

HOW CAN VISUAL LITERACY SUPPORT ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING?

Abstract

Visually literate persons are able to understand, create and use images as a means of expression and communication. Understanding the elements, meanings, and natures of visual images may lead visually literate persons to be able to use the images for teaching English purposes. Integrating the visual images in the steps of teaching learning process may create better learning atmosphere that can enhance the students' higher achievement. This paper elaborates the nature of visual literacy and the integration of visual literacy component in teaching English.

Keywords: Visual literacy, English language teaching, meaning of images, elements of images, steps of teaching learning process

Introduction

The undeniably role of English as a global means of communication has triggered almost all countries in the world accommodating English as one of the subjects in their educational curriculum. Teaching English, then, becomes one of the governments' focuses to facilitate their citizens in order to be globally literate by building their English language literacy. However, teachers as the fore-front actors to realize this effort must face various challenges to foster their students to master English well. In this respect, teachers then need resources, skills, knowledge and expertise to overcome every obstacle they face. Their visual literacy may help themselves cope with the problems in their teaching. Visual literacy may help teachers design teaching learning process more attractive with which students would be more engaged in learning. As a result, the students will end up with good English language mastery. This writing explores through literature review how teachers' visual literacy may enhance teachers to design better English language teaching and learning processes in the class.

What is visual literacy?

Many experts had made every effort to define what visual literacy is. Yet, they still have their various ideas on the definition (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997; Messaris & Moriarty, 2005). Debes was historically the pioneer in raising the issue of visual literacy and defined the term visual literacy as

“a set of competences owned by a person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects and symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment, and to apply the competences to communicate with others and to appreciate visual texts” (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, pp. 39-40).

Referring to the National Conference of Visual Literacy, visual literacy is defined as:

“a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and symbols natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through creative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communications” (Fransecky & Debes, 1972, p. 7).

Seel (1994) defined visual literacy as an aptitude to conduct visual communication, visual thinking, and visual learning. Visual thinking according to Kovalik and King (2011) refers to the ability of a person to use pictures, colours, diagrams, other elements to represent his views, notions and information that assist him to communicate the information. Meanwhile, visual communication is a circumstance when pictures, graphics, and other images are employed to prompt thoughts and to teach people. In this case, the counterpart in the communication must be able to understand what the image means to effectively communicate. Then, the visual learning can be addressed to the process of learning from pictures and media. This includes when learners understand knowledge by seeing visual images.

Briefly, based on various definition of visual literacy, Messaris and Moriarty (2005, p. 482) highlighted that there were two main components embodied in visual literacy: 'the ability to understand visual images and the ability to create or use images as a means of expression and communication'. In other words, in order to be visually literate, one should be able to understand what images are, and to create or use them for certain purposes.

Understanding visual images

Understanding visual images may take place in two sequences (Messaris & Moriarty, 2005). The first one is to understand a sign, an image, or a graphic representation through basic perceptual standards of what we see to acquire the meaning from the perceptual vision. The second one may refer to the ability to view critically the images in terms of how the image creator manipulates them.

Through basic perceptual standards in visual communication, images may compose at least ten elements: dot, line, shape, direction, tone, colour, texture, scale/proportion, dimension, and motion (Dondis, 1973, p. 15). Dot is the smallest part of visual image while line refers to the sequence of interconnected dots that cannot be seen individually so that they create a new visual appearance, a line. Line determines shape in which it has three basic forms: circle, square, and triangle. With various variations, combination, permutations, and other possible transformation, these three basic shapes may form different shapes like cube, sphere and other combinations. The meaningful visual direction can be seen from the three basic shapes: circular (circle), diagonal (triangle), and perpendicular (square). Tone is an element of visuals that deals with existence of light with which a person sees. The visual element that closely relates to tone is colour. Colour puts emotions and expressiveness to visual images. Texture and scale respectively picture images in terms of outward outlooks and proportional size. The dimension element refers to the numbers of angles in viewing the image. The last element, motion, expresses the visual mode of image. When the ten basic elements are blended with representational data, environmental information, and the existence of compositional structure of the element of the image, they create a meaningful visual image that has

a form and content (Dondis, 1973). To understand the meaning of visual image, one should view it critically. A critical view of the visual image may involve understanding how visual images are created and distributed historically, culturally, and aesthetically and also understanding how the audience are supposed to catch the meaning of the image (Burch, 2005).

The meaning of Images

According to Fransecky and Debes (1972) visual images, similar to those of universal grammar proposed by Chomsky, possess the surface and deep structure. On images, the visual symbols comprise the surface structure while the underlying idea under the images constitutes the deep structures. These structures mirror the representational system in which a language constructs meaning (Hall, 1997).

If we compare the visual to verbal grammar, we can understand that visual images possess the similar sources to those of verbal to create meaning. The meanings of verbal language that commonly consists of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning (Halliday, 1994) exist in the visual images as well. Unsworth (2001) argues that visual images possess ideational/representation meaning in terms of informing what happened, who the participants are, what the roles of the participant are, and in what kind of circumstances the event take place in an image. The event in Figure 1 shows the visual representation of the participants: lion and wildebeest. The lion as a subject (an actor) makes a prey of a wildebeest as object (a goal).



Figure 1. An actional image

Source: Taken from <http://www.laocomics.com/blog/2009/03/7-amazing-lion-hunting-photos/>

In terms of interpersonal/interactive meanings, visual images construct the interconnection features between speakers and listeners, writer and reader, and viewer and what is viewed. Figure 2 and 3 below denotes how the images demonstrate the interactive meaning between the viewer and what is viewed. In this case, the images share meaning to the viewers that Mr. Cyplenkov is powerful.



Figure 2. Regular guy vs. Russian arm wrestle Denis Cyplenkov

Source: <http://www.eatliver.com/i.php?n=7229>



Figure 3. Female hand vs. Denis Cyplenkov's hand

Source: <http://www.eatliver.com/i.php?n=7229>

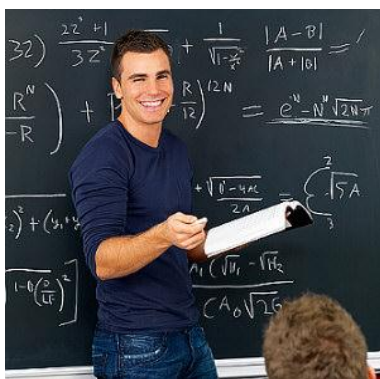


Figure 5. Representational pictures
Source:
<http://www.indiantvtoday.com/thank-a-teacher/2011/03/18/>



Figure 6. Analogical Images
Source
<http://www.playerzblog.com/free-online-spongebob-squarepants-games.html>



Figure 7. Arbitrary images
Source:
<http://peritalabs.wordpress.com/2009/11/04/list-of-data-visualization-tools-for-designers-and-developers/>

The visual images at hand are not only in the form of pictures or photos, but they include the moving images like films, movies, dramas and the like. Once, we understand the visual images clearly in terms of what they are, how they produce, how to create them, how to use them, what types of meaning are represented, and in what way the meanings are represented, it is not exaggerating that we may be included in the group of visually literate persons. At this stage, we might be able to use the skill in any purposes we involve like teaching English.

Integrating visual literacy in Teaching English

Teaching English deals with many aspects that have broadly sorted into four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Nunan, 1999; Snow, 2007) that may be added with “viewing skills” considering visual literacy in the future. Other aspects that obtain big attention are vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and culture (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Nunan, 1999; Snow, 2007). In teaching these aspects, various factors like first language acquisition, age, human learning, styles and strategies, personality factors, sociocultural were studied in order to ensure the success of English language teaching (Brown, 2000; Herrera & Murry, 2005; Nunan, 1999). In addition, approaches and methods to teach English also keep developing starting from grammar-translation method to post-method era (Brown, 2007) to find the most prominent way to

teach English. This paper will not address all of the above matters, yet it will focus on the integration of visual aids in the teaching learning process.

Basic aspects of English teaching learning process at least comprises three steps: pre-teaching, while teaching, and post teaching



Figure 8. Basic lesson process

Snow (2007) mentioned six steps in the teaching learning process: preview, warm up, main activities, optional activities, reserve (or spare-time) activity, closing. The previewing step may take either before or after warming up activities with the main purpose to provide an overview toward the lesson being conducted. The warming up activities generally aims to create preparedness of the students to follow the class that are usually conducted to lead in the student to the subject matter studied. The next step is the main activities that constitute the main menu of the day's lesson. Afterwards, after finishing the main activities, if ample time is still available, the optional activities may be carried out. However, if the main activities have taken the whole time, optional activities should not be included in. Reserve activity is peripheral. This is just to secure a teacher when unpredictable things occur in the class. The closing step serves as the session for making a fast review on the lesson and highlight the next meeting or assigning some home tasks related to the subject.

Visual literacy components whether they are in the forms of comics, picture books, film, television, drama (Stafford, 2011), animated graphic, flowchart, Venn diagram (Stokes, 2002), and other visual images can be integrated in one or more steps of teaching-learning processes as mentioned above.

The following figure is to picture how the integration of visual literacy components take place in English language teaching.

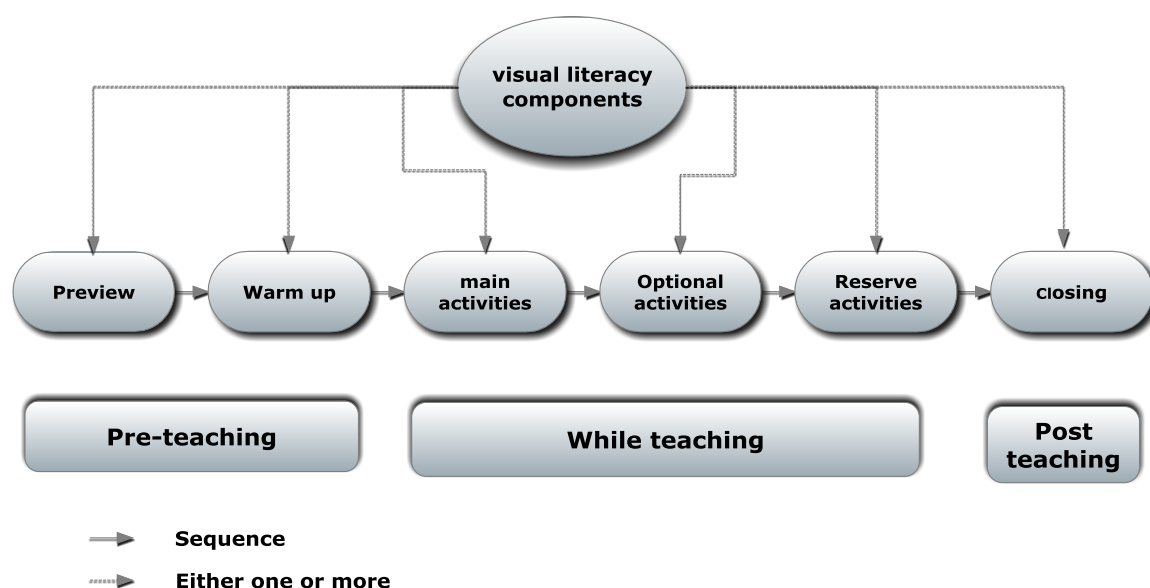


Figure 9. Integration of visual literacy components in English language teaching

Visually literate teachers should choose the most suitable forms of images for teaching the main English language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as the English language sub-skills: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation. Visually literate teachers are able to choose or create the right images and use them to teach the English language skills and sub-skills because they have well understood the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meaning of images with various natures: representational, analogical, and arbitrary.

The idea of integration at this respect refers to the integration of teaching using words and visual. Studies have consistently revealed that teaching with words and visuals demonstrate better outcome rather than teaching with words only or visual only (Jin & Boling, 2010; Mayer, 2003). Eventhough the students who are fully focused on content when they study find visual images to some degree distracting (Jin & Boling, 2010; Mayer, 2003), visual images have proven to have several functions in teaching learning process: directing attention, awakening appropriate prior

knowledge, managing mental loads, building mental models, transferring new skills, and optimizing motivation (Clark & Lyons, 2011). Therefore, integrating visual literacy component will be beneficial for teacher to support students to obtain the required skill in learning English. Having such visual aids the students are likely having better understanding toward the subjects the students learn.

Visual images in Teaching listening

Listening is important in foreign language classrooms (Nunan, 1999). It gains recognition when the theory of comprehensible input proposed by Krashen (1982) came into fashion mentioning that in order to be able to produce a good output, students need to have a comprehensive input. In this respect, listening skill should be mastered by students for the reason that this skill can equip students with abilities to encode inputs.

In teaching listening skills, a teacher should provide materials that enable students to understand them properly to build thorough knowledge in their minds. Schema theory proposed by Bartlett (1932) arguing that knowledge of man comprises of interrelated schemata that functions as unbroken units. Based on this theory, to create listening materials, teachers need to prepare a holistic picture of the contents since the knowledge schema works holistically as unbroken units.

Teachers can create holistic listening materials more comprehensively by adding visual components in the materials. Adding such components can support students to understand the listening lessons sufficiently. A listening study with three experimental groups indicated that a group with a visual aid of a concept map possessed superior comprehension (Nunan, 1999). In short, to facilitate better learning outcome, visually literate teachers should design listening materials by integrating visual components in their teaching processes to serve better students' understanding

Visual images in teaching speaking

Bygate (1987) proposed that the purpose of speaking conversationally can be analysed in terms of routines, the common methods of expressing information. In this case, Bygate (1987) classified

routines into information routines and interactional routines. Information routines comprise of expository activities (giving direction, telling a story, comparing something) and evaluative activities (making inference, giving judgment, predicting, etc.). Meanwhile, the interactional routines can be subcategorized into service activities (job interviews) and social activities (social gathering, birthday party, etc.). To run such routines, speakers need to have conversational management and negotiating meaning skills (Bygate, 1987).

To build speaking ability, teachers may develop students' skills through conducting the information and interaction routines as mentioned above. Visual images are very much helpful to support the students to practice the language as indicated by many books that contain exercises for speaking practice accommodate the visual images (Klippel, 1991; Ladousse, 1994)

Visual images for teaching reading skills

Comparing the printed-based texts and multimodal texts, texts which may incorporate spoken or written language, still or moving images, Walsh (2011) found differences between the two texts. The multimodal texts incorporate many modes of delivering meanings where readers find them useful to understand the texts comprehensively. Therefore, teaching reading skills by incorporating visual component will be helpful for students because visual components might be used as tools for students to learn to understand ideas and to learn in new ways (Zoss, 2009).

Visual images for teaching writing skills

For teaching academic writing, Baratta & Jones (2008) conducted a study to include visual images in their teaching. After six week pilot programme, they found that students found useful to have visual teaching methods and at the end of the program, the study indicated that average students' performance increased. Such a condition is supported by Zoss (2009) who stated that incorporating visual art in teaching is a promising endeavour.

Principles of integrating visual images in teaching English

As mentioned above that integrating visual image in teaching English skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, is promising for the success of the teaching. Besides, being visually literate in the sense that teachers should be able to understand, create and use visual images, teachers should also be aware of some principles to integrate the visual images. Meredith (1947) mentioned some principles of integrating visual images in teaching English: (1) The teacher should make adaptation to the available resources. (2) The visual images should be precisely related to a particular task in the learning process. (3) A balance should be maintained between all the different elements in the learning process and (4) teachers should develop student's self-reliance to anticipate their language use in real contexts.

Some consideration in integrating visual literacy components

Some components may be taken into accounts to ensure the smooth running in integrating the visual literacy components: space, an agent of learning and teaching, display learning, assessment, social community (Heath, 2000). The classroom as a space for studying should be redefined not only as a cubical space. It should be expanded to the place where studying may take place like museum, garden, and other outer spaces that enable students to study the subjects assigned in the curriculum. In such spaces, teachers may design better visually-integrated lessons. Then, students should be treated as an agent of learning and teaching. Students who study English in order to be English teachers, for instance, should go to study club or community centres where they can find people who want to learn English and design a project to help them learning. Having a project like this, students act as an agent of teaching and learning that can see directly how teaching and learning processes take place from the own perspectives. In addition, the concepts of 'display learning' should be imposed in the class that visual literacy component will be included. To impose such a concept, an educational institution needs to provide materials that are useful for this mode of learning like video, camera, and other related tools and equipment. Other considerations in

integrating visual literacy components are assessment and social community. Teachers who opt such different modes of learning should also design different types of assessment that suit to the learning type. Otherwise, students' learning achievement may not be portrayed appropriately. Related to social communities, the educational institutions should build mutual relationships by disseminating them any required information with intention that they may support any kinds of teaching learning programs that entail the communities' participation.

Conclusion

Visual literacy components may be integrated in English language teaching. Visually literate teachers are capable of choosing or creating visual images and using them to enhance the students' achievement in learning. Understanding the meanings and the characteristic of visuals image is important for teachers to integrate visual components in some steps of teaching learning processes to teach English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The integration may be put in the stages of pre-teaching, whilst teaching or post-teaching. To ensure the success of integration of visual teaching, some principles and some considerations on space of teaching, the role of the students, display learning facilities, assessment, and social communities need to be taken into account.

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