

YOUTUBE videos to develop multimodal literacy

Vídeos de YOUTUBE para desarrollar la alfabetización multimodal

Carolina Girón-García

Universitat Jaume I

gironc@uji.es

Abstract

Teaching and learning in English have been growing recently (Mitchell, 2016), and the general trend towards internationalisation in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts in Higher Education (HE) has led to an increased emphasis on English language instruction (Dafouz & Smit, 2020). Several studies in applied linguistics have focused on the analysis of digital genres (i.e., Internet and videos) in the ESP classroom (Bernad-Mechó & Girón-García, 2023; Girón-García & Fortanet-Gómez, 2023). Recently, the digitisation of materials, resources, and teaching activities has grown exponentially. Previous studies have examined how digital genres (Shepherd & Watters, 1998; Luzón, et al., 2010) develop and take advantage of the potential of the Internet in the digital era (Kress, 2010). They have proved that a stronger digital presence and more diversity of semiotic resources and communication channels are increasingly in demand by 21st-century learners to address their learning needs. The aim of this study is to analyse the multimodal

nature of *YouTube* videos in a Legal English classroom by (1) raising students' level of awareness of the multimodal characteristics present in *YouTube* videos, and (2) carrying out a multimodal discourse analysis of an extract of one video used in an ESP Law course at HE to unveil the features students must be made aware of. A multi-layered annotation tool (Multimodal Analysis – Video (MAV)) (O'Halloran et al., 2012) was used to attain the second aim. The results derived from this study may broaden students' comprehension of how multimodal communication occurs (i.e., how to acquire multimodal awareness) to become multimodally literate (i.e., to acquire multimodal literacy).

Keywords: Digital genres, multimodal awareness, multimodal literacy, legal English, ESP.

Resumen

La enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés han ido en aumento en los últimos tiempos (Mitchell, 2016), y la tendencia general hacia la internacionalización en contextos de Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE) en la Educación Superior (ES) ha llevado a un mayor énfasis en la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa (Dafouz & Smit, 2020). Varios estudios de lingüística aplicada se han centrado en el análisis de los géneros digitales (es decir, Internet y vídeos) en el aula de ESP (Bernad-Mechó & Girón-García, 2023; Girón-García & Fortanet-Gómez, 2023). Recientemente, la digitalización de materiales, recursos y actividades de enseñanza ha crecido exponencialmente. Estudios previos han examinado cómo los géneros digitales (Shepherd & Watters, 1998; Luzón, et al., 2010) se desarrollan y aprovechan el potencial de Internet en la era digital (Kress, 2010). Además, han demostrado que una mayor presencia digital y una mayor diversidad de recursos semióticos y canales de comunicación, son cada vez más demandados por los alumnos del siglo XXI para hacer frente a sus necesidades de aprendizaje. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar la naturaleza multimodal de los vídeos de

YouTube en un aula de Inglés Jurídico mediante (1) la concienciación de los estudiantes sobre las características multimodales presentes en los vídeos de *YouTube*, y (2) la realización de un análisis multimodal del discurso de un vídeo utilizado en una clase de Derecho en Educación Superior con el fin desvelar las características que los estudiantes deben conocer. Para alcanzar el segundo objetivo se utilizó una herramienta de anotación multicapa (Análisis Multimodal - Vídeo (MAV)). Los resultados derivados de este estudio pueden ampliar la comprensión de los estudiantes sobre cómo se produce la comunicación multimodal (cómo adquirir conciencia multimodal) para convertirse en alfabetizados multimodales (para adquirir alfabetización multimodal).

Palabras clave: Géneros digitales, comprensión multimodal, alfabetización multimodal, inglés jurídico, IFE.

1. Theoretical framework

This study aims to examine the multimodal nature of one of the *YouTube* videos, offered in the lesson task included in an ESP course on Legal English at HE. Furthermore, it aims at determining the level of awareness of students on the features of *YouTube* videos and, consequently, boost the acquisition of multimodal literacy. To achieve this goal, the following research questions are addressed:

RQ₁–What are the main criteria that Legal English students take into account to watch *YouTube* videos in their field?

RQ₂–What are the multimodal characteristics present in these videos? How much potential do *YouTube* videos provide given their multimodal nature?

RQ₃–To what extent are Legal English students aware of multimodal features in *YouTube* videos? How can students' acquisition of *multimodal awareness* affect their *multimodal literacy*?

1.1. Digital genres

Prior research has studied the development of digital genres (Swales, 1990; Shepherd & Watters, 1998; Kress, 2010; Luzón & Pérez-Llantada, 2022) and hence the way they harness the possibilities of the Internet in the 21st century. In this line, “digital natives” demand a greater digital presence and diversity of semiotic resources and communication channels to address their learning needs (Prensky, 2001). Therefore, integrating multimodal materials and resources in a digital context to support other conventional materials in the classroom has become almost mandatory for many teachers. The use of digital resources and their evolution from traditional genres (e.g., magazines, newspapers, among others.) to cybergenres have led to various digital platforms hosting countless resources. These resources facilitate the dissemination of scientific knowledge to a much larger audience. *YouTube* videos, for instance, play an important role in teaching English. These videos are generally regarded as a technology resource that accompanies approaches to language teaching with the benefit of experiencing the foreign language in an authentic environment (Toleuzhan et al., 2023). According to Albahiri and Alhaj (2020), many language teachers now prefer to use *YouTube* videos to reinforce English language learning in the classrooms and complement it by adding even better and more valuable material to the course curricula.

1.2. Online tasks and the integration of digital videos

Although the Internet offers countless video resources, the most popular ones are online videos hosted on *YouTube* channels, as scientific knowledge seems to reach young people in a more entertaining and motivating way (Kim, 2012). As a result, teachers can contribute to language learning by integrating these materials (Suárez & González, 2020) such as online *YouTube* videos into the Higher Education (HE) classroom.

The existing literature on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has shown that the integration of technological tools, as well as the use of integrated text and video resources by following the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach (Long, 2016) in a *WebQuest* (Dodge, 2001), fosters critical thinking by using information from the Internet appropriately. A *TalenQuest* (Koenraad, 2010) focuses on enhancing the use of ICTs to learn foreign languages. Similar studies with *WebQuest*-based model tasks (i.e., *Cybertasks*) (Girón-García, 2013), involve students in using the information from the Internet to collect, use and transform that knowledge. All these online tasks have proven not only to bring multiple benefits to language learning but also for the development of greater motivation and learning autonomy (Girón-García & Boghiu-Balaur, 2021). Additionally, the adaptation of the *Cybertask*-based model to an online lesson task integrated into a Moodle platform has proven to have several advantages for the students (Silvestre-López & Girón-García, 2023): (1) Involvement in the selection, process and management of appropriate digital information and resources for the task; (2) Autonomous language learning by using ICTs; (3) Active participation of students' learning process with online resources and (4) Evaluation of students' acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, it is proven that the design of online tasks for pedagogical purposes is beneficial for students in HE settings (Silvestre-López & Girón-García, 2023). Hence, the research gap that we address in this research starts from the lesson task in which an infinite number of multimodal resources, especially *YouTube* videos, as authentic materials, can be integrated. Therefore, we intend to carry out a multimodal study using one of these videos integrated into the lesson task to make students reflect on the relevance of semiotic resources in their learning and, therefore, raise their multimodal awareness and multimodal literacy.

1.3. YouTube videos as instructional resources and their multimodal features

Previous literature on the use of *YouTube* videos as pedagogical resources in the ESP classroom has focused on the multimodal analysis of strategies that are engaging (e.g., language puns, visual register shifting, humour as comic relief, taboos, among others) (Bernad-Mechó & Valeiras-Jurado, 2023; Bernad-Mechó & Girón-García, 2023) for online users to make knowledge accessible to a wider audience. In addition, some studies describe their multiple benefits for students; for example, improving content comprehension, promoting digital literacy (Pattier, 2021), improving communication skills (Karami, 2019), motivation and learning (Yildirim, 2018) and self-reflection on teaching practices (Bautista et al., 2019). Other studies, such as Alhamami (2013) and Zarzycki (2021), focus on different criteria to select the best video resources for pedagogical purposes. Among these, the following are mentioned: *technical characteristics* (sound, length), *attractiveness* (subtitles, pictures), *clarity* (body language, speed of voice), *reaction* (likes, dislikes), and *content* (adequate structure, among others.).

Previous literature in the field of digital genres also offers classifications of video productions (Brezeale & Cook, 2008; Hansch et al., 2015; Crook & Schofield, 2017). However, this research will focus on the classifications provided by Muñoz-Morcillo et al. (2016) and Boy et al. (2020) because their classification of video productions provides a clear-cut categorisation of the type of video analysed in this study. More specifically, Muñoz-Morcillo et al. (2016) have already identified up to 15 different video productions, such as reportage, essay film, animation/cartoon and documentary, among others. Other studies, such as that of Boy et al. (2020), establish an alternative classification of *YouTube* videos limited to just four types: (1) *Presentation films*, characterised by a speaker who talks directly to the camera in a medium shot. These videos give prominence to text over embodied modes (e.g., language, gestures, gaze, head

movements, among others.) and filmic modes (e.g., animations and background images) (Bernad-Mechó & Valeiras-Jurado, 2022). (2) *Expert films* portray an expert who gets involved in a discussion of a field. These videos feature a combination of the expert's image together with moving image material, such as animations or inserting comments. (3) *Animation films* depict artificial moving images to represent more conventional content (e.g., a problem or an issue) to the content of a more scientific nature. Finally, (4) *narrative explanatory films* are more complex because they focus on a general question that needs to be answered with arguments that follow logical reasoning (e.g., documentary, reportage) (Muñoz-Morcillo et al., 2016). These videos are characterised by containing a high number of filmic modes (e.g., type of shot, cuts, angle, and sound effects) (Bernad-Mechó & Valeiras-Jurado, 2022), mainly cuts. These cuts might be *structural*, defined as visual or auditory shifts in a video that change the narrator's content and structure. (i.e., cuts that are used to establish transitions between several scenes). Accordingly, these cuts create a coherent flow of ideas, allowing the audience to focus on the message conveyed. On the other hand, *functional* cuts are those edits created for a specific purpose or function, such as conveying information (i.e., these are made for specific functional needs, such as creating emphasis or informing, among others.) to create effectiveness.

YouTube videos may be somehow difficult to understand for different reasons: First, they offer specific content and terminology that belongs to a particular field of specialization (e.g., law, business, engineering, among others). In this sense, a series of "recontextualization" strategies (Luzón, 2019) might facilitate specialised language comprehension. Moreover, *YouTube* videos are envisaged as "multimodal arrangements" (Boy et al., 2020) that are composed of verbal and visual modes. Modes are regarded as recurrent semiotic systems following rules in their use (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). In this sense, any system that conveys meaning in each interaction might be considered a mode (Kress, 2010).

Regarding *YouTube* videos, Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó (2022) have identified two main types of modes: *embodied* and *filmic*. They state that embodied modes are those that are performed through the body (e.g., language, paralinguage, gestures, facial expressions, head movements, proxemics, gaze, among others.), and filmic modes comprise those that convey meaning through the production and post-production processes of the videos (e.g., type of shot, cuts, music, angle, visual prompts, sound and video effects, and *mise-en-scène*, among others.). Each of these modes interacts with one another, creating multimodal ensembles. Understanding and studying these combinations of modes (Jewitt, 2009) is fundamental to conducting multimodal analyses that can unveil the intricacies of how these associations of modes work in interaction (Bernad-Mechó & Girón-García, 2023). Furthermore, other studies (Fortanet-Gómez & Ruiz-Madrid, 2014; Querol-Julián, 2011; Ruiz-Madrid & Fortanet-Gómez, 2019) have considered other multimodal elements in their analysis of video resources, such as *words* (used as stylistic strategies and metadiscourse), *kinesics* (gestures, head movements, gaze and facial expressions), and *paralinguage* (two voice qualities and one voice differentiator, together with their functions in the discourse).

Teachers need training in how to establish criteria when selecting videos for their classes. The study conducted by Bernad-Mechó and Girón-García (2023) promotes teachers' *multimodal awareness* when ESP teachers select materials for their courses. Teachers are aware of the importance that semiotic resources have for the design of (online) activities and, as a result, foster students' motivation (Girón-García, Forthcoming, 2025). Other studies also focus on the *multimodal awareness* of digital resources. Ruiz-Madrid and Valeiras-Jurado (2020) conducted a study with HE students on the development of multimodal competence in 'Research Pitches' (RPs). Their findings revealed that the participants identified some multimodal features (such as intonation, gestures or even gaze), in the tasks they were given. Another study on digital stories (Dahlström, 2021) concluded that the students' previous knowledge was essential to understanding the digital and modal

opportunities for creating those stories and that enabling students to use multiple modes and media improves their ability to perform tasks that require both multimodal and digital competence.

Against this backdrop, there are no previous studies on students' *multimodal awareness* of *YouTube* videos. Accordingly, this study aims to raise students' awareness of the concept of genre and new forms of communication in a digital context from a multimodal perspective (i.e., *multimodal awareness* of a digital genre) to acquire *multimodal literacy* (Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023).

As we shall see later, the video selected for this study could be categorised as an animation film, according to Muñoz-Morcillo et al. (2016). A fragment from this *Animation* video was selected because of its technical characteristics and engaging nature for the multimodal analysis carried out in this research (see Section 2). Apart from that, the lesson task consists of a series of questions that students will be required, for which a list of *YouTube* video resources is provided. The relationship between this task and the questionnaire used to gather the data (see Appendix) lies in finding out which multimodal features of *YouTube* videos students consider when deciding to watch (or not) certain online videos when these are embedded in a task such as the one designed for this research.

2. Methodology

This section describes the method used to conduct this study. First, the context and participants in which the study took place; second, the two analytical tools used. Finally, the selection process and analysis of a fragment of a *YouTube* video will also be described.

This study was designed using a mixed methods approach, combining rich and detailed insights from qualitative research (i.e., a multimodal annotation and analysis of videos) with the numerical precision of quantitative research (i.e., a questionnaire on multimodal features of *YouTube* videos).

2.1. Context and participants

The study was conducted at *Universitat Jaume I* (Spain) during the autumn term of 2022. This period is chosen as it is the time when the Legal English course is taught. Therefore, students are more likely to respond to the questionnaire. The survey was carried out with 165 students from the same university enrolled in a bachelor's degree in law. They are in their first year with an English level of A2 (as accredited by the secondary school). Some of these students have higher levels (from B1 to B2) according to the CEFR.

2.2. Students' questionnaire on multimodal features of YouTube videos

A questionnaire, designed for the present research and adapted from Girón-García and Fortanet-Gómez (2023) (see Appendix), has been used as an analytical instrument for data collection. It was elaborated to elicit students' criteria to watch *YouTube* videos embedded in online tasks in the field of law. The questionnaire is composed of 5 questions, and the choice of a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = "always", 2 = "sometimes", 3 = "rarely", and 4 = "never", has been preferred for general trends and broader categorisations, and therefore maintains simplicity for the respondents. Nevertheless, this scale has only been used for some questions. Other questions required students' interest in specific content, as well as their knowledge gained from watching *YouTube* videos. The questionnaire was distributed to 165 students using Google Forms before completing the lesson task.

The answers the students provided in this questionnaire offered data related to (1) students' interest or lack of interest in watching videos of a legal nature, (2) the frequency with which they watch those videos concerning some specific features (e.g., length, sound and image quality, attractiveness, the complexity of the discourse, among others.), (3) students' willingness of watching those

videos for academic interest of feeling of obligation (i.e., on behalf of the teacher), (4) students' frequency with which they consider some characteristics when watching a *YouTube* video, which in turn, is embedded in an online task, and (4) students' knowledge from watching *YouTube* videos (e.g., type of content, vocabulary and specific terminology) in the field of law.

2.3. The YouTube video integrated into a lesson task: Sources of International Law

The lesson task – integrated into the Moodle platform – (Figure 1) is the final course assessment that evaluates the students' knowledge gained. For this reason, the activities proposed in this task are aimed at consolidating or reinforcing the contents of each unit, as well as revising specific vocabulary and terminology related to the field of law. The task includes 10 activities organised in 8 blocks (each block corresponds to a unit of the course syllabus). Accordingly, each activity also includes a list of online resources (text and video) to support students in solving the questions. Nevertheless, we will only focus on video resources because these provide multimodal characteristics that will be analysed in this study (block 4, activity 4.2; see Figure 1). Accordingly, the role of the video “Sources of International Law” is to conduct the multimodal analysis. The aforementioned video, specifically chosen by the lecturer of the course for this analysis, has a certain complexity about specific terminology (i.e., legal English), so it serves to review the contents of the entire semester. On the other hand, the lesson is composed of different questions. They have a list of video resources the students can choose randomly, not all of them necessarily, to respond to the proposed questions.

The activity proposed in the lesson task required students to watch a video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oViSYjt-wGw>) regarding the sources of International Law to write a brief piece of

text (from eighty to one hundred words approximately). After watching the video twice, students had to take their notes to develop their writing following the structure given by the teacher to help them guide their text (i.e., (1) Introduction: defining the concept of the source of law; (2) Sources of International Law; (3) Other sources of International Law and (4) Conclusion).

Figure 1. YouTube video “Sources of International Law” embedded into the lesson task



The selected video, “Sources of International Law” (Figure 1), is a pedagogical *animation film* (Bernad-Mechó & Valeiras-Jurado, 2022) which provides an overview of the sources of international public law as stated in Article 38 of the International Court of Justice. It is an animated video with simple and clear language, which makes it accessible to an audience not necessarily familiarised with the field

of law. It is useful for first-year law students for two reasons: first, they are not yet specialists in the content and, second, the inclusion of subtitles enhances the general understanding of the video/explanation. Hesham El Rafei, a legal adviser for the Abu Dhabi Government, arbitrator and lawmaker, is the narrator of the video. He also works for *The Nottingham Trent University* and hosts the *YouTube* channel called *Lex Animata* with 21.800 subscribers. The video lasts two minutes and thirty-five seconds and by the time it was chosen, it had 284.702 views and 2.729 likes.

The video is divided into three parts: (1) *Source of law* as an introductory description to the main topic, (2) *Sources of international law*: Treaty and Customary law. Customary law is divided into “state practice” and “opinio juris” and (3) *Other sources of international law* as a conclusion of the central topic. The transitions between these three parts are associated with each of the sources of international law. In fact, each time one type of source is explained in the video, a transition (see shaded cells) takes place (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Structure of the video “Sources of International Law”

Source of law (introduction)	Sources of international law (description)	Sources of international law (Treaty)	Sources of international law (Customary)	Other sources of international law (conclusion)
				

For this study, a short fragment was selected (from 01:06 to 01:54) to exemplify the multimodal analysis because of the higher

presence of modes. It has a duration of 50 seconds. This fragment explains one source of International Law (i.e., Customary Law), which, in turn, is divided into “State Practice” and “Opinio Juris”.

2.4. Multimodal annotation and analysis of videos

In order to analyse the selected fragment (from minute 01:06 to 01:54), the MAV framework was used for its annotation. It contains a large number of filmic elements and students’ answers in the questionnaire regarding their preferences towards watching *YouTube* videos embedded in an online task. This fragment was multimodally annotated using the Multimodal Analysis Video (MAV)¹ (O’Halloran et al., 2012) and following Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó (2022), as well as Bernad-Mechó and Girón-García’s (2023) framework. Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó (2022) identified two main layers for a multimodal analysis: embodied modes (i.e., verbal and non-verbal modes of body language performance that depend on the presenter/narrator) and filmic modes (i.e., semiotic modes detached from the presenter/narrator and related to the editing process). Regarding *embodied modes*, the following have been considered: (1) language, understood as the complexity of the discourse (e.g., whether language is comprehensible and simple for the audiences’ proficiency language level. Also, affordable language, leaving the technical or specialised terminology of the law field apart and (2) paralanguage: voice over; pauses, which are understood as silences that are longer than half a second; prominence, (i.e., prominent strands of speech) such as a change in tone or any other salient feature, among others. Regarding the *filmic modes*, (1) cuts that are present in the editing process, and

¹ Multi-layer annotation software that allows users describe the use of semiotic modes (e.g., proxemics, gestures, gaze, head movements, among others) in videos.

may be evinced by a change in sound, appearance or disappearance of images, and even visual prompts (i.e., a combination of images and text); (2) music; (3) sound and visual effects (i.e., digital effects added during the editing process; (4) colours; (5) relationship between visuals and voice; (6) image in motion and (7) locations and types of images. The qualitative analysis of multimodal ensembles (i.e., the combination of embodied and filmic modes) will help us unveil how these modes interact when they are combined.

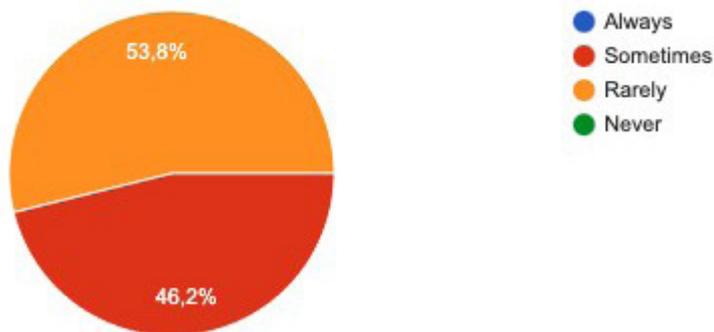
3. Results

3.1. *Students' questionnaire results*

This section describes the responses of the 165 students who participated in this study to the criteria they consider when watching *YouTube* videos in their field of study (i.e., law), when these videos are embedded into an online task; as well as to their views on other elements such as content, vocabulary and specific terminology they learn from watching them.

Regarding the question, “Do you watch YouTube videos related to your field of study (i.e., law)? If the answer to the previous question is “Yes”, how often do you watch them?”, all the students surveyed watched videos related to their field of study. With regards to frequency (Figure 3) of watching those videos, according to the parameters “*Always*”, “*Sometimes*”, “*Rarely*” and “*Never*” (see question 2 in the questionnaire, Appendix), out of all the students, 53.8% rarely watched videos of a legal nature in comparison with 46.2% who affirmed watching them sometimes.

Figure 3. Frequency in which students watch YouTube videos about law



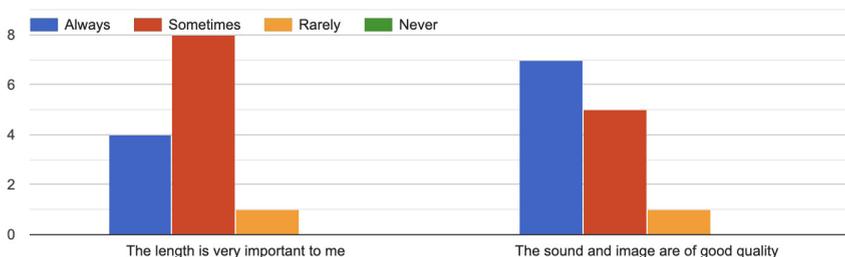
Concerning the question, “Do you watch them because you are interested, or simply because the teacher used them in the classroom, and you have no choice?”, only 7.7% of the students surveyed watch *YouTube* videos of a legal nature because they are not given a choice. This means that these students watch such videos because the lecturer plays them in class as a visual resource. Another 46.2% argue that they watch these types of videos because they are interested and because the teacher plays them in class (so they have no choice).

With regard to the *frequency* (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8), in line with the parameters

“*Always*”, “*Sometimes*”, “*Rarely*” and “*Never*” (see question 4 in the questionnaire, Appendix), the following criteria were used by the students for watching *YouTube* videos embedded in an online task.

Considering the *technical characteristics* of the videos (Figure 4), such as length, sound and image quality, as well as visual aids, most students (95%) surveyed said that they sometimes considered the *length* of the video when watching it for task purposes. Nevertheless, just a few students (5%) rarely contemplate this criterion as relevant. More than half of the students who responded to the questionnaire stated that the video(s) selected to develop a

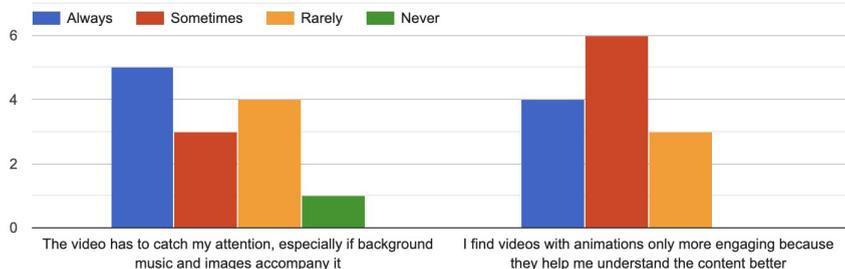
Figure 4. Frequency of the video selection: length and quality of sound/ image



given task should have *good quality of sound and image*. Similarly, more than half of the students considered *visual aids* should be suitable to help them understand the content.

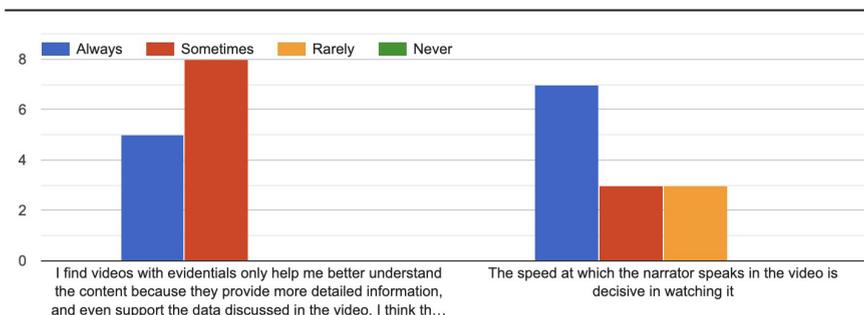
Half of the students surveyed (50%) find videos with *animations* (Figure 5) only more engaging because animations help them understand the content better.

Figure 5. Frequency of the video selection: attractiveness and animations



In contrast, videos with only *evidentials* (Figure 6) are the preferred type by most students (95%) since they consider that the complete content they provide, as well as the detailed information supporting the data discussed in the video, are important factors that help students to better understand the content.

Figure 6. Frequency of the video selection: evidentials and speed of narrator



With reference to complexity of the discourse, this is a criterion particularly appreciated by the students who responded to the questionnaire (more than half of the students – 70%).

Concerning the use of subtitles, most students (95%) find this criterion relevant because providing the video transcript makes it easier for students to understand the content.

Regarding *attractiveness*, 80% of the students surveyed considered that for their selection, the videos had to catch their attention, especially if background music and images accompanied them.

Figure 7. Frequency of the video selection: subtitles and credibility

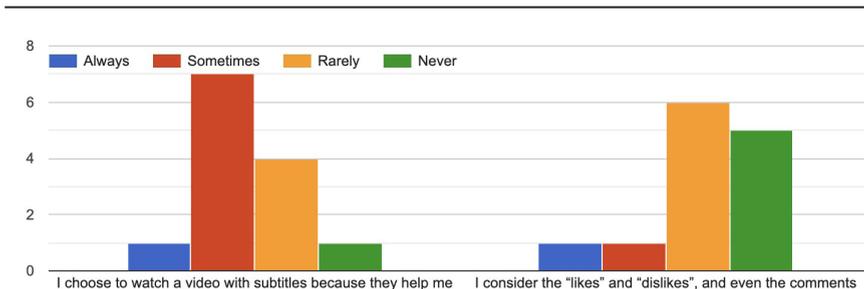
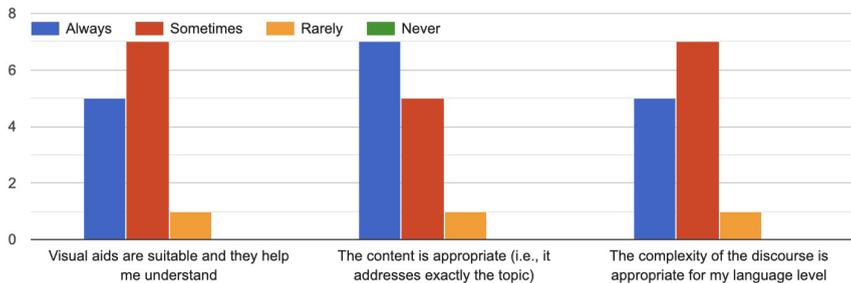


Figure 8. Frequency of the video selection: visual aids, content, and discourse



Concerning the “likes” and “dislikes” and even the *comments* on the video that make it more reliable, are not criteria highly considered for many students (30%) to develop a task.

Finally, to the question, “Which of the following do you learn from watching YouTube videos in your field (i.e., law)?”, almost all the students (95%) who responded to the questionnaire stated that they had learned new vocabulary and specific terminology, as well as discipline-specific content to better understand the subject matter of the course.

3.2. Multimodal analysis

This section presents a multimodal discourse analysis of a fragment of one animation video (Sources of International Law, from minute 01:06 to 01:54). Considering the previous literature on multimodal features in videos (see section 2), the different multimodal traits present in this fragment will be described and analysed.

The content of the video consists of a narrator who briefly explains the different sources of international law as stated in Article

38 of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) statute: treaty, customary law, court decisions, jurisprudence and law principles.

The transcript of this fragment reads as follows: “The 2nd source is customary law (PAUSE) as evidence of the general States Practice accepted as law (PAUSE). At the outset (PAUSE), international law was mainly regulated by customs (PAUSE), which is an unwritten rule and consists of two parts (PAUSE) States Practice and *Opinio Juris* (PAUSE). State Practice is the material part of customary law, and it combines States behaviour and actions. In other words, it means what States do and say (PAUSE). *Opinio Juris* is the second part of customary law (PAUSE), and it means that the States, verbal or material acts, have to be accepted as a binding law by the rest of the international community (PAUSE). For instance, the world accepts and believes that it’s legal for a State to act in a self-defence. In addition to treaties and customs...”

As stated, it is an animation film (Boy et al., 2020; Muñoz-Morcillo et al., 2016) explaining a concept. Both static figures and images with movement appear. Therefore, the central focus of the multimodal analysis will be the *filmic modes*. However, some elements belonging to embodiment (i.e., *embodied modes*), such as language and paralanguage, will also be analysed, since aspects such as the voice of the narrator (as an element detached from the rest of the animations) are relevant. Following Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó’s (2022) multimodal framework, Table 1 presents a summary of the multimodal analysis of the video extract selected for this research.

With the analysis of this fragment, it may be concluded that the integration and combination of different modes help maintain the audience’s interest and motivation. Table 1 exemplifies this extract that combines ten multimodal ensembles (embodied and filmic).

Concerning the embodied modes, the interpretation of this multimodal analysis is that having a *verbal transcript* might help

*Table 1 Multimodal analysis of embodied and filmic modes
(adapted from Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó, 2022)*

EMBODIED MODES	<i>Language</i> : Simple, plain, affordable, comprehensible, reformulation
	<i>Paralanguage</i> : Voice-over, pauses, prominence, pitch, intonation
FILMIC MODES	<i>Cuts</i> : A total of 6 cuts (“structural” and “functional”)
	<i>Visual prompts</i> (e.g., animated 2D cartoons / images and text)
	<i>Music</i> : Dynamic and gentle sound (relaxing)
	<i>Sound and visual effects</i> : Digital effects added during the editing process
	<i>Colours</i> : Combination of vivid and plain colours
	<i>Relationship between visuals and voice</i>
	<i>Image in motion</i> : A Roman carrying a column on his back, an Egyptian carrying two objects in her hands, war boats, missile, fire, handwriting on a blackboard, magnifying glass, helicopter, bomb/grenade
	<i>Locations and types of images</i> : Several locations (e.g., China, Egypt, Rome), and types of images (e.g., cartoons and emoticons)

students understand legal concepts of a legal nature, specialised terminology and vocabulary. Also, the simple and accessible *language* makes it more comprehensible to the public (i.e., non-specialised audience), without the need to be an expert on the

subject. Reformulations are also important components in clarifying more formal language. The narrator explains the concept of “State Practice” in a more formal way, and automatically reformulates it into an informal language (e.g., “In other words, it means what States do and say”). *Paralanguage* is another relevant feature found in this video that needs to be considered when watching *YouTube* videos. The alternation of the narrator’s voice-over, together with a combination of pauses and prominence, pitch and intonation make up an interconnected environment that enhances comprehension of the video.

From the perspective of the filmic modes used, *cuts* included in the edition process to signal shifts, are also present in this video.

As already commented, cuts might be “structural” or “functional” (section 1.3). In this fragment, 3 structural cuts appear accomplished by using transitional phrases (e.g., “At the outset”) and pauses (Figure 9, Image 1). The effective use of these cuts can increase the clarity and impact of a message, thus improving the ability of the audience to understand and remember the information being presented. Regarding functional cuts (n= 3), these are part of the editing process whose function is to convey information and emphasise a concept or idea improving the clarity and coherence of the message transmitted. For example, in our case, when the narrator explains what customary law is and into which parts it is divided (i.e., *State Practice* and *Opinio Juris*), he introduces a pause with an emphatic function to establish a clear distinction in the meaning of these two concepts making them easier to understand for the audience (Figure 9, Image 3). This function can be observed in the fragment below:

“*State Practice* is the material part of customary law, and it combines States behaviour and actions. In other words, it means what States do and say (PAUSE). *Opinio Juris* is the second part of customary law (PAUSE)”.

Filmically, the relationship between *visuals and voice* (Figure 9, Image 2) is a fundamental element, as the images are a remarkable multimodal constituent that, together with the narrator's voice, complements and facilitates the student's comprehension of content (Girón-García & Fortanet-Gómez, 2023) and the target language used (i.e., English). *Visual prompts* also play an important role, provided the images and the text appear simultaneously in alignment. Furthermore, the fact that this video contains emoticons and animated 2D cartoons (Figure 9, Image 4) makes it even more attractive for the viewer, giving it even a humorous twist. Finally, cultural environments are represented by using several locations in the video (e.g., China, Egypt and Rome) (Figure 9, Image 5).

4. Discussion

To respond to the objective set out in this research, i.e., to explore the multimodal nature of *YouTube* videos in a Legal English classroom and to determine students' awareness of the multimodal features of *YouTube* videos through multimodal discourse analysis, the following research questions were addressed:

4.1. What are the main criteria that Legal English students take into account to watch YouTube videos in their field?

Most Legal English students (95%) value length (as a technical characteristic) when watching a video on *YouTube*, especially since they are watching it for an academic purpose, i.e., they must complete an online task with a clear purpose. For this reason, it is a criterion they often consider. This principle is in line with Alhamami (2013) and Zarzycki (2021). These authors give importance to technical characteristics as essential criteria when watching videos.

Figure 9. Multimodal analysis of filmic modes (V_01:06 - 01:54)

NO	SCREENSHOT	TRANSCRIPTION	FILMIC MODES
1		<p>“...international law was mainly regulated by customs...”</p>	<p>Several locations</p>
2		<p>“State Practice is the material part of customary law, and it combines States behaviour and actions”</p>	<p>Visual prompts</p>
3		<p>“The 2nd source is customary law...”</p>	<p>Functional cut</p>
4		<p>“In addition to treaties and customs...”</p>	<p>Types of images: Emoticons</p>
5		<p>“At the outset”</p>	<p>Structural cut: transition phrases and pauses</p>

Regarding motivation and learning (Yildirim, 2018), videos with animations are more engaging for 50% of the students because they help students better understand the content. In contrast, videos with *evidentials* are preferred by most students (95%) because they do not only favour content comprehension, which is in line with Pattier (2021) but also provide more detailed and complete information by supporting the data discussed in the video. Although videos providing transcripts help understand the content better, this is not a predominant key factor for our students when watching videos.

On the other hand, regarding the content and complexity of discourse of a *YouTube* video embedded in an online task, Legal English students consider that content must be appropriate for the task (i.e., it must address exactly the topic).

Finally, the complexity of the discourse is another most appreciated criterion by these students (Girón-García & Fortanet-Gómez, 2023). This pattern is important given not all Law students have the same English level (from A2 to B2) in this 1st-year course, to the extent that it may become a hindrance or an additional difficulty in understanding the content of the video and, consequently, solving the task effectively.

4.2. What are the multimodal characteristics present in these videos? How much potential do YouTube videos provide given their multimodal nature?

In line with Boy et al. (2020) and Muñoz-Morcillo et al. (2016), the extract analysed (i.e., Animation/cartoon film) depicts figures that are mainly moving images describing conventional content with some hints of scientific terminology, given its legal nature.

These moving images in the video are mainly animated 2D cartoons and emoticons, which commonly feature filmic modes. In

fact, following Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó (2022), these videos are generally distinguished by the many filmic modes they contain. In this sense, changes in the music or the sudden appearance and disappearance of images show these cuts. The images that appear simultaneously with the text provided (i.e., visual prompts), as well as the relationship between those visuals and the narrator's voice while he is explaining the different concepts (i.e., the different sources of International Law), help the audience – Legal English students – understand their complexity. This fact is supported by our data as 70% of students said that images accompanying the narrator's voice enhanced their comprehension.

Regarding the embodied modes, they are not so usual in animated films but provide meaning through different components, especially through verbal transcription, so providing students with the narrator's transcription helps them to understand the content better. This argumentation aligns with previous literature (Fortanet-Gómez & Ruiz-Madrid, 2014; Querol-Julián, 2011; Ruiz-Madrid & Fortanet-Gómez, 2019). Also, as reported by the same researchers, the embodiment is reflected in the excerpt through the type of language and paralinguistic used by the narrator. The male narrator's voice-over is slow and calm, with some pauses – silences that are no longer than half a second – and prominence is reflected mainly with changes in the narrator's tone of voice.

Filmic modes add dynamism and realism to the animated film with music (e.g., relaxing and gentle), with a combination of vivid and plain colours, as well as the presence of different locations representing their various cultures (e.g., China, Egypt, Rome, among others). This is reflected in the *mise-en-scène* denoting the international cultural buildings, with the plain background throughout the entire video and with the presence of the American flag.

4.3. To what extent are Legal English students aware of multimodal features in YouTube videos? How can students' acquisition of multimodal awareness affect their multimodal literacy?

To answer this third question, as instructors and lecturers in the 21st century, we must be aware that students are surrounded by technology in their daily activities, but they do not know how to use it for educational purposes. It is necessary to consider that these students (i.e., digital natives) can handle social networks and online communication systems, but this does not mean they can use technology effectively for academic purposes (Prensky, 2017). All this is linked to their awareness of the different multimodal elements the virtual environment entails, whatever the purpose for which they use that technology. For that reason, the design of online tasks with integrated videos helps students raise their multimodal awareness. As it was shown in the analysis of our fragment, *YouTube* videos involve a combination of semiotic systems (modes) giving meaning to an interaction (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

According to the results derived from the questionnaire completed by the students in this study, students are in some sense aware of the multimodal features present in *YouTube* videos. Some of those characteristics include length, animations as the most engaging type of film that also helps students to comprehend legal content, but also *evidentials*, since this type of video provides more detailed information, the speed of the narrator, the use of subtitles, visual aids, as well as appropriate content and the complexity of the discourse for students' proficiency level of the target language. As a result, the multimodal ensemble (Valeiras-Jurado & Bernad-Mechó, 2022) engages the audience and, more importantly, increases the potential of *YouTube* videos embedded in an online task to learn new vocabulary in English, specific terminology (in our case, Legal English) and discipline-specific content to better understand the subject matter of the course.

According to previous research conducted by Girón-García and Bernad-Mechó (2024), both lecturers and students need more

training in multimodal literacy. Therefore, the instructor's previous design of tasks based on the TBLT approach can help increase students' multimodal awareness.

5. Conclusion

This study has focused on investigating the multimodal features of *YouTube* videos, as emerging digital genres (Shepherd & Watters, 1998) to raise Legal English students' multimodal awareness of that digital genre, and, therefore, help them acquire multimodal literacy (Bernad-Mechó & Girón-García, Forthcoming, 2025). For this purpose, a survey on the characteristics of *YouTube* videos has been conducted with 165 Legal English students to find out to what extent they are aware of this type of video's multimodal characteristics, and how they contribute to their understanding. Besides, a multimodal analysis (following Valeiras-Jurado and Bernad-Mechó's, 2022 framework) a fragment of one of the *YouTube* videos (i.e., "Sources of International Law" embedded in an online task (i.e., lesson) was carried out. The video has been described as a pedagogical *animation film* (Bernad-Mechó & Valeiras-Jurado, 2022) which has been used as an activity to develop not only students' listening comprehension skills but also their writing abilities since the task entailed watching the video and writing a brief essay. In this video, the orchestration of modes in various combinations (Jewitt, 2009), more precisely the combination of embodied and filmic modes (i.e., *multimodal ensemble*), benefits students in regard to the learning of new vocabulary and specific legal terminology, as well as the better understanding of discipline-specific content.

Although this innovative study has unveiled interesting and significant results, its scope has been limited in sample size – only one video has been analysed, and 165 students were surveyed. For this reason, the results obtained cannot be generalised. In this line, future research avenues should be conducted to see if answers change from 1st-year students to fourth.

It is relevant for students to work on videos, learn new vocabulary, and learn in their specialised context. Therefore, it is necessary to design and carry out activities for them to learn it. Multimodal analyses are also necessary; for this, working with the students on the multimodal features of the videos is necessary. Students need to understand the metaphorical language behind expressions such as “WTF?” (i.e., What the fuck?) or “Self-defence” to understand the video’s content and value. Given the importance of using authentic materials, such as *YouTube* videos, in the design of online tasks, integrating these materials into such activities is beneficial for raising students’ multimodal awareness and training and exploiting their multimodal literacy skills. On that account, further research should be conducted regarding the design of online tasks in the ESP classroom and other language courses in HE contexts, as well as in their pedagogical implications.

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Appendix.

Questionnaire on the characteristics of YouTube videos (adapted from Girón-García & Fortanet-Gómez, 2023)

The information provided through this questionnaire will be anonymised. Please click to provide permission to use the data from this survey for research.

- Yes, I provide permission

Student's name:

1. Do you watch *YouTube* videos related to your field of study (i.e., law)?
 - Yes
 - No
2. If the answer to the previous question is "Yes", how often do you watch them? Mark one per row. (Always/Sometimes/Rarely/Never)
3. Do you watch them because you are interested, or simply because the teacher used them in the classroom and you have no choice?
 - I am interested
 - I have no choice
 - Both
4. How often do you take the following features into account when you watch a *YouTube* video embedded in an online task, e.g., in a *WebQuest*, *Lesson*, etc.? Mark one per row. (Always/Sometimes/Rarely/Never)
 - The length is very important to me.
 - The sound and image are of good quality.
 - The video must catch my attention, especially if background music and images accompany it.
 - I find videos with *animations* only more engaging because they help me understand the content better.
 - I find videos with *evidentials* only help me better understand the content because they provide more detailed information, and even support the data discussed in the video. I think the content is much more complete
 - The speed at which the narrator speaks in the video is decisive in watching it.
 - I choose to watch a video with subtitles because they help me understand the content better.
 - I consider the "likes" and "dislikes", and even the comments on the video to select this or some other video because I think they give it more credibility.
 - Visual aids are suitable and they help me understand.
 - The content is appropriate (i.e., it addresses exactly the topic)
 - The complexity of the discourse is appropriate for my language level.
5. Which of the following do you learn from watching *YouTube* videos in your field (i.e., law)? You can select more than one option.
 - New vocabulary
 - Specific terminology
 - Discipline-specific content to better understand the subject matter of the course.
 - Other:

Data availability

The data collected is confidential.



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