FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH VISUALS / APPRENDRE UNE LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE À TRAVERS DES IMAGES / ÎNVĂŢAREA UNEI LIMBI STRĂINE PRIN IMAGINI[1]

Abstract: The learning setting has no longer been confined to very strict grammar or lexical rules since the development of technology. We can perceive the world around us through our senses, the visual one prevailing in almost all our learning or teaching tasks. Most of the school subjects including foreign languages course books comprise a high range of visuals whose main role is not only to familiarize students with the topic to be discussed but also to help them broaden their general knowledge. The present work aims to highlight both the importance of visual prompts in learning a foreign language and their impact on the visual reader.

Keywords*: learning setting, visuals, senses, technology.*

Introduction

Language as a living organism has always been liable to change. As the areas of new technologies have stabilized and articulated, language users tend not to cultivate the high registers of language, choosing instead a more simple approach of communication by using more gestures or body language than words and their sophisticated semantics. The perception and understanding of the world around us seems to be more adequate by using our senses. People's behaviour has always been visually-oriented. Both education and marketing are strongly influenced by visuals, starting from the images used in the classroom for students to decode and ending with the wide range of colours provided by images whose role is to influence consumer behaviour or decision making.

The historical reality itself has proved that people used to refer to the surrounding world by their senses due to the lack of complex technology. From early times, humanity has associated language with various visual elements. Before having the alphabet itself, cultures were mostly discovered visually rather than cognitively.

Symbols become the support points of the imaginary kingdom because they unveil the secrets of the unconscious and move to the most hidden springs giving new insights to the unknown. The attribute, analogy, metaphor, parable are all tools of communication on the level of imaginative or intellectual knowledge. People transmit different states or feeling by means of symbols. For example, the ancient were fully aware of the moment of the day by simply visualizing the position of the sun in the sky. Hieroglyphs, pictograms, paintings, etc., were used on a large scale during human evolution and they led gradually to a better representation of the world. Therefore, human communication has always existed and evolved from a more rudimentary to a high technical form.

The present work aims to highlight both the importance of visual prompts in learning a foreign language and their impact on the visual reader. The new school learning setting has no longer been confined to very strict grammar and lexical rules since the development of technology. It has contributed substantially to a reorganization of language at different levels: phonological, morphological, lexical, semantic etc.

On the one hand, the emergence of electronic corpuses has brought about a new revolution in the language dynamics not only through their use on a large scale but also in terms of their usefulness in rendering original texts and the changes occurring with linguistic phenomena. Despite the high price of specialized programs to insert all the data in the corpus, they are still considered invaluable sources of information.

On the other hand, the programs of vocal interpretation stand for another challenge in the educational learning system. The speaking language technology aims to promote verbal communication in accordance with society's expectations. Recognition of speaking

---

[1] Laura Ionică, University of Piteşti, lauraionica1976@yahoo.com

depending on some specific sound signals may become a tool of communication, although the process can sometimes be hindered by variability of pronunciation among speakers. However, such technologies may imprint their mark on the future of human evolution.

In terms of visual prompts, it should be mentioned that most of the school subjects are mostly based on visuals whose main role is not only to familiarize students with the topic under discussion but also to help them broaden their knowledge horizon.

Pictures of all types are meant to provide a meaningful context, to stimulate creativity, spontaneity in speaking and to facilitate comprehension of grammar and language. Starting from a visual prompt the world representation is much more productive and varied. The question that arises is *Can we learn a foreign language visually?*

Specialists strongly believe that learning visually is much more efficient than text based. As Mirzoeff stated (1991: 1) "Human experience is much more visual and visualized than ever before…In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life." Mannan (2005:108) has also highlighted the importance of visual aids in the language classroom. "They help the teacher to clarify, establish, correlate and coordinate accurate concepts, interpretations and associations, and enable him to make learning more concrete, effective, interesting, inspirational, meaningful and vivid."

Visuals throughout history

Visuals are not new in the history of language. Visual communication is one of the oldest forms by which people used to reproduce, share and interpret information. They made various associations between natural elements and objects whose main representation became universally known and applied. Not only military conflicts but also sea trade was marked by visual materials. Soldiers and sailors alike made use of primitive devices to visualize instructions. They include cardboards, string, plastic, colorful chalk or crayons which were highly used in such fields as mathematics, physics or astronomy.

Pictures, illustrations, tape recordings, slides or film strips of the 19th century have been regarded as useful tools in the classroom to promote real life contexts and help students to develop more motivating tasks. Later on, supporters of cognitivism highlighted the importance of visuals for second language acquisition.

> "Thanks to the visuals provided in the classroom, the second language input will be easily understood. They provide conceptual scaffolding, through cultural context or other clues, and it helps with the natural associations of images and words (Nation and Newton, 2009)."

> "Combining pictures, mental imagery and verbal elaboration could be an effective method in promoting understanding and learning from text by students ranging from grade school to university level (Paivio, 1991: 163)

Nowadays' educational setting is much more fact based and teachers should strive to create a suitable learning environment. For instance, significant historical events are even better understood visually. Exposure to a variety of visual clips which show the place, the time and all the circumstances of a historical event, may become fruitful and highly motivating for students interested in sequencing the historical events or learning about the characters involved.

In this way, history is no longer a boring, secretive page of humankind but an integral part of our lives. In terms of learning a foreign language, visuals are not less important. Throughout history teachers have always tried to represent reality in images. In their opinion, students are better at interpreting life contexts when shown images. These images are more consistent and stand for a solid basis for text hermeneutics. The text itself

as a string of words may be difficult to decipher, unlike a sequence of images which create broader horizons of understanding.

Therefore, irrespective of the historical stage, learning through images has always been an inexhaustible source of discovery and adequate language acquisition.

Today's role of technology

If the past was restricted to a more abstract and limited interpretation of information due to lack of familiarization with symbols or sophisticated words order, today's society abounds in a multitude of visual materials such as: flashcards, posters, computer programs, videos etc., which paradoxically can be better decoded by children in their early stages of development. Everything in the language is partially or totally associated with pictures. Verbal tenses, prepositions, descriptive adjectives are better assimilated when correlated with appropriate pictures.

Prepositions of time or place, for example, are generally recognized and used suitably when associated with contextual pictures. Visual links for prepositions or diagrams are more useful than theoretical backgrounds. Students operate with concepts in a more difficult way, but pictures rendering the respective information provide an accurate mental representation. My experience as a teacher proved that students' mental visualization of prepositions or their simple learning by heart has not been as useful as their representation by visual aids.

On the other hand, learners showed the same easiness in learning descriptive adjectives by means of images. For example, the register of emotions was fully grasped by emoticons used in all social networks. Feelings of happiness, anger, anxiety, satisfaction were best and easiest decoded when associated with adequate images. Such universally used elements can help learners to reinforce a message's meaning and to create independent thinking. They are commonplace symbols which both teachers and students use as sources of communication.

A comparison of students in engineering and humanities

During my teaching career I have constantly tried to thoroughly analyze the differences in thinking when it comes to learning a foreign language. Unlike students in humanities who generally have the tendency to develop critical thinking and to focus on more practical grammar or lexical structures, engineering students seem to be more systematical, logical and always expect to be provided with the right explanation to justify their choices. According to them, grammar rules are more or less logically intertwined as long as they cannot be wholly applied to all contexts.

As regards the use of visuals, students in engineering seem to be more used to them, since their other objects are mostly based on charts, diagrams, timelines etc. Therefore, teaching a foreign language visually is much easier than theoretical explanations. On the other hand, students in humanities develop their creativity more or less based on visual aids. They find it more difficult to interpret a chart in which figures prevail, but they can extract and analyze a lot of elements when shown various pictures. Statistics, mathematics and informatics are more accurately understood by engineering students, whereas stories, films, music are favoured by journalists, writers, psychologists etc.

In comparison with engineers for whom blocks of technical texts are demotivating, students in humanities operate with long texts which they consider inspiring and challenging.

Possible drawbacks of technology and visuals

Our constant flooding with technology and visual elements through laptops, smartphones, smart TVs or interactive boards has created some sort of addiction which specialists disagree with since we are dealing with a virtual illusion. If we reduce our

existence to the gadget space we risk disconnecting ourselves from the surrounding reality. The deformed perception of reality as well as the excessive reliance on technology may be detrimental both to the individual isolated socially and to large groups of students activating in the classroom. Attention deficit, lack of concentration, agitation and distraction are among the factors affecting the quality of learning.

Instead of evolving we regress to a world of superficiality. Moreover, according to foreign language teachers technologies and visuals are not always fully exploited in the classroom, either due to technical problems or difficulties teachers face when processing information. Convoluted issues based on visuals may become detrimental to learners either because of communication barriers among interpreters or due to cultural dissimilarities.

Therefore, both teachers and specialists in the field of psychology wholly agree that a combination of text-based materials and visual aids is the best alternative when it comes to learning and teaching a foreign language effectively.

Conclusions

The power of visuals cannot be denied in the teaching-learning process. They are effective tools that help learners retrieve information and make it more concrete. Abstract notions, especially in the technical field may become more tangible and clearer when explained by means of charts, flashcards, diagrams etc.

While visualizing and interpreting pictures of any type, students are free to express themselves and explore the new elements in their own way, while teachers' subjectivity fails to interfere. Moving fluently between texts and images has become a prerequisite in world interpretation. Images transmit messages faster, trigger emotions and enhance comprehension. However, a constant reliance on these tools may have its drawbacks translated in technical errors or addiction.

All things considered, visuals play an essential role at all levels of education.

Bibliography
Bradshaw, A.C., 2003*,"*Effects of Presentation Interference in Learning with Visuals"*, Journal of Visual Literacy*, Spring, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 41-68
Fiorito, L, 2005, *Teaching English for Specific Purposes*
Kang, S., 2004, "Using Visual Organizers to Enhance EFL Instruction", *ELT Journal*, vol. 58, no.1, January
Mannan, A, 2005, *Modern Education: Audio-Visual Aids*. New Delhi, Anmol Publications
Mirzoeff, N, 1999, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, New York: Routledge
Nation and Newton, 2009, *Teaching ESL / EFL Listening and Speaking*, New York: Routledge
Paivio A., Clark J.M., 1991, *Dual-Coding Theory and Education,* Educational Psychology Review, Vol. 3, No. 3
Wright, A., 2003, *Pictures for Language Learning,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.