

Designing Visual Materials for ESP Classes

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing issues concerning teaching/learning methods and techniques based on multisensory materials/aids that can be used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. Bearing this goal in mind, we have described and analyzed the main benefits and drawbacks of such teaching aids for advocating the use of visual aids in the foreign language classroom, in general, and for motivating and getting students interested, in particular. The bottom line is that interesting and challenging activities, accompanied by visuals can attract and maintain students' attention during ESP classes.

Key words: ESP, teaching tools, visual aids

J.E.L. classification: K00

1. Introduction

The type and usefulness of visual aids in the foreign language classroom, as learning materials and teaching tools have been described and explained by many authors, both methodists and psychologists/psycholinguists (see Stănișoară, 2003; Harmer, 2007; Nădrag, 2008; Vizental, 2008; Scrivener, 2011; Buzarna-Tihenea, 2017). Therefore, various activities based on visuals will be presented in this paper, along with the teachers' enhanced creativity. The major idea and hypothesis pursued throughout this paper is that the psychology of visual perception in the classroom can result in engaging students into lessons that facilitate learning.

In life, what we see, hear, smell, feel and touch turns into stimuli that reach our brains and are further analyzed and interpreted so as to help us understand our surroundings. According to Wortman(1988) and Shams and Seitz (2008), when we involve multiple senses in engaging with the external world, or learning, the chances to better understand and retain the informative content at hand increase. The use of several senses instead of a single sense as a primary source of information allows for multiple cognitive associations and connections. The neural pathways for pre-existent knowledge are activated, as the pre-existent information is retrieved and used to make sense and integrate the new information into the system already developed.

Visual aids engage learners with the help of attractive, stimulating resources. The combination between verbal and visual content helps retain the desired items and increases the chance of the right use of certain words, structures, sentences or other types of verbal content. The ability to associate verbal content with visual content facilitates the process of retrieving information from the memory as well as storing information in the long-term memory by creating multipleneural pathways for the same information (Shabiralyani et. al., 2015). This means that there are more memory triggers for the same information, which helps the learner activate the informative content faster and in a more reliable manner. In the long run, the use of visual aids alongside verbal content helps the learners' brain maintain its flexibility as well.

Visual tools can help make the teaching process more effective and interesting. A proper use of such aids supports the teaching process; however, a major factor should be taken into account, i.e. the aids used need to match the level of the students, namely their cognitive development stage and previous experience with English. Aids that stimulate students' use of English and participation in an activity planned beforehand should be brought to class. The visual aids should be realistic and

accurate. The results of the use of such aids should be further assessed by means of follow-up activities, in order to check the students' response to the use of visual aids in the classroom and their appropriateness for further use.

Visual aids display certain obvious advantages, compared to other aids used in the process of teaching/learning English. Some theoreticians have attempted to provide a full list of benefits, such as: to avoid excessive, empty and meaningless verbalization in teaching English, learners can go from concrete to abstract faster, form clear and accurate concepts in English, provide variety to teaching, interesting and inspiring means of teaching, create language atmosphere, reduce teacher-talking time, clarify the topic, save time and energy (see Daniel, 2013).

The use of visual aids in the classroom is multifold and enhances the processes of learning, knowledge retention, information retrieval, and neural pathway creation. As such, they prove extremely helpful to any teacher who wishes to plan lessons that are easily engaging and speed up retention and overall language acquisition.

2. Theoretical background: Types of visual aids used in ESP classrooms

Various types of visual aids can be successfully turned into learning tools. We will present several visuals that can be used successfully for teaching general English and English for Specific Purposes.

Flashcards or *pictures* can be used differently as the students' mind becomes more abstract and develops critical thinking (see Gibby, 2013). They have the advantage of providing support in a whole range of activities, appropriate for a whole range of ages. Teachers might use pre-made sets of flashcards available on the market or online, or they can make their own flashcards, according to the topic they intend to teach. Teachers can also create their own flashcard library. Browsing online can provide the necessary information, and can help teachers gather interesting materials. When selecting materials to be used as flashcards, the teachers need to take into account certain principles: the pictures need to be large enough to be seen by everyone in the classroom, they need to be clear and representative. The pictures can be collected and then organized by topic.

There are several ways to use flashcards in the English for Specific Purposes classroom: to show the meaning of a certain word; to illustrate and enumerate economic sectors, economic products, categories (of companies), etc.; to support visually the content of a verbal narrative, to stimulate students' imagination, describing processes, phases/steps; to remind students specific grammar items; to prompt students' creativity and ask them to make connections between the images, or even create a whole narrative; to accompany role-play or other types of activities.

Visual narratives help enhance abstractization and promote multisensory learning as well as cognitive development. They help learners verbalize the content expressed visually, by enhancing their abilities to pair up images and words. In the long run, visual narratives stimulate learners' interest in storytelling. Therefore, visual narratives in addition to enhancing linguistic knowledge and facilitating the learning process, they also teach thinking skills. Learners verbalize the actions performed, what they see, how the story/event is evolving - the sequence of events, or they can add information, events or come up with solutions. Thus, during the process of learning a foreign language, students also learn how to extract meaning, assess and interpret data, solve problems, make decisions based on the evidence at hand, establish relationship patterns, such as cause-effect, predict the outcome based on the current information available, support or reject a hypothesis, question the content they were presented with, predict, analyze, interpret, summarize, etc. All these processes and activities can be efficiently and successfully used with learners who are studying economics, law, medicine, engineering, history and political sciences, foreign languages a.s.o.

Teaching with *videos*, *TV shows* and *films* can be enriched in a number of ways to ensure its usefulness in the classroom. Teachers can use ready-made videos, films and clips, materials that they find online, or they can actually make their own materials or recordings to engage students faster. However, several factors need to be taken into account when deciding on the video materials to be included in the lesson and the manner in which they could be used: the material should be short, well exploited (used as starting point for a certain task/activity); accompanied by other materials and activities.

The use of the material should be interactive and complex. To be able to decide which part of the video is worth focusing on, teachers should refer to the multitude of aspects related to moving images. Videos have sound, image, characters that connect with each other via body language, facial expressions, eye movement, physical contact, a background, etc. If possible, subtitles should be used to enhance understanding. The video can be paused, played back, or fast forwarded, according to the learning needs at hand. Usually, DVDs provide additional materials in the form of deleted scenes, director's cut, set dialogue, or even learning material in the case of specialized DVDs. All this additional material can be turned into a starting point for a research activity, a debate/discussion, a written essay, a project.

The teacher should decide on the lexis, function, or grammatical item that will be the focus of the activity, while also preparing pre-task and post-task activities. If the activity is complex, the teacher can provide a worksheet that would help students focus on particular aspects of the video. An activity meant to highlight the importance of the visual content in rendering meaning could be muting the video and allowing students to watch a part of a scene and extract the relationship between the characters and the actual topic from the on-screen cues, such as body language, gestures, physical contact, movement, facial expressions, etc. Students can be asked to write down what they think happened in that scene, and even make up a dialogue and predict what's coming next. After hearing the various versions of the story, the teacher could play the video again, with sound, to check the students' understanding of visual cues.

3. Teaching tools

Various teaching tools used in the classroom can help enhance the use of visual aids in learning and practising ESP.

Interactive whiteboards have the advantage of being multi-purpose, as their touch-sensitive surface can be connected to computer and some loudspeakers. These particular types of boards are used visually not only to project an image (still or moving) from a computer, but also to write or draw with the help of a special pen. The images drawn are created and projected electronically. So, in addition to PowerPoint presentations, they can also be used as a monitor to play videos or even feature films. It is also worth mentioning that some of these boards come with specially-designed learning material that includes animated, interactive exercises which could prove useful to learners. As they help create highly interactive classes, interactive whiteboards have been proven to enhance student motivation and performance (Decker, 2010), as students are allowed to work with gadgets they commonly use in real life and interact with information in a manner that mirrors regular life interaction.

Presentation tools, from the classic PowerPoint to the innovative Prezi, this type of software can help pair verbal and visual content in providing much-needed explanations supported by images. To use this type of software in an efficient manner, the text should be reduced to a minimum of key ideas that the teacher should develop orally. At the same time, the illustrations/images used should be content-appropriate and original. Presentations can also be used to teach vocabulary with specific images. The animated tool provided by the software can help enhance grammar lessons, while pointing out various alterations in specific words or word position in different contexts (Scrivener, 2011), can explain processes, classifications, categories, principles, characteristics, etc. At the same time, through the use of such presentation software, students can get more involved in the process of learning, especially teenagers who are technology-prone already. They can be asked to do specific projects, to draw people's attention to certain problems identified by them, and to show how they can be solved. Other possible uses include resorting to sets of connected words and asking students to build up coherent content starting from that particular set.

Such tools may have some drawbacks, for example, the overuse of presentation software may lead to less classroom interaction, the students focusing too much on the planned content on the slides. On the other hand, teachers may fall back on this tool too much and eliminate creativity and experimentation with various teaching tools or methods.

Learning laboratories integrate the use of computers and headphones, and can enhance learning in multiple ways. A learning lab can ensure the use of audio-visual materials, such as podcasts, videos, or films. Teachers may even propose video conferencing students from a different school and come up with shared tasks, lively debates or other types of activity that students might feel comfortable and interested in.

Various websites provide *text analysis tools* that might help students work on tasks that could be part of larger projects or portfolios (Scrivener, 2011). Some of them could turn a set of words into word clouds, posters introducing a particular event, key-words for debates, seminars, presentations, etc. Other websites can help students make up visual dictionaries from the words entered, while also providing students with information regarding the way in which words are connected (synonyms, antonyms, words of similar form or similar meaning).

Visual worlds could work in attracting students. Creating a virtual learning environment could prove interesting and challenging for both teachers and students, as they explore the possibilities of their environment. If aiming to teach the language used in hotels, restaurants, companies, for example, the teacher may actually create a virtual restaurant, hotel, company where students can interact and practice real-life conversations. This simulation is very close to real situations and takes role playing to the next level. The students can develop their speaking and listening skills, enrich their vocabulary (words, collocations, idioms) and reinforce the use of grammatical structures (see Buzarna-Tihenea, 2015). This type of tool can be extremely useful for role playing, simulations, and task-based activities.

4. Conclusions

The visual aids that can be used in the classroom have already proven their advantages. They help create mental connections and multiple paths for information retrieval in the brain. Along with the material learned and the teaching and learning strategies and techniques, they may help alter students' perception of the world. Students become more motivated and get interested in what they are being taught, more energetic, enthusiastic and optimistic than before. From an experiment that we conducted on groups of students in economics and law, we can state that it is essential for learners to be provided with aids that would boost the learning process and facilitate the forming of multiple connections and neural paths.

Teachers' interdisciplinary and resourceful approach to the teaching/learning/assessment process could help students understand and learn the desired information faster and even lead to certain abilities (including communication and language abilities). It is obvious that students' creativity and thinking skills can be enhanced in very pleasant ways. In order to avoid the use of the same tools and material, and to create a friendly atmosphere during the ESP classes, the teaching process should include a variety of methods and tools.

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