Synchronous distance language learning and critical visual literacy practices in Greek primary education

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Abstract

Our research, focusing on critical literacy practices in education, demonstrates the outcome of a teaching scenario applied in 2021 in a primary school e-class learning environment with the aid of distant learning tools. Having taken for granted that: (a) covid-19 pandemic has initiated important changes regarding our understanding of language teaching and (b) the extend we expose ourselves to modern multimodal environments, our teaching intervention attempts at displaying how the use of visual grammar can contribute to the critical understanding and production of multimodal texts by junior pupils in the language teaching framework. In the light of the above, through multiliteracies pedagogy, it has been investigated whether the study of environmental discourse, based on the everyday texts that the pupils read, can contribute to the development of critical language awareness and the cultivation of their environmental sensitivity. At the same time, conclusions can be drawn about the challenges and the difficulties which online distant learning appears to have in L1 teaching both for pupils and teachers.

Keywords: Critical literacy practices, visual literacy, multi-modality, synchronous distance language learning

Introduction

The growing social and cultural developments, consequence of globalized social media, have led to the transformation of meaning production and understanding (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 34; Iedema, 2003, p. 33; Kress, 2010, p. 15). Thus, they contributed to the redefining of the concept of *literacy* that doesn't limit itself to reading and writing skills but also puts in the spotlight new social practices and procedures. The acquisition of cultural and cognitive tools is related even more to participation and action in different social contexts (Baynham & Prinsloo, 2001) in terms of equality and social justice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

This mode of thinking concerning who is considered as literate in contemporary societies, where people daily receive a plethora of messages, has earned new impetus due to the Covid-19 crisis which broke out in 2020. Because of the afore mentioned crisis, on-line learning transactions, have been reinforced in many western and non-western societies. On-line education was initiated in Greece to meet the increased needs of pupils during the successive lockdowns. In the case of language teaching this new reality has played a significant part in employing alternative and cooperative teaching methods. These methods are aimed at developing under urgent conditions a variety of skills, that can be critical, functional, social, as well as digital (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021, p. 20), with the aid of modern information and communication technology tools (Oikonomakou, 2012).

Our research draws data from the Greek primary education context and attempts to apply and evaluate critical visual literacy practices (Newfield, 2011), intending to develop pupils' environmental awareness (Hungerford et al. 1992, p. 83; Barbas, Paraskevopoulos & Stamou 2009, p. 62) through processing the critical understanding of environmental multimodal texts.

Theoretical Background

Critical visual literacy and multimodality

The concept of literacy incorporates visual literacy (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010) while it is defined as the ability not only of reading, interpreting, and using various forms relating to visual communication (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001, pp. 15-16; Felten 2008, p. 60), but also includes critical assessment, visual concept creation, and production of visual messages. In this sense the definition of visual communication includes both an interpretative and a productive dimension (Brumberger, 2011). Since meaning and knowledge are built-up through

various modes (images, texts, symbols, interactions, abstract design, sound, etc.), not just words (Gee, 2003, p. 210), visual literacy can be conceptualized as a distinct set of capacities or as part of a larger multimodal literacy (Felten, 2008, p. 60).

It is a fact that readers nowadays encounter multi-modal texts in which various, creative, semiotic modes intertwine. These modes spring up out of the creative synthesis and interaction of other individual unimodal elements (Kress, 2010). The texts consist of elaborate, communicative events and reflect various aspects, perspectives, and attitudes about social reality. Thus, their study should extend into bringing out the social, cultural and political dimensions which are associated with their production, and the dominant practices and power relations that they shape (Janks, 2010). The transition to critical visual literacy signifies "a shift in the manner of reading, from engagement and identification to estrangement and critical distance, from submission to the power of the image to resistance to its structuring codes and discourses, from reading with the text to reading against the text" (Newfield, 2011, p. 92).

In this context, the social semiotic theory of multimodal communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Royce & Bowcher, 2007), having Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) as a point of reference, combines lexical with visual code (Unsworth, 2007) to constitute a body of principles upon which we could systematically analyze texts that intertwine various semiotic systems, including language. The grammar of visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), based on the hypothesis that the meta-functions as defined by Halliday can become realized in the visual communication, offers an effective methodological tool for studying multimodal texts. It can be also employed in the field of education with the purpose of developing learners' awareness of dominant discourse practices.

Critical visual literacy in Greek educational context

The process of becoming visually literate continues through a lifetime of learning new and more sophisticated ways to produce, analyze, and use images or other semiotic modes (Felten, 2008, p. 60). In the framework of education, the basic goals that could be set are, initially (a) to enhance cognitive abilities through the comprehension of visual media across a range of visual forms and (b) increase aesthetic appreciation of the visual arts and of visual skills in all forms of visual communication. At the same time, via the critical pedagogy perspective, we could enforce awareness of visual manipulation, distortion and misinformation in mass culture texts by helping

children to develop not only operational and descriptive knowledge of the linguistic practices of their world, but also a critical awareness of how these practices are shaped by, and shape social relationships and relationships of power (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanič & Martin-Jones, 1990; Janks, 2010).

Through critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992) pupils will be able to perceive how linguistic and other semiotic choices construct social reality so that they become critical users of the language. In the context of literacy education, the shift of interest in the exposure of pupils to a large spectrum of media and cultural sources to acquire a critical meta-language, has been instrumental in establishing the pedagogy of multiliteracies as philosophy and practice in the Greek educational system since 2011 (Dinas & Goti, 2016; Koutsogiannis, 2017; Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2019, p. 44). In the more recent curriculum for language teaching in compulsory education (L1C, 2011) critical literacy is adopted as a language teaching approach upon which every cultural product, and in our case language and literature, can be researched and interpreted as a multi-layered outcome of social, cultural, and technological procedures (LIC, 2011, p. 7).

The curriculum, both in the description of the desired learning outcomes and of the suggested activities for the pupils, puts emphasis on the variety of communication forms which relate to the information and multimedia technologies, as well as on the variety of textual forms which a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society produces (Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2019, p. 52; Oikonomakou & Papakitsos, 2021). Indicatively, what is pursued is pupils to register that on the one hand language is critical in the perception of reality and communication whereas, on the other hand, there are other semiotic systems like pictures, graphs, diagrams, and other visual symbols that play an equally important role (Oikonomakou, 2012, pp. 6-7). Nevertheless, in the light of a multimodal literacy, the relation between visual and verbal literacy is investigated (LIC, 2011, p. 7) and the use of new technologies in language learning is promoted.

A parallel effort has gradually been made on the level of primary school textbooks which, by the years, have been enriched with multimodal texts with a more pronounced and active presence of pictures in their pages as well as additional digital sources in their on-line form. Whilst, in the older language textbooks the iconic element explained or complemented the basic written text of the units, now it becomes essential that the pupils are not only spectators/consumers of images or visual/acoustic stimuli, but they also become researchers and producers/creators of multimodal

texts, so developing a critical attitude towards them (Grosdos, 2010). In this effort, teachers' role is decisive: they, with sometimes inadequate means, are encouraged to utilize the teaching practices suggested by the critical literacy curriculum (LIC, 2011, p. 7; Oikonomakou, 2012; Oikonomakou & Papakitsos, 2021) as well as the knowledge of the personal socio-cultural needs of their pupils, to creatively bridge their extra-curricular literacy practices with school environment (Bulfin & Koutsogiannis, 2012).

Purpose and methodology of the study

The exploitation of online distance education tools, which appeared as a need after the school lockdowns in Greece because of the Covid-19 pandemic, has brought up many and complex issues. Apart from the digital gap pertaining to the uneven distribution of digital resources to families and individuals, the pandemic highlighted issues relating to digital skills that different population groups develop. In the light of research that has been conducted by the Greek Language Centre and concerns pupils 10 to 16 between the years 2006 and 2015 (Koutsogiannis, 2020) it has been explicitly displayed that social stratum with a higher educational background, with jobs in the service sector, invest much more into digital technologies as important means for the professional and academic development of their kids, in comparison to the less privileged social groups. In this context, the design of teaching interventions to pupils of the lower primary school grades could display some tendencies concerning pupils' adaptation to the(a) new digital reality and (b) versatile relation between their literacy experiences with the school environment (Bulfin & Koutsogiannis, 2012).

Having these questions in mind and using a case study methodology, a teaching approach was designed and implemented to 15 pupils (3rd grade primary school) in the island of Rhodes, Greece, in April 2021. The instructional design was based on the theoretical framework of critical literacy (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanič & Martin-Jones, 1990), as defined by the Greek curriculum for L1 teaching (LIC, 2011), and the specific learning outcomes that are stipulated for the 3rd grade. One aspiration of the case study was the pupils to be able "to pinpoint the role of the image, the construction of meaning and the coherence of the text" (L1C, 2011, p. 2) and "design and transform texts into different genres after negotiating their meaning according to the communicative/socio-cultural circumstances and needs" (LIC, 2011, p. 3). Aided by multimodal

environmental texts we set the goal for developing pupils' critical language awareness on issues related to environment protection and environmental education.

Having as a focal point the study of the 4th unit titled *The world around us* of the 3rd grade of primary school's textbook (Intzidis et al., 2006, p. 64), the pupils examine a large number of texts focusing on the pollution and the harmful human intervention into the environment. Therefore, they become familiar with elements of the humanities rhetoric (Veel, 1998), which holds humans accountable for the environment and tries to motivate them to undertake action for protecting the environment, in some cases with the aid of scientific data (scientific rhetoric). Along the same lines, the choice and processing of multimodal texts set the goal of cultivating pupils' environmental sensitivity which "consists of a complex blend of feelings, attitudes, beliefs and elements of environmental knowledge that lead people to refuse to litter highways and natural areas, to protect natural resources, to work to preserve ecologically important natural areas, etc." (Hungerford et al. 1992, p. 83; Barbas, Paraskevopoulos & Stamou 2009, p. 62). This empathetic perspective towards the environment merges with the shaping of responsible environmental citizenship through texts of environmental discourse which pupils find in their daily life.

Critical visual literacy practices and online learning communities

Framework of the didactic design

The present research was materialized in two stages: (a) the first comprised the collection and processing of multimodal, environmental texts based on the grammar of visual design of Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996) and (b) the second consisted of the didactic design and the implementation of the teaching intervention with the aid of on-line/distance education instruments. Especially, the processing of the texts was grounded in the principles of Systemic Functional Grammar of M.A.K. Halliday, according to three meta-functions: (a) ideational/representational (b) interpersonal/interactive and (c) textual/compositional (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 119-158). These metafunctions refer to (a) the manner of empirical world representation (b) the presentation of the links between producer and receiver and (c) the in-text relations which are fashioned through various iconic choices.

In a language-teaching context, the principles of the multiliteracies pedagogy have been adopted, which focuses its interests on the exposure with multimodal texts that produce meaning

via linguistic, visual and sound means (Cope & Kalanztis, 2000; Dinas & Goti, 2016, p. 42; Koutsogiannis, 2017, pp. 299-304), so that the pupils acquire the ability to comprehend and the dexterity to handle the power and influence of these texts.

The pedagogy of multiliteracies was adopted at all levels because it doesn't only become instrumental in the pupils' language development, but also corroborates their social empowerment (Dimasi & Aravani, 2013, p. 56). The pupils had the opportunity to understand the versatility in which these texts are produced, the contemporary social environment to be able to construct discourse as well as to develop critical ability and pose questions for their social future.

Our purpose was the texts to be signified by the learners themselves, so that language learning doesn't refer to a static system of grammatical-syntactic rules which only aim at effective communication but also to be regarded as a dynamic and multi-faceted procedure (Dimasi & Aravani, 2013, p. 56). For that reason, our priority was the study of the texts to be the stimulus for a more substantial contact between pupils and teachers, during the pandemic, who obviously have varied literacy experiences, knowledge along with different ways of understanding meaning apart from language communication. While structuring the activities, the educational processing was based on task-based learning method (Willis, 1996). In pre-task phase, we activated the pupils' pre-existing knowledge, their interest to get them ready for the topic of the suggested activities. While devising the activities, we tried to cooperate with them, taking into consideration student interests and needs as well as creativity.

The teacher's role was mainly to coordinate, to provide the pupils with feedback and facilitate solving the technical problems concerning on-line interaction. At the last stage, pupils were asked to contextualize the multimodal texts they had studied, for developing critical language awareness (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanič & Martin-Jones, 1990; Fairclough, 1992) through participation into on-line group activities, experiential games, and dramatizations.

Multimodal text analysis and didactic implementation

During the implementation, in the preparatory stage, a large number of multimodal environmental texts were analyzed, that the pupils became able to classify the texts according to content, source and intentionality (Dinas & Goti, 2016, p. 65). Through this procedure, we attempted: (a) the interconnection between pupils' literacy experiences and school environment (Koutsogiannis, 2017) and (b) the detection, via purposeful questions, of the way pupils'

approach, in the first stage, multimodal texts. The pupils were able to detect where they can find these texts in daily life to discern whether they aim at informing the citizens of environmental activities or at indicating the debt and the responsibilities modern people have for environmental destruction by adopting a humanities rhetoric (Veel, 1996).

More specifically, it was found: (a) posters/pictures drawn by the pupils in the context of lessons or national school contests (b) videos and posters by ecological organizations or state sector (municipality), (c) invitations to participate in ecological activities (collecting garbage from the coasts, protection of sea animals) d) signs/boards for what citizens must do in parks or in the streets, and (e) slogans/ rallying cries out of pupils' protests for the environment.

In *situated practice* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), pupils googled on the Web for multimodal texts and focused on the reasons of their choice. The texts were linked to (a) ecological activities that took place in the island of Rhodes by schools and other organizations (b) environmental problems which appeared in the island mainly due to both the citizens' carelessness and the large numbers of tourists on the island during the summer period. In relation to reading the texts some critical observations on information issues, activities or other entities were spontaneously made. Since the children were not equipped with an organized and systematic way for reading and perceiving pictures, we devised, based on an awarded child's drawing (**Figure 1**)[1], a framework of processing for all the dimensions of meaning and all metafunctions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) which appear in the figural synthesis.

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[1] It's an awarded children's drawing designed by 9-year-old pupils in the context of the program "Children's HELMEPA" titled "Clen Ocean means alive Planet" In the program participated 109 kindergarten Schools and Primary Schools of Greece which sent 395 drawings/pictures. Open access source: http://greenagenda.gr

Figure 1: HELMERA Program, clear sky means Live Planet!

While processing the picture (*overt instruction* stage), during teaching via Webex, several questions emanated from visual grammar analysis tools of Kress & van Leeuwen (1996). These questions concerned: a) the represented entities and procedures (Jewitt & Oyama, 2002, p. 143), b) the participants roles and the relationship they form with the reader, c) the value of information various features carry, d) the dominance of certain elements in a large multimodal synthesis in a picture (Jewitt & Oyama, 2002, p. 148), and e) the visual contextualization of the synthesis elements (Jewitt & Oyama, 2002, pp. 148-150). Similarly, within the context of a multi-modal approach (Papadopoulou, Pagkourelia & Goria, 2019, pp. 337-338), emphasis was put upon the means of communication and the communicative conventions along with the in-text and out-of-text references of meaning (pragmatic dimension). Some indicative questions that were asked to different groups of pupils were:

Representative meta-function

- What do you see in this picture? Can you describe it?
- What do you think that people are doing in the photo? Why have they raised up their hands? What is their expression? What might be their feelings like?
- Why only the hand is depicted in the center of the photo? What could that mean?

Interpersonal meta-function

- What appears at eye level?
- What stands at close distance? Why is it circular?

- How do you feel looking at this picture?

Textual meta-function

- What stands in the center of the picture? What is the role of the colors?

- Why do people stand both on the upper and the lower sides of the pictures?

- Why are the letters of the message in various colors?

Via this processing, pupils freely expressed their views by reading and resynthesizing heterogenous parameters of the picture. Their initiation in the concept of modality (Kress, 2010; Oikonomamou, 2012) was realized experientially and demonstrated that they had already developed skills of precise observation of the individual iconic and verbal elements both due to their experience with relevant texts from their school environment and via extra-curricular activities. More specifically, apart from detecting the represented elements (Jewitt & Oyama, 2002, p. 143), the pupils also paid attention to the rotation of the colors by interrelating them with different emotions: "the first picture is happy and the other black and sad", "in the colored part people raise up their hands because they are happy, in the black and white part because they are unhappy".

Similarly, they gave voice to critical observations about the positioning of the elements (Jewitt & Oyama, 2002, p. 148): "on the right there are nice colors, everything is clean… the one side reminds me the normal world and the other the old world. The old world was like the one we see in the movies, where everything is black and white", "[the picture] shows us how seas have become…in the first there is life, there are creatures, the other is grey and full of rubbish". They also made comments on the interpersonal dimensions of the synthesis: "the circle reminds of earth", "we can see **more closely** a circle, the hand is halved into two parts, on the one side clouds are gathered. It is about to start raining. On the other side there is sun".

At the same time what was noteworthy, was the effort of interpreting the figural elements: "the man does everything, that's why we can see his hand", "from the grey picture we understand that people say that they have made mistakes by damping rubbish", "in the colored picture people are more careful now that the grey ones got their lesson…. are doing to treat their land like the others". In all, pupils evaluated very positively the effectiveness of the multimodal text ("I would hang this picture in my room", "I would place it outside, in a square, were a lot of people gather to look at it"). Children also seem interested in the HELMEPA Program. They

visited the website where awarded children's creations have been uploaded and made comparisons between them.

During *the critical framing* of the text and the *transformative practice* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), we could say that two goals were achieved after discussing the sociocultural context of the text: (a) the testimony of value judgements in relation to the effectiveness of environmental multimodal texts and humans' responsibility for the destruction of the environment and (b) the development of pupils' creativity since they were asked to recontextualise the texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) on the basis of their critical observations. Especially pupils, perhaps due to their longer exposure to eye stimuli, they think that texts combining verbal with figural information can contribute more effectively, in comparison to unimodal texts, to attitude change on issues of environmental sensitivity, ("I would rather draw, a drawing can teach even a little child").

Pupils also responded very positively to doing an online poll via chat, to write their mottoes and rally cries which they would put in the center of the text after the processing of the textual features (Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2014, p. 83). Some of them are: "Sweet life means clean sea" and in capital letters "clean earth means clean seas", "clean air is happy", "when earth is dirty is in pain". However, their figural proposals mainly concerned the order change of the texts' zones (Picture 1) and the creation of new entities regarding the colors and the selected representations ("I would draw more houses", "I would use more colors in the drawings", "I would draw more people on the upper side, and I would also draw a river"). In the end, the total number of pupils stated that they would wish their school to participate in a similar contest, so they would be given the opportunity to create their own multimodal texts.

After the completion of the preparatory stage, we examined the verbal and figural meaning-making mechanisms, regarding two more pupils' drawings. The selection of the educational material was dictated by the need of interrelating with school reality, the age, and the interests of the pupils as well as with individual teaching parameters like the possibility of creating intertextuality (Dinas & Goti, 2016, p. 66) based on the textual genres that are taught in the 3rd grade (Intzidis et al., 2006). The multimodal texts due to be taught in the 3rd grade are integrated into various communicative environments, as the current curriculum stands (L1C, 2011). The first (**Figure 2**) had been presented in the frame of Environmental Curriculum Education by E.U and materialized by the Greek Ministry of Education in cooperation with the university of the

Aegean and the second (**Figure 3**) was taken from a widely circulated newspaper article in the framework of pupils' activation for climate change in the island of Crete.

Both texts have similarities regarding their visual and verbal choices to facilitate the consolidation of the understanding of their various multimodal elements (Kress, 2010), which pupils met during preparation stage and used creatively while developing language skills. Then at the stage of open teaching (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), the suggested activities have resulted by textual analysis based on functional parameters (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). The questions to the pupils reflected four viewpoints of textual study based on critical literacy: They aimed at studying the texts (a) with respect to their communicative context, (b) language and meaning structure, as well as (c) their social practices and (d) effectiveness (Dinas & Goti, 2016, p. 61). Especially, in the second picture (**Figure 2**) the pupils initially traced and described the represented entities and procedures, the absence or presence of eye contact, social distancing, viewing angle along with elements of textual meta-function with stress to the ordering of new information and the information value of the new elements.

Figure 2: *Environmental Education Program "Energy: Do we act the right way?" Ministry of Education, European Union, University of the Aegean.*

This whole procedure shows that the pupils are able to (a) discern the dynamic character of the picture and the importance of visual elements ordering and (b) process and interpret the channels through which the sender-receiver interpersonal relation is created through the personalization of natural elements. Characteristically, since the sender and receiver were defined (the picture was made in 2005-6 by pupils in the 13th Primary School of Evosmos in Northern Greece), the pupils expressed the feelings of the centrally represented entity, that of earth which is placed in the center, and commented on the ordering of the verbal communication information (right: "Puff…, I feel exhausted" "I can't bear it any longer", "Save me.."). The solution to the problem was placed at the upper side of the picture via through the message "Energy: Do we act the right way?" and earth's plea in black capital letters on the left "SAVE ME". This set the starting point for studying various textuality parameters (Dinas & Goti, 2016, pp. 63-70) with emphasis on the language choices which guarantee the cohesion and coherence of the text.

In the words of the earth, which are given in the form of a comic, what was discussed was the color choice and the font (black and red), the use of exclamations and exclamation marks and generally the modality indexes used in the speech acts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). The comments on the words and the thought of earth focus on the attribution of causation via the examination of the participants' role and the use of both active and passive syntax in the utterances. Therefore, the omission of the thematic role of the agent and the anteposition of the experiencer in "I have been exhausted!" with the use of passive syntax is explained by the visual choices/thoughts of the speaker-earth which refer to the human factor who has wasted the natural resources and burdens the environment. The text demonstrates intentionality regarding the necessity of human change of attitude towards the environment, so the pupils easily made intertextuality connections (Dinas & Goti, 2016, p. 66), since they spotted the map of Greece in the center of the picture and used experiential elements from the study of comics which they had read at school or during spare time.

At contextualization level (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Koutsogiannis, 2017), the pupils had already processed, through web pages, environmental activities, which were organized by other schools in Rhodes and in elsewhere in Greece. They were asked to approach aspects of

ecological organizations' actions and different ways of protecting the environment in their daily habits, as it is also anticipated by the corresponding unit of the school textbook. They also negotiated the contribution of the multimodal creations of the primary education pupils (Oikonomakou, 2012) in the citizens' attitude change by paying attention to the discourse practices that should be developed at the level of the pupils' community with the intention of participating in panhellenic, European or global contests which have as their main topic the development of environmental sensitivity (Hungerford et al., 1992).

In the frame of expanding their concern about the actions of pupils' communities, the children studied photo material (**Figure 3**)[2] taken from a widely circulated newspaper titled "the pupils of Crete demonstrated against climate change" and were able to understand with greater ease, due to the analogies between pictures 2 and 3, the various functions of the verbal (Save Earth! She suffers!) and visual data also based in personification of natural phenomena (sun's thoughts on Earth: Oh, Oh! How did earth come to this point?"). Therefore, emphasis was put on the differentiating elements which result by the comparison of two multimodal texts (**Figure 2 & 3**): regarding realistic depiction, the pupils identified the photo elements which capture reality and of course the different communicative and social context of its production (banners/motoes of protest).

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[2] Open access source (in Greek): https://www.efsyn.gr/efkriti/koinonia/212560_oi-mathites-tis-kritis-diadilosan-gia-tin-klimatiki-allagi

Figure 3: Banner-moto in the context of pupils' mobilization in Crete for climate change (from: Efimerida Syntacton).

At the stage of transformative practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), which involves the recontextualized discourse production, in other words the transfer of a text from one socio-political context to another, pupils dramatized the dialogues between the earth and sun. Aided by role playing, in teams, they drew their own drawings, using the PAINT program, and continued with narrating the rest verbally. Therefore, they had the chance, on the one hand, to give vent to earth's emotions which is not included in the photo and, on the other, to resynthesize an imaginative narrative plot. In this plot the students stressed the causes of ecological destruction, whereas they selected dark colors for displaying the psychological condition of the planet. In an effort of critical recontextualization, students wrote down their feelings, since they had drawn material in the pre-writing stage (Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2014) from printed photos in order to understand the textual conventions of a motto.

Research Findings and Implications

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in a temporary suspension of school operation in many countries of the western and non-western- world, has attributed new meaning to the significance of new technological tools regarding the teaching of various subjects of the curriculum (Lestari & Gunawan, 2020). Pupils, especially the junior ones, were given the opportunity to familiarize themselves even more with the use of P/C during teaching via digital

platforms. Those of the 3ʳᵈ grade, as the results of our case study show, were progressively able to use the pre-existing experiences of digital literacy which had developed regarding messages exchanged over chat and googling for data, whereas gradually they exerted cooperating practices in an on-line learning environment.

However, this unprecedented condition brought about questions concerning the issues of equal opportunities in education and the digital gap that occurs between various social groups and classes (Koutsogiannis, 2020). Therefore, some pupils faced problems with their internet connection and the learning procedure was disturbed either because they got connected via tablets or because at the same time two or more learning sessions occurred. In addition to these problems, there must be taken into consideration the uncertainty of the supporting context, since only part of the pupils was able to receive additional help, except the aid coming from the family environment. In this new environment, new management skills are also demanded by the teachers (Lestari & Gunawan, 2020) who are called to act supportively and develop alternative strategies of motivating pupils via appealing educational material **(Figure 4).**
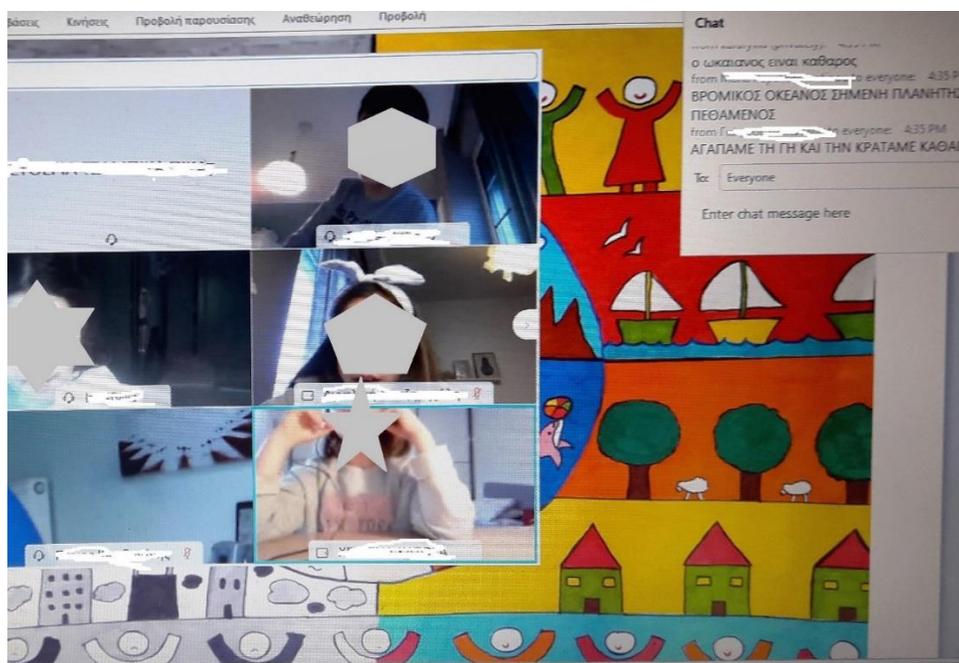

Figure 4: *Synchronous distance language learning*

Further integrating, in the frame of on-line learning of multimodal texts, (Kress, 2010) has demonstrated that is in line with the pupils' interests and encourages the emergence of their literacy experiences (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Baynham & Prinsloo, 2001) in their daily life (Bulfin & Koutsogiannis, 2012). It releases teaching from the linear development of the subject material which puts emphasis on the school textbook exclusively, by enriching it with audiovisual sources (Grosdos, 2010). It also develops skills of a more effective understanding of the modern socio-political environments (Oikonomakou, 2012) thus reinforcing procedures of researching and cooperating via immediate, in real time, access to the web. In this manner, the restrictions that occasionally appear in conventional learning environments, due to material shortages in school units, are considerably limited.

The full use of the visual critical literacy practices (Newfield, 2011), which are favored by the supplementary curriculum for L1 teaching in the primary school (L1C, 2011; Oikonomakou & Papakitsos 2021), finds a breeding ground for studying environmental discourse texts which the pupils of an island tourist area seem to have been already familiar with. So, they tended to locate their communicative context and features of their linguistic and meaning structure (Dinas & Goti, 2016), as well as to negotiate the way which visual and verbal elements coexist and interact in the multimodal texts (Papadopoulou, Pagkourelia, & Goria, 2019), albeit in a more intuitive and experiential manner.

The implementation of the multiliteracies pedagogy principles (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Koutsogiannis, 2017) has contributed to both (a) enrich the repertoire of texts under examination within the on online learning community and (b) the systematizing of the spontaneous critical observations of the pupils giving them the opportunity to acquire new instruments for reading and interpreting multimodal texts. Even though the contact with the principles of visual literacy grammar (Royce & Bowcher, 2007; Felten, 2008) is not systematically cultivated in the Greek educational system (Grosdos, 2010), it seems that the pupils, since preparation stage, responded very positively with locating and interpreting the multiple modes of visual syntheses (Gee, 2003). In that way they were able to define the represented entities and procedures, either dynamic or static, whereas at the same time to articulate critical observations for the informative value of the pictures and negotiate the interpersonal relation developed between transmitter/receiver (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Jewitt & Oyama, 2002).

Difficulties emerged during the study of individual dimensions in the context of interpersonal and textual meta-function due to a great extent to the rate of pupils' familiarization with the communicative framework of the pictures studied (Dinas & Goti, 2016). The existence though of verbal supplementary or explicative information and the potential of creating intertextual links, due to previous experience with the specific texts in the context of the school or pupils' social environment (Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2014), has considerably facilitated the decodification of meaning. Children's drawings, comics, signs which they usually come across in urban environment, as well as posters that decorate the school in the context of environmental activities, activated pupils' interest.

It is notable that pupils were more receptive in relation to handling experientially and sometimes by association individual parameters of multimodal configurations. However, their response to oral output or writing assignments was positive, since they, in their entirety, produced authentic and creative texts, aided by digital means, and they were able to transform their communicative framework (Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2014), thus examining at the same time various facets of the socio-political reality (Messaris, 1994).

Motto writing, the creation or re-contextualization of different elements of the pictures studied, the output of oral narratives along with participating in role playing has demonstrated that pupils understand that (a) even multimodal texts convey certain ideological attitudes (Janks, 2010) and (b) contribute decisively to the development of environmental sensitivity and awareness (Hungerford et al., 1992, p. 83; Barbas, Paraskevopoulos & Stamou, 2009, p. 62). Therefore, in both the critical framing stage and the transformative practice (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Koutsogiannis, 2017), elements of humanities approach were traced (Veel, 1998), placing in this way, the human being in the center of notion of responsibility for the protection of the environment either on individual basis or based on political representation and social action.

Making full use of multimodality in the classroom has reinforced the processing of functionally interlinking texts with the interests and the questions of the school community (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Oikonomakou, 2012; Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2019). Pupils indicated their willingness to participate into environmental activities or events where they could (a) present or exhibit their creations within the frame of pupil contests or actions in the local community, through their experiences of narrating relevant incidents and (b) point out, at the

same time, the basic problems that result from rapid tourist development and massive arrival of tourists during the summer period. In parallel with googling in the web, under the instructions of the teacher, they learned about the actions that are organized by state actors or organizations at local or national level, putting emphasis on the protected species of the island of Rhodes and the individuality of the Greek sea eco-system.

Conclusion

The effort of cultivating critical visual literacy practices (Newfield, 2011) in the Greek educational system (Dimasi & Aravani, 2013) has been more systematically marked by the introduction of the principles of critical literacy (Clark, Fairclough, Ivanic & Martin-Jones, 2012) and multiliteracies pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) in the L1 teaching in compulsory education in Greece (L1C, 2011). The aim of the Curriculum was the development of the pupils' critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992) through the study of social, cultural, and technological processes which are at the basis of text creation, mainly multimodal, in the modern societies and reflect the complexity of various facets and ideological dimensions of reality (Dinas & Goti, 2016; Oikonomakou & Sofos, 2019; Oikonomakou & Papakitsos, 2021).

Despite the implementation difficulties in classroom (in person or distance learning) of the above approaches which are (a) undermined by the supplementary character that permeated the Curriculum for many years and (b) the absence of both pupils and teachers familiarization with similar practices, the challenges of online education, reinforced due to the Covid-19 pandemic, have posed anew the issue of didactic use of the new literacy experiences that pupils acquire and their importance in the contemporary education systems (Bulfin & Koutsogiannis, 2012; Koutsogiannis, 2020).

The realization of teaching interventions aimed at creating online learning communities which have, as a point of reference, texts (a) produced in digital environments and (b) exist in the daily routine of the pupils, could contribute to the development of critical reading skills and production of multimodal texts, thus transforming even little pupils from producers to critically thinking creators (Grosdos, 2010; Papadopoulou, Pagkourelia, & Goria, 2019). The above could be achieved with (a) further incorporating modern scientific results of applied linguistics and pedagogy into teaching practice, (b) renewing educational material with various digital sources

and (c) training the teachers community into alternative modes of teaching with the use of new information technologies.

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