ILLUSTRATION - AN IMPORTANT TOOL IN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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The learning process involves complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components, and language acquisition is an ever-developing skill that accumulates over time. Perception, particularly through sight, plays a significant role in learning, and visual representation often accompanies the language learning process. As such, this article aims to emphasise the importance of visual stimuli in language acquisition, discussing the interpretation and classification of illustrations and their role in teaching. Visual materials, such as images, are integral to the teaching-learning process, facilitating communication and making concepts more memorable for students. Although visual materials are valuable, there are drawbacks, and teachers must carefully select and analyse them to avoid confusion or distraction. This is also discussed and explained to help teachers and learners adopt a more efficient outlook on learning a foreign language.

Keywords : *teaching materials, visual tools, illustration, visual learning, language acquisition, didactical application.*

Learning a new language is no easy feat and considering that general education and certain professions require knowing at least two languages, the necessity for more effective and interactive teaching methods is ever-growing. The process of learning is complex and involves various cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components. Not to mention the fact that learning a language is an ever-developing skill that accumulates over time. Undoubtedly, perception plays a significant part in this process.

The brain interprets sensory input from the environment, this includes seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Perception allows individuals to make sense of the information they encounter. Sight is an essential and by far the most dominant sense for information gathering as well as the interaction between people and the world around them. Therefore, it is no surprise that learning is often accompanied by a visual representation. As such, this article aims to underline the importance of visual stimuli in processing information and language acquisition, by elaborating on the interpretation and classification of *illustration* and what might fall under this term along with its use in the teaching and learning process.

The term *illustration* originates from the Latin word “Illustrate”, which has the meaning of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. To put this in the context of an object, an illustration is therefore, a visualization or an interpretation of the world around us made by various artists, which could be in the form of a painting, drawing, collage, photo, engraving, and so on. The difference between an illustration and an art piece is that it does not need to be drawn because it accompanies a text that explains it, i.e. if a drawing does not explain something, it is a work of art, not an illustration.

When it comes to classifying, it is hard to appropriately put teaching materials into neat boxes that can explain their use and characteristics as well as their teaching value. What is

considered an image can also be broadly interpreted and already falls under the umbrella term of visual tool or visual, for short. (Byrne, 1978 : 5)

This opinion is also shared by Pit S. Corder who goes even further to refer and say that "anything that the learner can see in the classroom or through the window is potentially a visual element in the teaching of meaning". (Corder, 1966 : 32) This, of course, applies to anything that is portable and can pass through the door. However, those that cannot, are brought in front of the class through representational visual material, such as drawings, models, and diagrams presented on charts, on film strips, cinema films or on TV. As such, for the sake of brevity, this research will be limited to the conventional teaching materials most commonly used during lessons in foreign languages.

Images or pictures have a very strong effect on students. Students may hear and read an explanation or description, but they will never be able to properly imagine what they are being told without actually seeing it. For example, we can give a situation in which a teacher asks the students to draw a blonde girl in a dress. At first, this is a simple description. However, many details are open to interpretation. Therefore, students are likely to draw pictures of blonde girls with curly hair, straight hair, or pigtails; the dress could be of the colour of red, green, pink, patterned and so on. The girl herself can be short, tall, chubby or skinny. That's why images are so useful. They give a perfect, direct answer to the question: "What is this?" or "What does it mean?" The things taught through the images are also much easier retained by the students and remembered for a longer time.

Wall pictures and posters depict scenes, people or objects and are large enough to be seen by all students. Wall posters can be made commercially for language teaching purposes, for other educational needs such as road safety rules posters; or by the teacher themselves, either drawn or through the use of the collage of images. Posters often depict an intricate scene and contain a lot of details. Sometimes students can be distracted by the rest of the picture and not see the necessary details, which is a clear disadvantage. On the other hand, it is precisely the complexity of the posters that makes them so useful. Students learn to pay attention to details and separate the important information from the clutter. Posters are seen by the entire class and can be used multiple times. (Wright, 1991 : 44-45)

To understand the role of illustrations in the pedagogical sense, it is important to ascertain how people obtain information from such tools. People's senses were not always a means of understanding how the world around them operated as much as surviving the unpredictable dangers of wilderness. Originally, they were biological survival tools that focused on the details that made the difference between improving and hindering life. People did not so much as analyse what they were seeing or hearing, but immediately reacted and then made assumptions on the outcome.

Nowadays, we are allowed to properly take everything in, but that is an active choice, rather than a passive ability. A person can examine an object from all sides if he does so intentionally. However, many details are involuntarily left out. Therefore, perception is goal-directed and selective. (Arnheim, 1969 : 19)

People can process images sixty thousand times faster than text. Now the average person can only remember a fifth of what they hear. Visual aids have been found to improve learning by up to four hundred per cent. (3M Corporation, 2001 : 1) This is also supported by David Hyerle (2000 : 31), who states that between eighty and ninety per cent of all information received by the brain comes through visual means. Even though the auditory and kinaesthetic types of perception are complex, the brain primarily absorbs information through the eyes.

Therefore, it is no wonder that all teaching methods today include some visual element or another.

Teaching materials, especially those containing some sort of visual material, like pictures or drawings, are an integral part of the teaching-learning process. They are determined by the lesson components and the learning objectives and can fulfil all sorts of roles.

According to Marie Dominique (1996 : 8), images are an easier form of communication and are generally considered to be easier to understand than texts of foreign language. This indicates that simply the element of visual representation communicates to the human psyche on an intuitive level akin to nonverbal communication. As verbal communication requires a lot of concertation including the introduction of a code and the participation of more than one person. Meanwhile, nonverbal communication can be realised either by the interaction between two parties through the means of gesticulation and expression or through some medium like materials that include some visual or auditory element.

Moreover, visual materials are more beneficial for the teacher to clarify the topic much easier. Students can quickly grasp concepts and get a clear picture of them. For example, when learning about the sea, other countries and buildings, it can be easily taught along with appropriate images, charts, videos etc.

In addition, pictures can evoke a response or reaction from students. Through the use of pictures, teachers can introduce a topic and encourage learners to delve into constructive arguments, not only describing the picture but also arguing their points of view and opinions. The visual materials are also fresh and flexible, creating a sense of curiosity in learners and breaking monotony. (Hill, 1990 : 1) In agreement with this, Byrne Donn (1978 : 8) supports the use of visuals as a launching pad for discussions and prompts for different situations, that otherwise would be hard to naturally integrate during lessons. The learners need to not only describe what they see but also put themselves in situations where they can utilise their language skills and show knowledge and flexible integration in discussions.

Not least of all, students often tend to memorise information from books and texts and expect that to be the absolute right answer. With visual materials, students learn that information can be processed and presented interestingly and memorably. A strong understanding makes the task of retention much easier and the concept can be easily recalled when needed, and presenting it in such an easy-to-grasp way, challenges learners to try more effective methods of learning and presenting.

However, images are not the only way to encourage communication during class. Never before have people been exposed to so many images as they are today. Everyone knows cinema, television, advertising posters and the Internet as the source of this flood of information. The human brain is constantly busy sorting and selecting data about these pictures. And no visual aid has more potential and influx of information than films and videos.

Films and videos are generally composed of multiple pictures arranged one after another to create the impression of movement. Accompanied by audio this creates an immersive effect that gives a lot of information to the viewer and in a class, setting can serve numerous purposes. However, not all films and videos are recommended for use and discussion during class.

As a special note, films, shorts, feature films, television films and documentaries have audio accompaniment in addition to the visual component and can serve as an immersion into the culture of the target language. They are used to convey knowledge about the country interestingly and memorably and show a unique side to learning by demonstrating how speakers of the target language carry out activities familiar to the learners and what is special or similar

between the two. This learning process also occurs through an interesting and relaxing activity that does not require reading texts or processing pages of information. (Sass, 2007 : 13)

However, the choice rests with the teacher depending on the type, topic, purpose of the lesson, length, preference or other characteristics. Sass (2007 : 5) suggests adding short films or video sequences in foreign language lesson plans in order to expand learners' linguistic and intercultural skills through the use of specific vocabulary in a visual context. The goals of the exercises with video material should be to understand the content, explain the narrative, name and describe the characters and comment on the story.

Young learners should focus on describing the clothing, appearance, hairstyle or body language of characters observed in films. As an exercise, the teacher can describe a character's clothing to learners, point out the traditional clothing of the target language and compare it with their own national clothing. This situation allows branching outside of the barriers of the curriculum to invest in the personal development of national values as well as study what other countries see as their own pride and privilege thus, further developing the students' international competencies.

Nonetheless, it is also important to consider the drawings and images used in the exercises. Due to the fact that images are not always mere replicas or faithful copies of real life, but representations and excerpts of what is real, they may cause more problems rather than solve them. Many images are edited to fit a particular narrative, and the person taking the picture also influences certain aspects of the final result. Depending on the abstractness of the image, the viewer feels the need to fill in the gaps. An image can represent a symbol of the thing in real life, outlining concepts or characteristics that are difficult to define on their own, in relation to the subject depicted. For example, the portrait of a king can show strength, brutality, and wealth. Meanwhile, the picture of a white dove in the open sky, influences the viewer to adopt a more symbolic outlook on this image and associate it with peacefulness, freedom, gentleness, innocence and so on. (Arnheim, 1969 : 138)

With that being touched on, it is unquestionable how useful illustrations can be when used as teaching tools for Foreign Language lessons. However, as with everything else, there are always drawbacks, or at the very least some things to take into consideration when utilising these tools and it is up to the teacher to properly research and select the appropriate materials for the lesson. Sometimes excessive use of pictures can distract the learners from the starting point of the lesson, and sometimes the material, if chosen carelessly, can confuse the students and lose attention from what is important. Arnheim (1969 : 308) believes that pictures can be downright harmful if the message they give to the student is more confusing, incomprehensible, or useless than no picture at all. What he recommends regarding images is to approach them with the same scientific analysis as any other subject and to study them properly to understand their meaning. In other words, proper care and analyses need to be given the visual materials before using them in a class setting.

After all, art is subjective. Art is also a form of visual thinking. It fulfils the functions of creating beauty, order and perfection and transforming imaginary concepts into reality. Of course, making an object visible means capturing its essential features. The result, the product, only shows the viewer what the artist wants to see. The viewer on the other hand cannot focus on the details and imagery that the artist intended. As such, they will get a different reaction or reach an alternative conclusion. This is not necessarily bad when it comes to art, as it can start a dialogue and reveal unique perspectives. On the flip side, in a class where pictures are used as tools and guides it can spell a different matter and lead to further confusion and disorder.

Nevertheless, the drawings can be misleading and ambiguous at any level of abstraction, no matter how realistic. What teachers need to pay attention to when using illustrations, according to Arnheim (1969 : 313-315), is to cultivate their students' visual sensitivity to see the details and features, as well as the imagination needed to understand what they see and apply them to each task. This idea is further elaborated on by Timothy Gangwer (2015 : 25), who is of the opinion that visual skills can be learned. Teachers should guide students to recognize and respond appropriately to pictures and other visual tools, whether with humour, irony, or curiosity. As a special focus, teachers must ensure that students can tell the difference between fictional and actual representations, because this will affect their ability to recognize facts from misinformation, later in life.

Teachers in language pedagogy aim to help learners acquire proficiency in a new language by utilizing their prior knowledge and experience. This naturally requires more than simply the skill and knowledge of the teacher to impart the necessary lessons and language abilities to students. As such, visual materials, the likes of pictures, illustrations and so on are a cornerstone to the lesson progression of foreign language acquisition, serving as a source of inspiration, curiosity, and prompts for communication exercises, thus making it an all-purpose tool that every teacher should continue to use and further develop.

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