A PICTURE AND A THOUSAND WORDS:
Visual Tools in ELT

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Abstract — The ELT classroom cannot remain separate from the predominantly visual world in which it is located, where both the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ media are bursting with images, where most students are visual learners and where the proverb ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ applies more than ever. Visual tools, such as pictures and videos in any available format, can be used for a wide range of activities, from speaking and writing to enhancing students’ vocabulary and grammar skills because the simultaneous visual and auditory input provided by visual tools facilitates both teaching and learning foreign languages. According to studies, learners can record images and words in their memories and recall them later in image and/or word forms. In addition, using visual aids has proven to be a great motivational tool for students and teachers alike, as it provides the teachers with the opportunity to express their creativity in preparing new teaching materials. This paper focuses on using visual tools in teaching English as a foreign language at tertiary level, with an emphasis on the role of visual tools in facilitating the teaching and learning of language content widely considered to be ‘difficult’, or at least unpopular (e.g. conditionals, modal verbs, tenses, phrasal verbs and collocations). The paper will provide an overview of the experience in using visual tools with first-year business and cultural management students at the University of Applied Sciences Baltazar Zaprešić, Croatia and the workshop will provide some useful practical examples of classroom-ready exercises.

Index Terms — ELT, grammar, visual tools, vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Today’s students live in a predominately visual world, exposed to the media, technology and an overabundance of digital stimuli, where the proverb ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ applies more than ever. As Prensky [13] puts it, they have spent their entire lives using computers, videogames, video cameras, cell phones, email and the Internet. Today’s average college graduates have spent 20,000 hours watching TV, over 10,000 hours playing video games and less than 5,000 hours reading. Both the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ media are bursting with images. In order to keep up, teachers are adopting new teaching techniques and using new tools to make their teaching as effective as possible. Since reading texts and doing grammar exercises (the typical ‘old school’ activities) are no longer the path to their students’ attention and interest, graphics, digital and visual tools have made their way into the contemporary classroom.

VISUAL TOOLS

As defined by Harris and Caviglioli [6], visual tools are powerful retention aids which increase understanding. There are several types of visual tools: pictures, posters, photos, illustrations, icons, symbols, sketches, figures, presentations, mind maps. In this paper we shall examine only a few of them and also mention some audio-visual tools, such as movie clips.

Canning-Wilson [2] defines video as a selection and sequence of messages in an audio-visual context and states that in comparison to listening activities, scenes where utterances are backed up by an action or body language are easier to understand. She also differentiates projected and non-projected images. The visual is considered projected when it is planned and executed with an intended meaning. Non-projected images are just spontaneous occurrences of an image that is usually unplanned [3]. In other words, using a visual tool in the classroom needs to have a clear purpose and be carefully planned by the teacher, i.e. the intended learning outcomes should be clearly defined.

If properly used, visual tools facilitate learning foreign languages. As stated by Yaman [15], studies on learning indicate the fact that individuals can record images and words in their memories and recall them in image and/or word forms. Humans can keep images in their memories for a short time and create schemes for long term memory. So, visuals help students to remember course material. Furthermore, according to Felder [4], most people (at least in western cultures) are visual...
learners while the information presented in almost every lecture course is overwhelmingly verbal, a disparity to be avoided if the aim of the teacher is to facilitate learning.

Gilakjani and Branch [5] define visual learners as learners who learn visually by means of charts, graphs and pictures. They think in pictures and learn best in visual images. They depend on the instructor’s non-verbal cues such as body language to help understanding. According to a survey [5] carried out among Iranian EFL university students aged between 23 and 28 years old, fifty per cent of the students preferred the visual learning style. However, in classrooms students are surrounded with written words and formulas in texts, text books, on the board and on hand-outs, and spoken words in lectures. There are little visual stimuli available to them. It is up to the teachers to provide some visual aids to support the students’ understanding of the course material and to enhance their teaching.

Moreover, interested and engaged students will achieve better academic results. If students engage with technology outside the classroom, then using technology in the classroom will surely have a positive influence on their motivation. According to Canning-Wilson [2] visual and audio-visual tools motivate students’ interest. Macwan [11] emphasizes that visual tools bring variation in class, since a lengthy class becomes tough if it is not interesting. Properly planned, constructed, and employed, visual aids can help not only to improve the overall language program but also to enhance the classroom atmosphere and to ensure greater student participation, as in Ramirez [14].

POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS OF VISUAL TOOLS IN ELT CLASSROOM

Visual tools can be used for a wide range of activities, from speaking and writing to enhancing students’ vocabulary and grammar skills. They can be used as warmers, to get the students to start thinking about the topics that will be introduced or to initiate classroom discussion and debate, which can sometimes be difficult to achieve.

According to Macwan [11], visual aids can help in speaking activities as learners will share their feelings and inspirations. They provide the learners with the opportunity to speak in order to develop their speaking skills. She states that inspirational videos are particularly useful in developing foreign language speaking fluency.

Baralt, Pennestri and Selvandin [1] give an example of using word clouds as visual tools in writing activities. They used a web tool called Wordle [17] which performs statistical text analyses and organizes it by word frequency. It shows which words are used the most in a given text in a visually appealing way. By using this tool Baralt, Pennestri and Selvandin [1] were able to enhance students’ essay writing skills and to promote their lexical creativity. By the end of the course 100% of the students thought that the use of Wordle was worthwhile and that it was a valuable tool to help them improve their writing.

Also, visual tools can be used to provide a better understanding of the topic, whether we are explaining grammar or learning vocabulary. As Yassesi [16] puts it, teaching language skills through mechanical exercises and traditional fill-in-the blank, true or false, multiple choice assessments, although necessary, does not interest students as much as we expect. Yassesi [16] gives an example of using audio-visual techniques to teach modals of speculation. She recorded herself doing various activities, like brushing her teeth and locking the door. Students had to guess the actions by merely listening, and afterwards they watched the entire video. The listening aroused students’ curiosity and in order to make speculations on the noises they had to use the teaching point. When they actually saw the video they had fun laughing at their speculations.

According to Katsioloudis [10], visualization methods are extensively credited for simplifying the presentation of difficult subjects. Konomi [9] carried out a study to examine the extent to which teachers use visual materials when they teach English vocabulary in grades 3 and 6. She found out that 42% of the interviewed pupils think that these are their favourite techniques when language is taught.

Using visuals encourages students to use their imagination, as the same picture can be interpreted in many different ways. Visuals give an insight into the world and help students think ‘outside the box’. And finally, visual aids can help lighten the lesson and make students laugh, which is not unimportant. According to Neumann, Hood and Neumann [12], using humour in teaching can not only amuse the students but also help maintain their attention.
At the University of Applied Sciences Baltazar Zaprešić, Croatia a number of visual tools was used with first-year business and cultural management students during the academic year 2014/2015 for facilitating the teaching and learning of language content widely considered to be ‘difficult’, or at least unpopular. An overview of our experience follows.

**Visual Tools and Grammar**

Students often have difficulties understanding different types of conditional sentences and their usage. Consequently, so-called drilling activities are needed in order for students to get comfortable with using conditionals. In order to make this experience more palatable to students, and in order to engage them, instructors can use pictures to provide the students with the chance of being creative and using their imagination. For example, if the aim is that the students produce a first conditional sentence, a picture of a shopping mall might be used. In our case, students were encouraged to produce sentences like: ‘If I go to a shopping mall, I will spend a lot of money.’ (Fig. 1) If the aim is that the students think of a sentence using the second conditional, a picture of Superman can be used and students then produce sentences like: ‘If I were Superman, I would be able to fly’ (Fig. 2). This activity can be extended by building on each other’s ideas and chaining them together, which results in an amusing and very effective exercise.

**Possible Sentences**

If I go to Paris, I will see the Eiffel Tower.

If I were Superman, I would be able to fly.

Although among the simplest of tools, pictures can be used in numerous contexts. A possible application is using pictures to teach modal verbs of certainty and deduction. For example, students were shown pictures of a dissatisfied customer (Fig. 3) or an ill person. Then they were encouraged to use their imagination to produce different sentences using modal verbs, such as ‘This can’t be mine’, or ‘He must be sick’.

He must be upset.
This can’t be what he ordered.
They might have run out of Cheddar.

Pictures can also be used when teaching past tenses. For example, students can be shown funny pictures on the basis of which they have to write a story and include what had happened before.
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what was happening while the picture was being taken, and the reasons why it happened, while making sure to use the correct tenses. (Fig. 4). This is also an excellent writing activity which engages students’ creativity and can be used to practice sequencing, narration and causality.

Figure 4: An example of using a picture to teach the use past tenses

VISUAL TOOLS AND VOCABULARY

Harmer [7] states the importance of vocabulary by saying: ‘If language structure makes up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh’. Traditionally, using pictures is associated with teaching vocabulary to young learners (e.g. using flashcards). However, college students can also benefit from visual stimulus so photos and pictures were used to illustrate the meaning of phrasal verbs and collocations. For example, when revising phrasal verbs students were asked to connect different pictures with phrasal verbs (die out was represented by a dinosaur, slow down by a snail) (Table 1).

Table 1: Pictures and corresponding phrasal verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PICTURE</th>
<th>PHRASAL VERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dinosaur</td>
<td>die put</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snail</td>
<td>slow down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>detective</td>
<td>find out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race</td>
<td>keep up with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a man pushing his car down the road</td>
<td>break down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VISUAL TOOLS AND SPEAKING

Students are often reluctant to talk and discuss in class. Visual and audio-visual tools are a great aid to create a relaxed atmosphere in which students feel safe and comfortable to initiate discussion. Macwan [11] states that it is particularly useful to show inspirational videos as it will encourage students to share their feelings. In our case, a funny video clip [18] on gender stereotypes was used to start a debate on differences between women and men. The class was divided into two groups, whereby one group had to write all the things from the video with which they agreed and the other group had to list all the things with which they disagreed. The points in which the two groups overlapped served as an excellent starter for a group discussion. As an expansion, the same video can be used to encourage students to write an essay on the topic of gender stereotypes or gender differences.

CONCLUSION

Using visual tools in the ELT classroom seems logical because the majority of students are either visual learners, or have been directed towards adopting a visual learning style due to their exposure to a plethora of visual stimuli in their everyday lives. The experience from the University of Applied Sciences Baltazar Zaprešić, Croatia gives us reason to believe this presumption to be true. Visual tools, along with being versatile and multifunctional since they can be used as warmers, discussion starters, writing prompts and grammar teaching aids, sometimes even at the same time, are warmly welcomed by the students because they are perceived as less formal. They provide the
students with the opportunity to use their imagination in an attempt to simulate (or simply imagine) authentic situations, or to enjoy the benefits of using humour in class. Also, using visual tools provides the teachers with the opportunity to express their creativity in preparing new teaching materials, or finding new uses for the existing ones. Being highly motivational for both students and teachers, visual tools, however simple they might be, are not to be forgotten in an ELT classroom.

REFERENCES

[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlFsnlMmyg

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