova, 2022; Winaldo & Oktaviani, 2022), sciences (Mohammed, 2020; Winaldo & Oktaviani, 2022) and most certainly, education (Bacha et al., 2021; Ardiç Kıyak, 2021) are some aspects that are influenced by the English

language, mostly due to English being the lingua franca for many people internationally (Mohammed, 2020; Ardiç Kıyak, 2021; Winaldo & Oktaviani, 2022).

As people are derived from many different nations, it is only natural that they possess different mother tongues, or first languages (L1). In order to communicate cross-culturally, a lingua franca must first be established between speakers of different nations (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 59). English, being one of the most prestigious languages in the world, is one of the languages utilized for cross-cultural communication (Ardıç Kıyak, 2021). Due to its usefulness in international communication, people seek to acquire the English language in a multitude of ways. One of the mainstream methods of learning a language is through education. Because of this, the English Language Teaching (ELT) sector has seen an incline in English learners (Maguire, 2023), where learners seek education for the purpose of acquiring English as a second language (L2). Education is one of the

primary sources of learning for most, where students learn some of the fundamentals about current society such as science, mathematics, and languages.

The English language is considered a core subject for learners in many schools and institutions of various countries, including Malaysia and in the context of English education in Malaysia, there are many tools available for educators to assist learners in the process of English language acquisition. One of the commonly used yet crucial tools is the textbook provided by the educational institution. Typically, the textbook provided is determined by the syllabus that the educational institution is adhering to, i.e. government (SPM), International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), etc. The textbook is an important educational tool as it provides a medium for which information can be transferred to the students. Although it may seem simple, the conception of the 'ideal' textbook can be quite challenging when analyzed through a multimodal approach, as the images (Agrawal et al., 2011), amount of words, and even the font types and size (Gasser et al., 2005) might affect the learners' efficiency in absorbing information and recollection from the textbook. Although there are English textbooks from the three main pathways for education available in Malaysia, i.e. SPM, IGCSE, and UEC, this paper will only focus on the English textbooks provided in both the SPM and IGCSE syllabus for Form 5 and Year 11 respectively. The paper will analyze the various methods used by the textbooks to convey information to the students via the Theory of Multimodality. It will then investigate the usage of multimodal techniques present in the textbooks in assisting students in English language learning. The paper will also attempt to uncover the criteria that could improve the English textbooks based on student preferences.

There is already much existing research on multimodality in the field of ELT due to its usefulness in student learning. It is suggested that multimodality assists learners in their language skills (Baykal, 2021; Guichon & McIornan, 2008; Eisenmann & Summer, 2020; Hafner, 2020). Baykal (2021) in his paper explores multimodal pedagogies in terms of the perspectives of both educators and learners, recommending that the English curricula be developed in a form that utilizes multimodality and links it to the needs of society. He also states that publishers are increasing the integration of

various modes into their materials in an attempt to make their material more appealing. Guichon and McIornan (2008) investigated the effects of multimodality on French L2 learners of the English language via digital learning, discovering that information transferred via multimodal sources are by far more efficient for comprehension as compared to unimodal sources. Not only were there papers on the margins of ELT, the paper by Early et al. (2015) details multimodality out from the margins of ELT, where they discuss prior research regarding multimodality in the context of ELT, critiquing them by highlighting the issues presented and questions unanswered in the articles, whilst also revealing the gaps in the knowledge pool simultaneously. Supramaniam and Nazer (2016) in their paper compared the final test papers of the two main pathways in Malaysian education, i.e. SPM and IGCSE, noting that the IGCSE paper mainly focused on the style, content, and accuracy of the students in utilizing the English language while the SPM paper leaned more towards the format of the answer.

Although there is much existing research, there is still a need to pursue further research within the field of ELT via multimodality, more specifically, research is needed in analyzing multimodality in a micro essence. A prior study conducted by Baykal (2021) suggested that the multimodal design of textbooks assists in structuring the knowledge for learners, stating that "There is a need for teachers who understand that multimodal resources are central to ELL textbook design and students' learning in the contemporary times". Another study by Early et al. (2021) suggested that the structure and arrangement of visual prompts may affect the efficiency of learners, particularly in academic writing classes. In addition, Supramaniam and Nazer (2016) stated in their paper that "a comparison of artefacts used in teaching subjects in a dual system, i.e. test papers, textbooks and teaching materials, is grossly under researched". Hence, this study intends to uncover the various multimodal methods utilized by the English textbooks in the Malaysian Government and IGCSE syllabus. It also aims to investigate the use of multimodality in assisting students in learning the English language. The paper then attempts to uncover the criteria that authors of future English textbooks could improve on based on student preferences.

The objectives for this research are as follows:

1. To determine the various methods utilized to convey information through the English textbooks.
2. To investigate the use of multimodality from the textbooks in assisting students in learning the English language.
3. To uncover the criteria that could improve the textbooks based on student preference.

## Methods

The research plans to determine the various methods utilized to convey information through the English textbooks. This will be attempted through a qualitative analysis via the different modes present in Kress' (2010) Multimodality. The English textbooks from both the Malaysian Government syllabus and the IGCSE syllabus will be utilized as materials for the analysis, that being the Form 5 English Download Student's Book and Cambridge IGCSE First Language English Coursebook.

The research also plans to conduct a controlled study, adapting from the pilot study by Guichon and McLornan (2008). The study will include 40 non-language major participants pursuing a bachelor degree in Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology. Contrast to their format where they utilized audio, video, L1 subtitles, and L2 subtitles in their study regarding online learning, this study will instead utilize the following: 1) text; 2) image; 3) font; and 4) spacing. The rationale behind this is that physical textbooks are inanimate objects that are unable to be altered once created, which prevents the use of videos and audios, with the exception of link inclusion. Considering this restraint, written words, i.e. texts, are one of the main mediums of transmitting information. Images are another method available as images are not animated in printed textbooks. The spacing between words and images along with the font may be considered as another factor that may affect the outcome of the study as shown by Gasser et al. (2005) and will therefore be included as a variable. It is noteworthy that 'Font' includes the font type and the font size.

The controlled study will include 4 groups of 10 participants each. The participants will consist of undergrad students pursuing non-language majors and are of the age range of 19-25. The first group will be introduced to a set of texts that is transmitted via words, i.e. the linguistic mode. The second group will be introduced to the same set of text, with the addition of images to combine the linguistic and visual modes, forming a multimodal text. The third group will have the

same format as the second group, that being the inclusion of images alongside the text. However, the font size and style will be different from their counterparts. The fourth group will have the same format as the second group, with the exception of spatial differences in the text, images, and content overall. The participants will be requested to read through the text. Note-taking is permissible, where they are only allowed to write in the English language. After the participants have finished reading, the texts will be returned and the participants must write a detailed summary of the texts. They are allowed to refer to their notes. The method for marking the summary will follow a similar approach of the pilot study aforementioned, whereby a list of lexical items will be recorded beforehand that contains content relating to the text. The summary will then be crosschecked with the list to identify similar lexical items that were identified by the participants. The accumulated points of all the participants in each group will then be converted into a percentage and the percentages of all groups will then be placed in a graph.

This study will also attempt to uncover the criteria that could improve textbooks based on student preference. A survey will be conducted whereby all 40 of the previous participants will be interviewed. The participants will be asked questions relating to their preference in a textbook to attract their attention and make the textbooks more appealing. The results will then be categorized into a table alongside a short description of each category.

## Results and Discussion

It is important to note that the study has not yet commenced, hence the results are only predictions based on physical observation and secondary sources. The paper seeks to determine the various methods utilized to convey information through the English textbooks. The results will be determined through the use of Kress' (2010) Multimodality as a framework for analysis. It is predicted that the English textbooks may utilize multiple modes for information transfer, i.e. visual, linguistic, and spatial. Some examples of visual modes are images and symbols. Linguistic mode examples may include the texts and words itself. For the spatial mode, it is expected that the spacing of words, images, and content overall contribute to the mode. Furthermore, it is also expected that the audio and gestural modes are not present due to the fact that textbooks are inanimate objects and are not capable of producing audio



recordings, with the exception of attached links to websites.

The paper also aims to investigate the use of multimodality from textbooks in assisting students in learning the English language. The paper will adopt a similar study carried out by Guichon and McLornan (2008). The results of the adopted study are expected to be similar, whereby the second, third, and fourth group utilizing a multimodal text, will display a higher frequency of lexical items as compared to the first group utilizing a unimodal text. In addition, it is expected that in terms of multimodal text comparison, the second group will display a higher frequency of lexical items as compared to the third and fourth group, which differ in font and spacing respectively.

The results of the survey are expected to be straightforward, whereby students prefer clean designs, allowing for ease of reading. Another criterion is the amount of words, whereby it is expected that they prefer more word-to-content ratio, to reduce the amount of reading without sacrificing content. Additionally, it is also expected that students may prefer more visual images rather than words.

Overall, multimodality is expected to play a pivotal role in information transfer and retention, increasing the need for authors and publishers to carefully tread on image inclusion, font, and spacing of content. Furthermore, future research can be done on the effects of different font types and sizes as well as suitable spacing of content and images in order to retain student attention and to make textbooks more appealing to users.

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