

Visual & Linguistic elements of Palestinian cartoon : How can this be applied in language teaching

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) can be applied to explore the sociopolitical messages embedded in Palestinian cartoons. Focusing on symbolic imagery, emotional language, and rhetorical strategies, the research examines how these multimodal elements shape meaning and influence audience interpretation. Data were collected through classroom observations and in depth interviews with fourth semester English Education students at UIN Fatmawati Bengkulu. Findings show that the integration of visual and textual elements in Palestinian cartoons fosters empathy, critical reflection, and social awareness of humanitarian and political issues. Students demonstrated greater awareness of how multimodal features reinforce ideological messages, enabling them to interpret contextual meanings and express informed perspectives. Although some initially found it challenging to decode layered symbolism, targeted scaffolding supported their interpretive skills. Overall, the study highlights Palestinian cartoons as effective pedagogical tools for enhancing critical thinking, contextual analysis, and engagement with real-world discourse in language learning.

Keywords: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Palestinian cartoons, visual symbolism, sociopolitical language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding and interpreting multimodal texts is an essential skill for developing students' critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and communication abilities (Kenalemang Palm & Eriksson, 2023; Budiastono & Noverino, 2024). In language learning, the integration of visual and linguistic analysis enables students to connect symbolic meaning with real world sociopolitical contexts (Moghaddam, 2024; Liu, 2024). Without such training, learners may struggle to decode complex ideological messages and apply them in academic discourse (Ain, 2024; Alsmari, 2024).

Previous studies (Abdel-Raheem, 2024; Sa'adah, 2024; Abouelenine, 2024) have explored Palestinian political cartoons from a multimodal perspective, while other research (Padillo, M. S. R., & Serote, C. A. L. 2023) has highlighted their psycholinguistic impact on comprehension and language processing. However, few have investigated how Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) combined with psycholinguistics can be applied pedagogically in higher education to strengthen analytical skills, especially in non-Western sociopolitical contexts.

Preliminary observations and interviews with fourth semester students of the English Education Department at UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu show that they can identify visual symbols and ideological cues in Palestinian cartoons but still face challenges in linking multimodal elements (images, text, color symbolism) to deeper interpretive arguments. MCDA is perceived as offering a fresh perspective and encouraging critical engagement, though its concepts require scaffolding for effective comprehension.

This research addresses the gap between multimodal discourse analysis and its classroom application in Palestinian cartoon contexts. Integrating MCDA with insights is expected to enrich language teaching methods, enhance students' interpretive and argumentative skills, and promote critical media literacy in the digital era.

The study purpose was to identify how MCDA can be utilized to improve students' analytical abilities and language comprehension through the study of Palestinian cartoons.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design to provide an in depth understanding of how Palestinian cartoons convey sociopolitical ideologies and how their multimodal features can be integrated into language learning. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows the researcher to explore complex cultural and communicative phenomena in depth, capturing the richness of meanings, interpretations, and contextual nuances that cannot be fully represented through numerical data alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Durmaz, Z., & Yöğün, 2022).

The primary analytical framework in this study is Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), rooted in social semiotics, which examines how meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes such as images, text, color, gesture, and spatial arrangement (Kilby, L., & Lennon, H. 2021, Brosseuk, D., & Downes, L. 2024). By applying MCDA alongside the study seeks to uncover the ideological messages, symbolic representations, and audience perception processes embedded in Palestinian cartoons.

The MCDA process in this research consists of three interconnected stages. First, the multimodal analysis stage identifies and categorizes visual and linguistic elements, including symbolic imagery, color schemes, textual rhetoric, and character expressions. Second, the ideological interpretation stage examines how these elements communicate beliefs, values, and sociopolitical stances, as well as how they reflect or challenge dominant narratives surrounding the Palestinian context. Third, the pedagogical integration stage explores how analytical insights from Palestinian cartoons can be applied in language classrooms to foster students' critical thinking, contextual interpretation skills, and media literacy.

The study focuses on six contemporary Palestinian cartoons published on Instagram between 2024 and early 2025, selected for their high public engagement and clear representation of ideological messages. The participants consist of 17 fourth semester students (7 male, and 10 female) from the English Education Study Program at UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, chosen for their active classroom engagement and balanced linguistic competence.

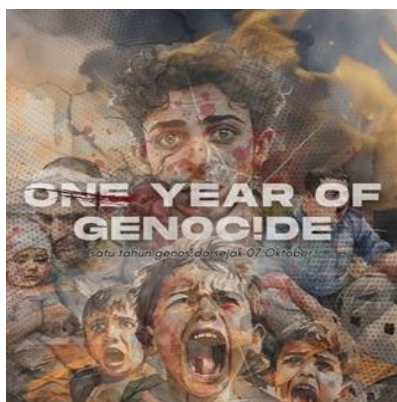
Data were collected using three main instruments interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of visual and linguistic symbolism in the cartoons and its influence on their interpretation of sociopolitical messages. Observations recorded how students engaged with the material, discussed ideological meanings, and applied critical perspectives in classroom interactions. Documentation included students' notes, visual analyses, and selected cartoon scenes, providing additional evidence and supporting triangulation.

Data analysis followed Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) spiral model, involving four main stages: data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation; data reduction to focus on information relevant to the research objectives; coding and categorization to identify themes such as symbolic interpretation, ideological positioning, and pedagogical value; and interpretation to draw conclusions on how MCDA based analysis of Palestinian cartoons can enhance students' critical engagement, interpretive skills, and understanding of multimodal communication.

RESULTS

The implementation of the multimodal strategy using Palestinian cartoons in language learning was analyzed based on the results of visual and linguistic analyses, interviews,

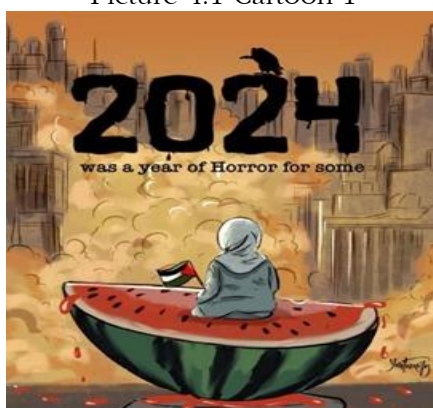
questionnaires, and documentation conducted during the learning process. This strategy was employed to train students to understand and express critical perspectives through spoken and written texts by connecting the multimodal analysis of the Palestinian cartoons they watched with social and humanitarian issues. In the results of the visual analysis, the application of the multimodal strategy using Palestinian cartoons in language learning was carried out with several students after the learning process, focusing on six Palestinian cartoons and analyzing aspects such as visual composition, color, symbols and iconography, gestures, and expressions.



Picture 4.1 Cartoon 1



Picture 4.2 Cartoon 2



Picture 4.3 Cartoon 3



Picture 4.4 Cartoon 4



Picture 4.5 Cartoon 5



Picture 4.6 Cartoon 6

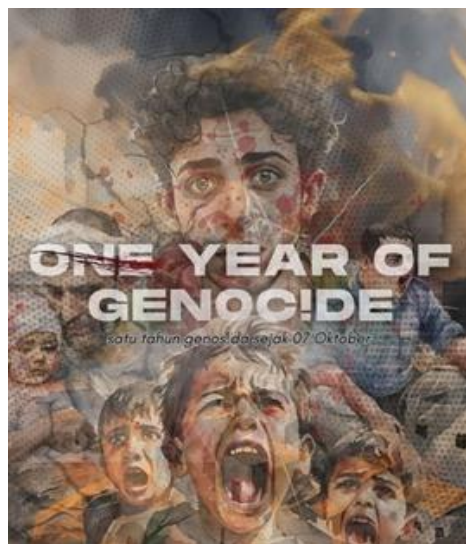
Based on the students' analysis of the six cartoons in, it can be concluded that visually, the cartoons prominently highlight elements focusing on children and

symbols of Palestinian resistance such as the flag, watermelon, bird, or key. These figures and symbols are consistently placed at the center as the focal point, with backgrounds of destruction that reinforce a sense of tragedy. The dominant colors used are red, black, gray, white, and green, each representing blood, mourning, devastation, hope, and Palestinian identity. Red, in particular, is always emphasized to highlight violence and suffering.

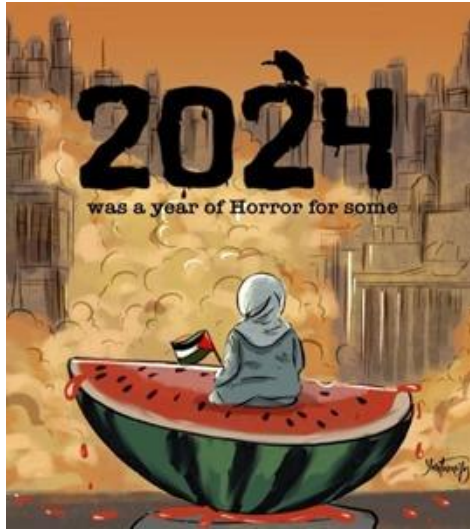
Symbolically, students were able to understand that elements such as the small bird, bleeding watermelon, keffiyeh, and tree roots are not merely images, but metaphors for struggle, identity, resilience, and the deep connection of the Palestinian people to their land. The socio political messages conveyed by the cartoons were critically interpreted by students as expressions of protest against violence, occupation, and ongoing injustice. The cartoons were also understood as moral and humanitarian appeals to the international community to no longer remain silent in the face of this suffering.

From the perspective of expressions and gestures, students assessed that the faces of wounded, frightened, and hopeless children effectively evoked emotions of sympathy, sorrow, and anger in the audience. Body postures such as hugging, standing tall, or turning their backs to the viewer were interpreted as symbols of bravery, alienation, and resistance. Overall, the three students demonstrated a critical understanding in linking visual elements to the social, political, and humanitarian issues presented in the cartoons. Complete data can be found in the visual analysis results.

Furthermore, the implementation of the multimodal strategy using Palestinian cartoons in language learning was also reinforced through linguistic analysis conducted with students after the learning process. This strategy was applied using six Palestinian cartoons, focusing on aspects such as word choice and diction, metaphor and symbolism, and rhetorical strategies .



Picture 4.7 Cartoon 1



Picture 4.9 Cartoon 3



Picture 4.11 Cartoon 5

Picture 4.8 Cartoon 2



Picture 4.10 Cartoon 4



Picture 4.12 Cartoon 6

Based on the students' analysis after observing and analyzing six Palestinian cartoons, it can be concluded that the choice of words and diction in the observed cartoons tends to use formal, direct, and emotionally charged language. Diction such as "One Year of Genocide," "Call to Action," and "Palestine Will Defeat the Death Machine" is deliberately chosen to emphasize issues of violence, oppression, and resistance. Some students also noted the use of words with negative connotations, such as "horror" or "genocide," which directly highlight the aspect of suffering, while words like "free" and "action" carry positive connotations in the context of humanitarian struggle.

In the aspect of Metaphor and Symbolism, all three students agreed that although the texts rarely use metaphors directly, the visual elements in the cartoons contain many powerful symbols such as the bleeding watermelon, small bird, tree roots, and the Palestinian flag. These symbols are used to represent identity, resistance, the right of return, and hope for the Palestinian people. Phrases like "Death Machine" are also understood as metaphors for oppressive military power, while visual symbols of children, mothers, and destroyed cities convey the suffering and helplessness of civilians in conflict.

Regarding Rhetorical Strategies, the students observed the use of both visual and verbal repetition, such as the repeated word "Free" and the phrase "Facts vs Lies," which serve to reinforce ideological meaning. Some students also noted subtle irony, particularly in the phrase "for some," which criticizes the world's unequal attention to the tragedy. Overall, the cartoons were perceived as aiming to evoke audience emotions such as sympathy, anger, and empathy by depicting injured children, symbols of destruction, and emotionally charged diction that encourages a moral response to the ongoing social-political injustice. Full data can be found in the linguistic analysis results.

Furthermore, the implementation of the multimodal strategy using Palestinian cartoons in language learning is also reinforced by the results of interviews conducted in class with several students. These interviews explored the application of the multimodal strategy using Palestinian cartoons in language learning, specifically referring to questions number 1, 2, 3, and 7, 8, 9 .

Table 4.1 Student Interview multimodal strategy of Palestinian cartoons

No	Cycle	Question/Answer
1	Q1	Have you ever used cartoons as a medium for language learning? If yes, how was your experience
	A1	<i>"Yes, I have. It was used in class when I was learning speaking through a YouTube video. I found the cartoon interesting and it helped me understand the material more easily."</i>
	B1	<i>"Yes, I have used cartoons. My experience was enjoyable because cartoons made the lessons more engaging and easier to understand."</i>
	C1	<i>"Yes, I have used cartoons as a medium for language learning. My experience was quite enjoyable because it helped me grasp the material more easily."</i>
	D1	<i>"Yes, I have used cartoons as a medium for language learning. My experience was quite enjoyable because cartoons made the lessons more engaging and easier to understand."</i>
	E1	<i>"Yes, I have. Cartoons made learning more interesting and less boring, especially in understanding context and expressions."</i>
2	Q2	To what extent do cartoons help you understand the concept of multimodal communication?
	A2	<i>"Quite helpful, because I can see how images, text, and characters' expressions support the message being conveyed."</i>
	B2	<i>"Cartoons are very helpful because they combine images, text, and sometimes sound, making the message clearer and easier to understand"</i>

	C2	<i>"Yes, cartoons help visualize the concept, making it easier to understand in multimodal communication."</i>
	D2	<i>"Cartoons are very helpful in understanding the concept of multimodality because they present messages through elements of images, text, and expressions, making it easier to comprehend."</i>
	E2	<i>"Quite helpful. Cartoons combine images, text, and sound, which makes it easier for me to grasp the meaning of multimodal communication."</i>
3	Q3	Which element is more dominant in capturing your attention visual or linguistic? Why?
	A3	<i>"I felt sad and concerned, especially when seeing the depictions of children's and families' suffering there."</i>
	B3	<i>"The visual element is more dominant because images immediately attract attention and can convey emotions or messages quickly."</i>
	C3	<i>"The visual element is more dominant because it draws attention and is instantly easier to understand."</i>
	D3	<i>"The visual element is more dominant in capturing attention because it is processed more quickly by the brain and is more emotionally engaging."</i>
	E3	<i>"Visual elements are more dominant because images instantly draw attention and help in understanding the content before even reading the text."</i>
4	Q7	Do you think cartoons can be an effective learning tool to improve students' language skills?
	A7	<i>"Yes, because the images and text complement each other. We can understand the language through the context of the images and simple dialogues."</i>
	B7	<i>"Yes, cartoons can be an effective learning tool because they make students more interested, less easily bored, and help them understand the language lesson more easily."</i>
	C7	<i>"The strategy can include discussions, writing assignments based on the cartoons, or asking students to retell the content of the cartoon in their own words."</i>
	D7	<i>"Yes, cartoons are effective because they increase learning motivation, help with understanding meaning in real contexts, and enrich vocabulary."</i>
	E7	<i>"Yes, cartoons help students learn vocabulary, expressions, and cultural context in an enjoyable way."</i>
5	Q8	What strategies can be applied to optimize the use of cartoons in language learning?
	A8	<i>"The strategy can include discussions, writing assignments based on the cartoon, or asking students to retell the cartoon's content in their own words."</i>
	B8	<i>"Strategies that can be applied include class discussions, cartoon analysis, and having students create their own cartoons to increase engagement."</i>
	C8	<i>"Strategies that can be applied include class discussions, cartoon analysis, and having students create their own cartoons to increase engagement."</i>
	D8	<i>"Strategies include selecting cartoons that match the theme, group discussions, writing exercises, and creative projects like making their own cartoons."</i>
	E9	<i>"Strategies: Choose cartoons that fit the learning topic, discuss the content and message with students, then ask them to create their own version of the cartoon."</i>
6	Q9	Do you feel there are challenges in understanding the multimodal messages in cartoons? If yes, what are the challenges?
	A9	<i>"Yes, sometimes I get confused by symbols or unfamiliar terms, so I need further explanation."</i>
	B9	<i>"Yes, sometimes the challenges lie in difficult language, unclear images, or symbols I don't understand."</i>
	C9	<i>"Yes, the challenge is understanding the symbolism and cultural context that is sometimes not explicitly explained."</i>
	D9	<i>"Yes, there are challenges such as unfamiliar symbols or cultures and ambiguous</i>

		<i>or metaphorical language.”</i>
	E9	<i>“Yes, there are. Sometimes it's difficult to interpret the meaning of symbols or humor if I don't understand the cultural context or background of the issue.”</i>

Based on the first interview results, students felt that using cartoons as a medium for language learning was enjoyable and effective. Cartoons helped them understand the material, especially in speaking skills, through the visualization of context, expressions, and dialogue. This medium was considered engaging, not boring, and made the learning process more lively. Cartoons also combine visual and linguistic elements in a balanced way, making messages easier to comprehend. The learning process became more interactive and increased students focus. Therefore, cartoons have great potential as a meaningful learning aid.

The second interview results showed that cartoons were perceived as moderately to highly helpful in enabling students to understand the concept of multimodal communication. Cartoons convey messages through text, images, expressions, and sound that complement each other. The combination of visual, verbal, and auditory modes made it easier for students to grasp the meaning comprehensively. Cartoons also helped visualize ideas more clearly and contextually. Students recognized that each multimodal element reinforces the message and meaning. This medium made the material easier to understand and more engaging. Exposure to cartoons provided insight into communication in a complex form. Cartoons were effective in supporting multimodal language learning.

The third interview results indicated that visual elements were more dominant in capturing students' attention compared to linguistic elements in cartoon based learning, especially in the context of Palestinian cartoons. Images were considered capable of conveying emotions and messages instantly without the need for verbal processing. Visuals were also more effective in evoking empathy, particularly when portraying the suffering of victims. These elements are quickly processed by the brain and trigger strong emotional responses. This enhances students' memory retention and understanding. Visuals serve as the initial key in grasping meaning before reading the text. These findings highlight the important role of the visual mode in multimodal strategies. Visuals reinforce linguistic messages and deepen students' emotional engagement.

The fourth interview results showed that cartoons were effective in improving students' language skills. Images and text complemented each other, making it easier to understand context. Cartoons also increased learning interest and enriched vocabulary. Strategies such as discussions and retelling helped improve speaking and writing skills. Learning became more enjoyable and meaningful. Cartoons taught language in a functional and communicative way. Palestinian cartoons also strengthened the understanding of values and culture. Overall, cartoons supported an integrative approach to language learning.

The fifth interview results indicated that the strategy for using cartoons should be participatory and contextual. Students suggested activities such as discussion, analysis, writing, and creating their own cartoons. These activities encourage active engagement and language comprehension. Choosing cartoons that align with the lesson theme helps connect the content to real-life contexts. Cartoons also train reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. In addition, they enrich creativity and cultural understanding. Cartoons thus become an engaging and meaningful learning medium.

The sixth interview results revealed that students faced difficulties in understanding multimodal messages in cartoons, especially related to unfamiliar symbols, cultures, and language. They often felt confused by implied meanings, foreign terms, or metaphorical language. Cartoons like those about Palestine contain symbols of struggle that require cultural and social context. Therefore, teacher guidance, discussion, and

symbolic explanation are needed to help students understand the messages accurately and critically.

Based on the results of the student interviews in the table above, it can be concluded that most students had a positive experience using cartoons as a medium for language learning. They stated that cartoons made it easier and more enjoyable to understand the material. Additionally, cartoons were considered effective in introducing the concept of multimodal communication through the combination of images, text, and sound, which strengthened message comprehension. The visual element was the most dominant aspect in capturing students' attention, as it could convey information quickly and emotionally. Students also acknowledged that cartoons can be an effective learning tool for improving language skills through strategies such as discussion, writing assignments, and creating their own cartoons. However, some challenges were also encountered, such as difficulties in understanding symbols, foreign terms, and unfamiliar cultural contexts presented in the cartoons. Therefore, guidance in explaining context and symbols is important to optimize understanding of multimodal messages in language learning. For complete data, see the student interview results.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze how Palestinian cartoons utilize visual and linguistic elements to convey sociopolitical ideologies and explore how these multimodal features can be applied in language teaching to enhance students' understanding of multimodal communication. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on textual or linguistic aspects alone, this research integrates symbolic imagery, emotional language, and rhetorical strategies to examine how meaning is constructed and how it can foster both cognitive and affective engagement in the classroom.

Qualitative findings from classroom observations, interviews, and students' analytical activities support the effectiveness of this approach. Observation results showed that students were able to identify visual symbols such as watermelons, national flags, and scenes of destruction and connect them to ideological meanings. They also demonstrated an improved ability to interpret the interplay of text, images, and color in conveying resistance narratives. Analysis of discussions and written reflections revealed deeper critical awareness, empathy, and the capacity to link multimodal analysis to real world sociopolitical contexts.

An unexpected and compelling finding was the emergence of strong emotional responses from students, even among those without cultural or political ties to the Palestinian context. The integration of emotionally charged imagery and rhetorical language created a safe space for students to explore humanitarian and political issues without feeling pressured, fostering cross-cultural empathy and active participation. These affective factors, emotional connection, and supportive classroom dynamics played a crucial role in enhancing cognitive engagement, even though they were not the initial focus of the study.

Therefore, the MCDA based approach using Palestinian cartoons has proven effective not only in improving students' interpretive skills but also in fostering critical awareness of sociopolitical ideologies. By integrating multimodal analysis into language teaching, students engaged more deeply with texts, constructed more informed interpretations, and applied critical thinking in ways that are socially and contextually relevant. The implications of these findings highlight the importance of incorporating multimodal and socially conscious materials into pedagogy to support both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that Palestinian cartoons combine visual and linguistic elements to deliver powerful sociopolitical messages, particularly on themes such as oppression, resistance, and national identity. Through MCDA, the findings reveal that visual symbols such as watermelons, national flags, ruins, and depictions of civilians paired with emotionally charged diction evoke empathy, critical awareness, and cross cultural understanding among students. The integration of symbolic imagery, rhetorical language, and cultural context demonstrates how these multimodal texts construct compelling ideological narratives. The analysis also indicates that such materials can be effectively used in language learning to enhance students' interpretive abilities, critical thinking, and social awareness.

Recommendations Based on the Research Findings:

1. For Language and Media Educators: Integrate Palestinian cartoons into classroom activities to promote critical discussion of sociopolitical issues while teaching multimodal communication skills.
2. For Curriculum Developers: Include culturally relevant and multimodal materials to connect language learning with real world contexts and foster empathy.
3. For Researchers: Conduct comparative studies between Palestinian cartoons and other political or cultural cartoon traditions to examine similarities and differences in multimodal strategies.
4. For Future Research: Explore audience reception to better understand how different cultural backgrounds influence the interpretation of ideological messages in cartoons.

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