

THE IMAGE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Edited by Kieran Donaghy and Daniel Xerri



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1. The image in ELT: an introduction

Kieran Donaghy

UAB Idiomes Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Daniel Xerri

ELT Council, Malta

The vast majority of language teachers use images in their classroom. In today's increasingly visual world, it is difficult to imagine the language classroom without coursebook images, photographs, paintings, cartoons, picture books, comics, flashcards, wallcharts, YouTube videos, films, student-created artwork and media, and so on. However, despite the ubiquity of images in language teaching, we need to ask whether images are being approached merely as an aid or support, or as a significant component of communicating in a foreign language, and as a means of fostering students' communicative competence and creativity. In order to answer this question, we need to examine how images have been approached in resource books and coursebooks.

IMAGE RESOURCE BOOKS

In his 1966 seminal study *The Visual Element in Language Teaching*, Pit Corder made the distinction between "talking about images" (merely describing images) and "talking with images" (responding personally to images). The influence of this work on the use of images in language education has been immense. Since this seminal book, there have been a number of practical resource books, such as Alan Maley et al.'s *The Mind's Eye* (1980), Andrew Wright's *Pictures for Language Learners* (1990), David A. Hill's *Visual Impact* (1990), Ben Goldstein's *Working with Images* (2009), Jamie Keddie's *Images* (2009), and Peter Grundy et al.'s *English Through Art* (2009). These books promote the critical and creative use of still images in the language classroom, and encourage students to interpret images and analyse their reaction to them.

Perhaps the most influential video methodology book for teachers is Cooper et al.'s *Video* (1991). This ground-breaking book was the first to establish the principle of active watching: that rather than just watching a video passively and answering listening comprehension questions,

students should play a much more active viewing role. Students were involved in information gap tasks and engaged with the video on a much more meaningful level. Subsequently, a number of guides such as Susan Stempleski and Barry Tomalin's *Film* (2001), and Jane Sherman's *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom* (2003) contained practical suggestions for activities built upon the principle of active viewing. More recently, Ben Goldstein and Paul Driver's *Language Learning with Digital Video* (2014), Jamie Keddie's *Bringing Online Video into the Classroom* (2014), and Kieran Donaghy's *Film in Action* (2015) have focused not just on activities to exploit existing video content available on video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, but also on making and using learner-generated videos and short films.

However, despite the fact that there are many resource books that promote the critical and creative usage of both still and moving images, resource books sell very few copies and it can take a long time before the activities proposed in them are adopted by authors of the much better selling coursebooks. For better or worse, ELT coursebooks have a huge influence on teachers' methodology. As Peter Viney (2017) recounts,

I angered a group of teachers in Japan by stating that *Headway* had had a far greater influence on what happens in the ELT classroom than the entire collected works of Stephen Krashen. In practical terms, coursebooks are the filter through which theory reaches the classroom. It's a thick filter with an inbuilt delay system, but the good ideas trickle through eventually.

To better understand the role of images in the language classroom, it is necessary to examine how they are used in coursebooks.

IMAGES IN COURSEBOOKS

When considering the use of still images in coursebooks, one is struck by the fact that the power of images to stimulate ideas, discussion and creativity is still currently underexploited in the majority of them. According to well-known coursebook writer Ben Goldstein (2009),

With the advent of large-scale ELT publishing, images were used not only as visual reinforcement, but in order to make the finished product more attractive and hence more marketable. However, although texts are largely taken

from 'authentic' sources to reflect the real-life language that the books promote, the images are still largely made up of archive photos. Such images not only lack originality, but more often than not project and promote an affluent and aspirational lifestyle to learners. For this reason ELT materials, however, contemporary they are in topic and outlook, often appear to have a superficial, colour-supplement 'look' to them. Teachers and learners tend not to be presented with images that they would encounter in the real world, but rather a safe cleaned-up version. (p. 4)

In addition to this sanitised use of images in coursebooks, there is the criticism that images are still largely used as aids and for decoration. In a recent study of the usage of images in three intermediate ELT coursebooks for young adults and adults, David A. Hill (2013) found that over half of photos and drawings were used only for decoration:

It seems to be that having over 50 per cent of the pictures in a given coursebook used for purely decorative purposes is a great waste of effort on the part of the publisher and a great waste of opportunity for the language learner and teacher. (p. 163)

Of course, upon examining an ELT coursebook, one is also struck by the dominance of monomodal texts over the type of multimodal texts that students are engaging with on a daily basis outside the classroom.

However, despite the fact that the majority of coursebooks still use images largely for support and decoration, and monomodal texts are generally dominant, recently there has been a clear trend towards using images to stimulate ideas and discussion. In an increasing number of coursebooks, such as *Life* (National Geographic Learning), *Eyes Open/Uncover* (Cambridge University Press), *Keynote* (National Geographic Learning), and *The Big Picture* (Richmond), at the start of each unit large high-impact non-stock images are being used as a springboard to help establish the topic, activate schemata and get students talking.

Having looked at how images are used in ELT coursebooks, it is now necessary to explore how videos are used as more and more coursebooks are integrating video. When we look at how video is used, we discover that it is still largely regarded as glorified listening. Video is used as a way of doing listening comprehension tasks but with the support of moving

images to help with non-verbal communication. It is still largely exploited for comprehension-based tasks such as multiple-choice questions and language-based tasks such as gap-fills. However, an increasing number of coursebooks are exploiting video not just for language or comprehension-based activities, but also for more communicative and creative tasks in which students are encouraged to interpret and analyse what they see. Furthermore, in some coursebooks, such as *Eyes Open/Uncover* (Cambridge University Press), students are even asked to create their own videos. In the same way that the still image is beginning to play a more dominant role, so too has video become more integral to classroom practice and has begun to play a more communicative and creative role.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that there has been a gradual shift towards a more critical and creative use of both still and moving images in ELT coursebooks and the ELT classroom, images are still not being fully exploited as multimodal texts, and there is little focus on *multiliteracies pedagogy* as well as little effort to develop learners' *visual literacy*.

MULTILITERACIES PEDAGOGY

The term 'multiliteracies' was coined in the mid 1990s by the New London Group, a group of scholars who argue that literacy pedagogy should be linked to the rapidly changing social, cultural and technological environment. They argue that for a long period, the book was the dominant medium of communication. However, with the challenge of a technologically evolving landscape and the ascendance of the image, particularly the moving image, the screen has taken that place. According to Gunther Kress (2003), a prominent member of the group, "The former constellation of *medium of book* and *mode of writing* is giving way, and in many domains has already given way, to the new constellation of *medium of screen* and *mode of image*" (p. 9). However, this change does not spell the death of the written word. As Kress (2003) states, "Writing is too useful and valuable a mode of representation and communication – never mind the enormous weight of cultural investment in this technology" (p. 10).

In *Literacy in the New Media Age*, Kress (2003) offers a new theory of literacy where he argues that our previous dependence on linguistic theories to define literacy is now obsolete and deficient, and that we must combine language-based theory with semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and how they are used) and other visual theories, to provide an appropriate meaning to the term 'literacy' in the twenty-first century. As Carey Jewitt (2008) points out, "there is a need to approach literacy

practices as an inter-textual web of contexts and technology, rather than isolated sets of skills and competences” (p. 47). She believes that “what is needed is an educational framework that recognises and describes the new forms of text that children meet every day in order to secure the place of multimodal and visual texts within the curriculum” (p. 56).

To do this the New London Group called for a pedagogy of multiliteracies where students would learn to ‘read’ (analyse and interpret) and ‘write’ (create) multimodal texts. Within the framework of multiliteracies pedagogy, visual literacy is one of the key literacies.

VISUAL LITERACY

John Debes (1969) coined the term ‘visual literacy’ and offered the following definition:

Visual Literacy refers to 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, 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 the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication. (p. 26)

A more contemporary and perhaps useful definition states that,

In the context of human, intentional visual communication, visual literacy refers to a group of largely acquired abilities i.e. the abilities to understand (read), and to use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images. (Avgerinou, 2001, p. 26)

The importance of visual literacy in education is widely acknowledged. It is generally agreed that education needs to develop learners’ skills and ability to interpret images and to communicate visually. In schools there is a gradual move away from a reliance on print as the primary medium of dissemination and instruction, and instead towards visual media and the screen. In addition, there is an increasing recognition that visual literacy

needs to be integrated into curricula. This is reflected by the fact that in the English language curricula of a number of countries – for example, Canada, Australia and Singapore – two new skills, *viewing* and *visually representing* have been added to the traditional skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

According to Deborah Begoray (2001), the Canadian common curriculum framework states that,

Viewing is an active process of attending to and comprehending visual media, such as television, advertising images, films, diagrams, symbols, photographs, videos, drama, drawings, sculpture, and paintings.

Representing enables students to communicate information and ideas through a variety of media. (p. 202)

Viewing therefore requires learners to construct meaning by interpreting the parts (images, symbols, conventions, contexts) that are related to a visual text, and to understand not only “what” a text says, but “how” the text works. Here are some of the questions the Canadian common curriculum framework states effective viewers would ask themselves:

- What is the text representing?
- How is the text constructed?
- What assumptions, interests, beliefs, biases and values are portrayed by the text?
- What is the purpose of the text?
- To whom is the text directed? Who does the text exclude?
- What is my reaction to the text? What causes this reaction?
- What personal connections and associations can I make with this text?

Representing enables students to communicate their ideas visually using a variety of media and formats, including diagrams, charts, infographics, illustrations, slide shows, concept maps, photographs, images or symbols, storyboards, memes, posters and videos. Representing often allows students to make sense of their learning and to demonstrate their understanding.

Undoubtedly, these two new skills of viewing and representing will be integrated into national curricula throughout the world in the near

future. However, for the moment, at least, very little attention has been paid to them in ELT syllabus design. Indeed, multimodality and visual literacy have been largely ignored in ELT. As Kress (2000) points out, “Nearly every text that I look at uses two modes of communication: (a) language as writing and (b) image. Yet TESOL professionals continue to act as though language fully represented the meanings they wish to encode and communicate” (p. 337). Similarly, Greek academic Sylvia Karastathi (2016) states that,

Talks in TESOL conferences, address the use of iPads, films, digital storytelling, interactive whiteboards, GoogleMaps and so many other digital media. It is indeed exciting the way ICT has been embraced by the ELT community, as a useful tool that promotes engagement and new learning opportunities. But, although much attention has been given to digital tools which produce mainly visual media, visual literacy is largely ignored in TESOL conferences, often subsumed under the focus on digital literacies, revealing the overall misinterpretation of its changing role in the ELT field.

This misinterpretation of the changing and increasingly important role of visual literacy in ELT highlights the need for teachers to receive training in both visual literacy and media production. According to Karastathi (2016), “Aspects of visual literacy training need to be included in the syllabus of pre-service and in-service teacher training courses if we want to empower teachers in an era of multimodal communication and enable better collaboration with their students.”

Unless teachers receive specific training in visual literacy and media production, it will be difficult for them to teach these vital skills to their students in a world where they are expected to interpret and present complex visual ideas using a variety of media. As Karastathi (2016) argues,

If it is true then that our world is full of powerful visual images that continually bombard our students, it is important to teach them to resist the passivity, apathy and numbness they might feel toward the visual, and instead help them analyze the rhetorical techniques and meaning making mechanisms in operation in visual texts – that is, to make them active viewers. The fact that the nature

of contemporary communication has changed into a multimodal one, would lead us to rethink the construct of communicative competence.

Despite the excellent work being done by many teachers with images, there is an urgent need for ELT to finally come to terms with both multiliteracies pedagogy and visual literacy if we are to meet the needs of our students to communicate effectively in a world where communication is increasingly multimodal in nature. To do this, we need to increase the presence of multimodal texts in the ELT curriculum, incorporate specific visual literacy and media production training into pre-service and in-service teacher training courses, and extend specific visual literacy and media production strategies aimed at students.

THE IMAGE CONFERENCE

The Image Conference was set up to explore the possibilities that film, video, images and video games offer to both language teachers and language learners. In a world where we are saturated with visual stimulation due to the fact that the visual image is taking over, the rationale behind The Image Conference is that there is a need for the ability to interpret, analyse and create images to become an integral part of literacy.

The aim of The Image Conference is to put images at the centre of the language learning agenda and offer guidance on using images critically and creatively, and to promote visual literacy in language education. The Image Conference brings together leading experts and practitioners in the use of images in language learning so that they may share their experiences, insights and know-how. It provides participants with an excellent opportunity to enhance their competence in the innovative and creative use of images.

The first edition of the Image Conference was held at Universitat Autònoma Barcelona with the support of the IATEFL Learning Technologies Special Interest Group. Subsequent editions were held in Brasilia, Brazil; Córdoba, Spain; and Munich, Germany. The fifth edition of the conference was held in collaboration with the ELT Council in Valletta, Malta, in October 2017.

BOOK OVERVIEW

This book brings together a selection of papers based on sessions at the five editions of the Image Conference organized so far. All of the

papers in this book urge teachers to use images critically and creatively, and encourage students to resist the passivity they might feel towards images. Every single contribution is meant to help both teachers and students to become more active viewers and more visually literate.

The first group of papers explores the use and production of film in the language classroom. Whitcher uses her analysis of a short film as a springboard for a discussion of the potential of filmmaking for language learners. Goldstein provides a history of video in ELT and considers what role it will play in the future. Clare examines why video is such an engaging language learning tool.

In the next group of papers different authors investigate how images sourced from social media can be used to enhance language learning. Wasilewska starts by providing an overview of the needs of language learners forming part of the visual generation before considering the classroom use of applications like Instagram and Pinterest. The latter is also the focus of Zakime's paper, which examines how a tool like Pinterest can be harnessed for the purpose of developing students' visual literacy. Domínguez Romero and Bobkina illustrate how visual literacy can be taught via the memes that are regularly posted on social media.

The book's next two papers consider other sources of images in the language classroom. Fresacher takes a look at how product packaging, advertisements and other image sources can be used to develop students' colour vocabulary and their understanding of the different meanings of colour. Seburn makes a case for the use of learner-sourced images in the classroom as a means of deepening textual engagement and conceptual comprehension.

The next group of papers examines how the images in artworks can be exploited not only for language learning but also for the development of visual literacy. Papalazarou shows how exposing students to paintings can serve to structure their thinking and enhance their writing skills. Similarly, Karastathi discusses the classroom application of ekphrastic writing, which consists of the act of writing about visual works of art such as the ones found in museums. Writing prose and poetry in response to peace-related artworks constitutes the focus of Brzezinska's paper. Given the importance of visual arts as a means of enriching human communication, Pratt describes how to create an Artists in Schools project.

The book's last group of papers is concerned to varying degrees with the storytelling capacity of images. Dummett highlights the connection that exists between images and stories, a connection that helps to

make language learning more engaging. Narratives play an important role in many digital games, these being what Driver evaluates in his paper. Lewis explores how graphic novels and comics can be used with language learners while Theuma elaborates on how to exploit the visual communication contained within cartoons and comics. Finally, Benévolo França explains how the act of deconstructing pictures of teaching and learning spaces enables us to glimpse the truth about the movements, voices and interaction of the people that occupied them.

kieran@kierandonaghy.com
daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt

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