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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5024550>**THE ROLE OF VISUAL MATERIALS IN TEACHING ENGLISH****Victoria FIODOROV***Universitatea de Stat din Moldova*

This article first attempts to point out the importance of using visual materials in EFL classrooms and the advantages of using them in EFL teaching, highlights new modern methods used in the practice of teaching English, namely teaching English through images. Having an interdisciplinary character, this study aims to promote interactive methods that require the mechanisms of thinking, intelligence, imagination and creativity. This method focuses on stimulating interest in the knowledge taught by capturing attention due to visual presentation, thus eliminating the risks of inattention because of routine and boredom, the development of logical and creative thinking, stimulating imagination and training communicative skills.

Keywords: *interdisciplinary, communicative skills, critical thinking, interactive methods, teaching-learning.*

ROLUL MATERIALELOR VIZUALE ÎN PREDAREA LIMBII ENGLEZE

În articol sunt prezentate noi metode moderne folosite în practica predării limbii engleze și avantajele lor, și anume – predarea limbii engleze prin intermediul imaginilor. Având un caracter interdisciplinar, studiul are drept scop promovarea metodelor interactive care solicită mecanismele gândirii, ale inteligenței, ale imaginației și creativității. Această metodă este axată pe stimularea interesului față de cunoștințele predate prin captarea atenției datorită prezentării vizuale, eliminându-se astfel riscurile neatenției datorate rutinei și plictiselii, pe dezvoltarea gândirii logice și creative, pe stimularea imaginației și formarea competențelor comunicative.

Cuvinte-cheie: *interdisciplinaritate, competențe comunicative, gândire critică, metode interactive, predare-învățare.*

Introduction

We live in the age of information and communication where the role of visual representations has increased enormously. Visual language has become a very important means of communication in the modern society in which the value of photographs and pictures, for instance, has dramatically increased over the last century. Pictures or visual representations are effective ways to convey complex concepts when using them to either supplement or substitute the written word. One of the most important advantages is that they can be presented in a wide variety of ways, including brochures, posters, flip charts, blackboard drawings, slides, filmstrips and photos. Using all these materials in teaching a foreign language implies the same common goal – to encourage students to look more deeply at the pictures and thus, stimulate students' feelings and empathy, as well as their curiosity and questions.

It is also a well-established fact that we all communicate visually in the many social situations of our everyday lives. Our eyes are drawn to the faces of people around us, and we read them, consciously or subconsciously. We read other people's body language in real life, as well as when we watch films or look at photographs or paintings representing people, because it gives extremely useful hints about their thoughts and actions. That is why when people have special learning needs, such as low literacy skills or increased stress, or when they do not speak English as a primary language, it may be especially important to use visual teaching tools.

Given the importance of visual communication in real life, teaching English through pictures remains one of the most creative and effective new techniques in teaching a foreign language that can be used for any students regardless their level of English. Over time, it was revealed that different paintings and pictures used in the EFL classroom can become an important part of the curriculum. Art can be used to stimulate language acquisition in a creative, enjoyable and memorable way. It also can help to motivate learners to talk about themselves and revise grammar, writing and vocabulary activities. What is also important is that no prior knowledge of art or artists is required – even the most creative activities can be done by every student irrespective of their experience or background knowledge, or ability.

Apart from all these benefits, there is also a very practical one. Being able to describe what one sees is an essential basic skill that has to be trained when learning a language. Pictures/paintings can provide exposure

to "real language" used in authentic settings and in the cultural context in which the foreign language is spoken. This issue also has a very pragmatic dimension, as students in many countries, including Moldova, in case they want to study abroad, have to pass the international English language proficiency exams, such as IELTS, TOEFL, CAMBRIDGE, etc. An important part of the English language proficiency exam is the oral exam, where students have first to describe, then analyse and interpret up to three pictures or photographs (e.g., Cambridge oral test). The oral exam demonstrates the knowledge and mastery of a subject matter, its primary purpose is to demonstrate presentation, speaking and interpersonal communication skills. That is why it is undoubtedly a significant advantage for the students to have done regular training in this type of activity before they take their final exams.

Material and methods

When working with visual material, pictures and paintings for example, one needs to be aware of the main tenets, techniques and the lasting influence of this method.

According to A. Raimes, pictures (drawings, posters, photographs, cartoons, slides, magazine advertisements, diagrams, charts and maps) can be valuable resources for teaching because they represent ideas and they can help a person grasp, understand and remember the information quickly. They provide a shared experience for students in the class, a common base that leads to a variety of language activities. For most people, they also provide critical contacts with the real world. In addition, the author also states that a picture can be the basis not just for one task but many, such as sequencing of sentences to the writing or original dialogues, letters report or essays. Furthermore, due to the fact that everybody likes to look at pictures, their use in the classroom provides a stimulating focus for students' attention. A picture brings the outside world into the classroom in a vividly concrete way [1]. Finally, a picture is a valuable resource as it provides:

- a shared experience in the classroom;
- a need for common language forms to use in the classroom;
- a variety of tasks;
- a focus of interest for students.

Additionally, A. Wright adds that pictures give contribution to students' interest and motivation, sense of language in context and stimulate students' ideas [2]. The role of pictures in productive skills (speaking and writing) are:

1. Pictures can draw students' motivation and attention and make them participate in learning;
2. Pictures can create contextualised language learning activity;
3. Pictures may raise interpretation objectively and subjectively;
4. Pictures may refer to response of questions, or as controlled practices;
5. Pictures can stimulate and give information in dealing with conversation, storytelling and discussion.

Furthermore, the same author mentions that there are five practical criteria of pictures to be applied in the classroom: (1) easy to prepare, (2) easy to organise, (3) interesting, (4) meaningful and authentic, (5) sufficient amount of the language in order to justify its conclusion in the language lesson. A picture is a general language which is able to be understood and can be enjoyed everywhere [2].

J. Heaton states that, in everyday life, students may sometimes be required to describe people, objects, places and even processes. There will also be times when they have to write about sequences of events, incidents, etc. and give directions. Pictures provide students with ideas for such tasks, enabling them to pay their full attention to using written language [3].

Generally speaking, there is quite a number of advantages inherent in including visual material in lessons, whether these are language lessons or other subjects. R. Gower, D. Philips and S. Walters illustrate this thesis in their handbook *Teaching Practice*. They explain that visuals "attract the students' attention and aid concentration", that they "add variety and interest to a lesson", but they also "help to make the associated language memorable" [4]. The two former positive aspects of using visuals are especially valuable in a school that works with ninety-minute lessons. Concentrating for ninety minutes requires much more of an effort than doing the same for fifty or less. Yet, it is true that these attributes of visuals are also useful in all other schools.

The handbook then illustrates how visuals achieve this effect. R. Gower, D. Philips and S. Walters argue that visuals can be used to "arouse interest and concentrate attention at the beginning of a lesson", to "elicit already known language" and "create a need for language which the teacher then satisfies", but also to

"stimulate discussion" [4]. Arousing interest and focusing the students' attention are always positive. Similarly, it's always worthwhile creating occasions where students can use the areas of language they have already learnt, as it reinforces their capability in those areas.

The last way in which visual material can support the language learning process mentioned by Gower, Philips and Walters was by stimulating discussion. Discussions are useful classroom activities in their own right, because learners engage in meaningful conversations in the target language. Furthermore, they help develop their analytical and critical thinking skills, because discussions usually force the speakers to form and voice their opinions [4].

To stimulate discussions and to make students be able to communicate on different topics, by enriching their vocabulary, learners need a lot of vocabulary because it is one of the pillars of progress in learning a foreign language. P.M. Lightbown and N. Spada support this claim in their excellent work *How Languages are Learned*. According to them, "the acquisition of vocabulary has become one of the most active areas in second language acquisition research and the importance of vocabulary can hardly be overestimated" [5]. There appears to be general agreement among researchers on this and it is generally confirmed that "vocabulary learning is a major goal in most teaching programmes".

For example, in order to describe a picture, the learners will need a lot of new words that will help them to express their opinions and analyse all the details. The teacher will give them a guideline how to do this. At first, they have to say some general facts about pictures, such as:

Describe a painting according to the plan:

1. the subject of a painting (what is depicted in it)
2. the composition (how space is arranged) and the colours
3. the details
4. the impression made by the picture

Then, the useful vocabulary:

To begin with, you should say that the painting belongs to a particular genre. It can be:

- *the portrait*
- *the landscape (seascape, townscape)*
- *the still life*
- *the genre scene*
- *the historical/ mythological painting*

The activity may go further, and the learners can tell some information about the painter:

This artist lived in thecentury and worked in the style known as..... Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, Expressionism, Abstract Art.

They can also mention the colours and the composition:

- *warm/ cold colours*
- *bold colours*
- *oppressive colours*
- *bright colours*
- *deep colours*
- *light colours*
- *soft and delicate colours*

Having described the picture, the learners will have to give their opinion about the painting, using the following adjectives suggested by the teacher:

- *lifelike = true to life*
- *dreamlike = work of imagination*
- *confusing*
- *colourful*
- *romantic*
- *lyrical*
- *powerful*
- *outstanding*
- *heart-breaking*

- *impressive*

To my mind, it is a ... picture, which shows (....say what you see)

If one of the lesson objectives is to revise grammar, the teacher will point out what exactly the learners have to use, for example:

- *In the centre/middle of the painting we can see a*
- *In the foreground there is a....*
- *In the background there are....*
- *In the far distance we can make out the outline of a...*
- *On the left/right stands/sits...*
- *There is/there are/there was/there were....*
- *Participle clauses: a woman wearing a cap, a man dressed in a monk...*

This activity shows how the language can be acquired in a creative, enjoyable and memorable way using pictures in the classroom, that has become much easier since technology has developed.

Therefore, it is recommended to engage students "in activities that require them to attend carefully to the new words and even use them in productive tasks" [6]. Another factor in vocabulary acquisition is the variety of contexts in which new words are encountered. The intention is to demonstrate the opportunities for vocabulary acquisition offered by the incorporation of art in an English course. On the one hand, the learners will be dealing with the more technical, art-related words and expressions, like 'painter', or 'to arrange a scene', and 'background', to mention but a few examples. On the other hand, students will have to use the vocabulary needed to describe the scene that is depicted and its context, which are as wide-ranging as the subject matter of the paintings. As learners develop their vocabulary knowledge, they acquire not only new words, but also new meanings associated with words they have already learned. These are acquired gradually, as words are met in different contexts and eventually, a word might have extensive and complex meaning associations. It is clear that vocabulary intake is facilitated by repeatedly encountering words in different contexts. Therefore, the conclusion is to offer a variety of activities designed in such a way as to guarantee this variety. If it is difficult to include this variety in one lesson, one can easily distribute the activities among different lessons in a sequence.

For these reasons, interdisciplinary learning and teaching are beneficial by offering manifold opportunities for language lessons. The teachers of foreign languages are constantly in search of new topics to discuss in class. The traditional topics encountered in lower-level classrooms are the language needed in everyday exchanges, whereas reading and literature analysis are reserved for higher level classes. It should be clear, though, that this can only be a narrow view of reality. There is a beneficial side effect to including a wider range of topics, for example, music, science or painting, in the English lessons. It makes learning and teaching more varied and more interesting for those involved in the learning process – the learners and teachers. Therefore, ideally, lesson time would be used more efficiently, and more learning should be taking place.

In recent decades, however, the topics traditionally treated in other subjects have found their way into the English language classrooms. It makes sense, after all, for students who are learning a language, to improve their knowledge of the culture and history of the people who speak it. An important factor to consider is that students who study history at leaving class level do not get to know very much about the history and culture, or civilisation in general of the English-speaking countries. The main reason for this narrowing down is time constraints, because most classes have only two English lessons per week.

While teaching with images has been at the core of disciplines like art history for decades, all courses can benefit from the use of visual materials in class lectures, assignments, exercises and resources [7]. Images can be an effective way of presenting abstract concepts or groups of data. Teachers who used this method reported that their use of images in the classroom led to increased student interactivity and discussion. Teaching with images can also help develop students' visual literacy skills, which contributes to their overall critical thinking skills and lifelong learning.

Images will be more effective in the classroom if they are meaningfully integrated into course curriculum. The teacher should think of ways pictures can support the delivery of content, illustrate class themes, serve as primary research materials or be built into assignments. For example, when the learners study the topic *A visit to the museum*, the teacher may use and integrate different visual materials at the lesson. First of all, the pupils will have a virtual visit of the museum by watching some videos. Here you can find some useful links of the most famous digital museums:

1. British Museum, London

<https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/>

2. National Museum of the United States Air Force

<https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Virtual-Tour/>

3. The Louvre

France's most famous museum is currently offering seven virtual tours: The Advent of the Artist, Founding Myths: From Hercules to Darth Vader, Power Plays, The Body in Movement, Egyptian Antiquities, Remains of the Louvre's Moat and Galerie d'Apollon.

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/online-tours#tabs>

4. Metropolitan Museum of Art

This tour offers a 3D experience as if you're actually walking through the museum. Explore 30 exhibits in one sitting, featuring iconic paintings from even more iconic artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Johannes Vermeer and more.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePwPPGlV2N>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81cOWV3->

Then, the teacher may already show them some paintings that they will have to describe according to given criteria. The learners also may choose a painting that impressed them from this museum and present it to their classmates. It can be done as a project, individual or group assignment. Such activities will motivate learners to talk due to the fact that they will be more interested in the topic and will give them the freedom to choose what they are going to present and the way of doing this. The most important is if we can get our students to respond to a single image with a thousand of their own words, or a hundred, or ten or even one, under certain circumstances, that can be a significant step toward language production.

Sometimes teachers say that they have difficulty finding appropriate pictures. This may be the situation if a picture is looked for when one is needed to fit a particular concept or lesson. The "secret" is to collect pictures whenever and wherever they can be found, regardless of whether they fit an immediately perceived need. Eventually, the collection will grow. Sources of pictures are numerous, the following being probably the most obvious: calendars, magazines, posts, greetings, advertising, cards, posters and even mail order services. Nowadays, technology has indeed simplified many aspects of teaching and the teachers can find and show to their learners almost any painting, museum or other things using the Internet. The teachers can use different platforms that will help them to use visual materials or even to create their own, such as:

- Canva <https://www.canva.com/>
- Sway.office.com <https://sway.office.com/>
- Pinterest.com <https://www.pinterest.com/ideas/>

Images can be introduced into the course materials through:

- PowerPoint, Keynote Presentations
- Blackboard resources
- Other learning tools, such as Interactive Map Tool
- Primary source materials: photographs as historical documents, maps to teach directions, diagrams and technical drawings, printed paintings. The "physicality" of a print is appreciated: something that you can pass around and annotate. "Allowing students to hold an image, to see it up close, to look for texture, wear and tear, variations in shading, etc. is still an important value for some".

Class assignment: images can be powerful as illustrations, didactic materials or stimulating starting points for structural writing.

Conclusions

1. Although pictures, paintings and other visuals constitute the most effective, the most plentiful and least expensive teaching medium, it remains the medium that is least utilised. There is plenty of good teaching pictures almost anywhere you look.

2. The old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words may or may not be true. What is true, however, is that one appropriate picture can be a catalyst giving rise to the production of thousands of words and a multitude of creative and analytical thoughts.

3. Used appropriately and sequentially, pictures can not only illustrate a topic, but can also provide the experience base that learners require in order to profit from reading and writing and from numerous other learning experiences, including those associated with developing creativity.

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