

An Exploration of Visual Literacy through Pictures in Developing English Reading Comprehension for Elementary Students

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Abstract

This paper attempts a small-scale understanding of visual literacy through pictures in developing English reading comprehension for elementary students. It is based on the theory of language development through pictures, that if used effectively in the classroom might aid to develop English reading comprehension among elementary learners. During the teaching-learning process, the possible ways of using some factors of pictures are discussed that might help to improve learners English reading comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, we are moving more into technology than other equipment in the classroom teaching-learning methods. However, we still use old traditional methods, making teaching-learning easier for our young learners. The term 'young learner' covers a large chronological age span: from around 3–15 years. Some writers and researchers segment learners according to age: 3–5 year old; 6–8 and so on (Nunan, 2011). On the other hand, with the growing popularity of audio-visuais, both teacher-learners

have become habitual in absorbing information more visually than ever before. This is because smartphones, computers and picture aided books are in print or visual form. The term 'visual' refers to the act of seeing or perceiving something in one's brain. For example, visual refers to pictures or images, paintings, cartoons or comic strips, charts and graphs, diagrams, realia bringing real-life, authentic artefacts in the classroom, maps, and many more. Visuals that are more readily available for teaching are regularly used to make teaching-learning easier but they are also a

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great way to learn and develop English reading comprehension.

VISUAL LITERACY

Many scholars have found that we develop and learn visual skills before acquiring verbal skills. Young learners are keen observers of things that are surrounding them. They start pointing those items, pictures, and many more things to their reach of eyes. Visual is to see someone or something through naked eyes. "A visual-minded individual is one who remembers things that he sees" (Anderson, 1972: p.87). Visual learning is one of the learning styles among learners. It is a sensory receiver of the information. According to Spencer (2018), "research has found that around the globe, 65 per cent of our general population are visual learners, meaning they need to see information in order to retain it."

Centuries ago, the human race had always communicated through visuals. It is not new in the mediated world; it is just another version; perhaps we have passed down the message and its meaning through different paintings, sculptures, symbols, images, and others. We passed down stories and traditions through photographs, illustrations, carvings, etc. We passed down stories and traditions from one generation to another. In our media-driven environment twenty-first century, being visually literate is becoming increasingly important. From internet advertising to jokes to emoji messaging, we are constantly flooded

with pictures, body language, hand gestures, object language, signs and symbols (pictorial representations of a message), abstract language (graphics or logos to represent ideas), demonstrating how traditional ways of communication are transforming. It has become vital for our teachers to develop visual literacy abilities in students by providing them with the resources and vocabulary they require to discuss images.

Visual literacy has completely changed the environment of individually or collaboratively seeing the same things and describing them differently in one's sense. Most of the information is a blend of colourful images and a few words for young learners. It is the role of the teachers to impart the knowledge and skills to the students to enhance and comprehend all the information in all its ways. A very famous Chinese proverb reads, "A picture is worth a thousand words." This is applicable to young learners and even adults. It is often simpler, easier and better to show something in the picture than to describe it verbally as the same information reveals everything in a single frame. It even saves energy of the person too. "A single picture of a thing can do more than half-an hour of talk on it" (Chakrabarti, 1967: p.106).

Our teachers have been teaching visual literacy to young learners through various visual aids to see pictures and learn their alphabets or words associated with them by heart. Through this method, young learners

develop rote learning or mechanical/drilling way of memorising the words. The importance of reading and understanding pictures seem less. In addition, the teachers have been using colour books, photos, storybooks or poems, posters, picture cards/flashcards, diagrams drawn on black/whiteboards, picture puzzle books, photographs, charts, maps & globes, overhead projectors, and many other visuals to impart knowledge effectively to learn English grammar skills through rote learning.

However, now in the twenty-first century, as the teaching scenario has wholly changed, the elimination of the rote learning method is necessary to construct knowledge and develop reflective learning among young learners. Using visual items aid learners in both linguistic and non-linguistic skills. Visual items in the classroom help young learners increase their skills such as visual, reading, writing, speaking, non-verbal, etc., and enhance vocabulary and most importantly, expand their reading comprehension. It is no surprise that visuals have a more powerful impact on learners than any other medium.

Importance of Visual Literacy in Enhancing Picture Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a massive problem among the young learners. Low-level and average-level learners face many difficulties in reading and comprehending the text. Reading

complex text makes young learners' disinterested and bored resulting in not paying attention to what they are reading. According to Silbert (2015), "Decoding individual words slows down or prevents reading comprehension." Using visual aids in the classroom with young learners can improve visual literacy and facilitate reading comprehension. According to Wright, "It is important to have as wide a range of resources as possible in the classroom so that the students can have a rich base and stimulus for this development. And the resources must include pictures" (p. 2). Objects or artefacts we see around us have a massive impact on us and provide us with knowledge. Therefore, using a picture with young learners will help them guess, interpret, and make predictions from what they hear and read and what they see around, and recall seeing things to relate it with them. Making use of pictures can benefit learners in the following ways:

- Visual items are conveyed faster and are processed extremely quickly by the brain. Trafton (2014) in her news article 'In the blink of an eye' states that a team of neuroscientists from MIT found that the human brain can process entire images that the eye sees for a little as 13 milliseconds—the first evidence of such rapid processing speed.
- Pictures can be used independently and associated with written text, audio, and audio-visuals. This help teachers to enhance

comprehension and reflection of the young learners.

- Young learners are attracted more towards visual information pictures, flashcards, comic books, storybooks with colourful illustrations, and many more towards visual study material. It helps learners develop the learning process, reading skills, and understanding of the text using pictures and visual directions. Pictures make young learners visually alert and active in the classroom, and help them build interest and improve their understanding and love for visuals.
- Using pictures can exceptionally benefit young learners in the classroom. Visuals can serve as a helpful bridge in the language learning process, especially with these young learners as they are working towards developing fluency and vocabulary in English. Apart from enhancing reading and writing skills, visual literacy aid in producing images and interpreting the meaning out of the photos. We rely more on mobile, computers, videos, and pictures in the digital world to comprehend and convey meaning quickly.
- Young learners are fun-loving. They love to make noise, play and laugh without thinking if they are disturbing others. They

are curious to know things, explore around, are creative and imaginative, and for this, teachers need to provide them with a learning environment to support and develop their learning skills. 'The physical environment is also crucial for establishing a secure, positive environment' (Nunan, 2011). Therefore, the teacher must provide a positive, stress-free and welcoming environment for learning and holistic development.

Role of Picture Reading in the Classroom

Encourage participation

Many young learners are shy. They prefer to avoid reading the text during teaching. Which leads to a lack of confidence in them. While reading, they struggle with words and stammer intermittently. All this forces them to dislike reading. Knowing whether they are engaged or bored in the class becomes difficult. As a result, they tend to hide behind their classmate's backs and avoid making eye contact with the teacher. Thus, Using pictures in the classroom can generate interest and actively motivate learners to participate in reading comprehension (understanding and retaining information). "Pictures can motivate the student and make him or her want to pay attention and want to take part" (Wright, 1989: p.17). It

will help them build confidence and make them active and attentive in visualising, listening, and reading—picture aids in describing, decoding, and understanding the text.

Language barriers

Learning a language is challenging. Learners will gradually develop and understand English during these foundational years of learning English as a second language. Primarily teachers should not focus on phonics, accuracy and translation of the text to young learners. Using pictures can help teachers build fluency and comprehend the text for developing reading comprehension without language barriers in young learners. "Pictures bring the world into the classroom (a street scene or a particular object, a train)" (Wright, 1989: p.17). Using pictures can help learners read, speak and comprehend the image to form sentences and produce vocabulary. A picture can stimulate and memorise the information and recall it whenever asked later. For example, pictograms "are language independent and can be understood with the same conventional meaning in a lot of different places where a number of different languages are spoken" (Yule, 2016: p.595). These pictograms can help read pictures comprehend and interpret the meaning behind them. This help attract readers attention. Some pictograms are as follows:

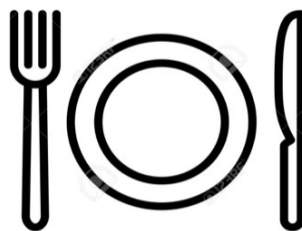


Figure 3.1: Restaurant



Figure 3.2: School ahead



Figure 3.3: Accessible toilet

Reading comprehension is fun!

All learners are different and have different styles of learning the same things differently. VAK (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic) is a learning style. It was designed by Walter Burke Barbe and developed by Neil Fleming. Using this style of teaching-learning in the classroom among young learners can benefit them from grasping the content, making reading simple and comprehending fast. Through this learning style, learners can develop picture reading comprehension by visualising the picture, hearing the sound, and doing hands-on learning. It will benefit all types of learners and increase their comprehension of picture reading. It will generate fun among learners in the classroom as the class will attract more towards pictures, be attentively engaged, and will be able to recall the text readily even through gestures and expressions used while teaching the class.

Total communication process helps young learners to understand the pictures well. Reading picture help learners to enhance verbal and writing skills, but it also develops nonverbal communication skills (body language, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, symbols, signs, and many others). Using photographs of people, objects, or any activity in the classroom will help to find out the mental and emotional state of the people, artefacts used in the photographs, and more things. For example, showing a photo of people and asking about their

physical description, how they dress, how they look— sad or happy, how many they are. These would required various types of responses: yes/no, one-word answers or open-ended answers.

EFFECTIVENESS OF VISUALS

The effectiveness of a photograph is determined by its selection and application. Choosing and using a suitable image for low-level and average-level learners is a must in the classroom. Using typical pictures or photographs is necessary to convey the entire tale without writing words or sentences. It will help young learners to reinforce communication skills and improve cognitive development. Choosing an image for the classroom is the most complex and crucial part for the teacher. There are few opportunities to bring authentic materials into the school. "Pictures for younger children should be bright and should have fewer details. Coloured pictures are attractive, but make sure that they are of the natural colours (white, black, red, yellow, green, and blue). In a learning situations, pictures or photographs help children see what things really look like." (Chakrabarti, 1967: p.113) As a result, if possible, photographs, realia and other teaching resources should be brought and used with learners. Further, "Authentic materials have a positive effect of learner motivation, provide exposure to real language and support a more creative approach to teaching" (Richards, 2016).

Pictures and photographs intended for classroom exhibition should be sufficiently large and straightforward to be seen by all learners. If an image is small, either show it individually or project it on the screen to clear visibility before it loses its value. The picture needs to be held correctly for displaying to the class. A class needs a proper stand or easel to keep the picture for clear visibility to attract the learners' attention. Too many pictures should not show to the learners at a time. It is always better to go from simple images to complex. What children see may differ from what the teachers intend to see. The picture does not always arouse interest in the children at once. Therefore, teachers should instruct the students on what learners need to observe in the picture before handing it in. To make good use of a photo, develop a list of questions that learners must answer from the image. Teachers should teach students how to create an opinion on a visual. It would eliminate the need for translation while also improving visual association learning.

Activities for the Teaching of Visual Literacy in the Classroom

1. Able to identify, locate and speak a sentence.

Language learning is implicit. Children use and learn language indirectly while utilising the language itself. During storytelling poems, rhymes, flashcards, activities such as drawing posters,

colouring, etc., aid the teachers. It generates interest to learn and show attentiveness, and the teacher gets the idea of how much children have understood, what they have comprehended, what they have liked and what is their interest. Reading comprehension is the most crucial area for language learners at the primary level. It is their foundational years of learning English as a second language. Learners should answer who, what, where, when, and why questions. Therefore, teachers need to be creative and imaginative and access many resources to teach the young learners.

Some simple and easy to follow activities that can be used in the class with young learners are as follows:

- Plan for hands-on activities which use visual resources such as photos and objects. Introduce activities orally. It must be a collaborative work. For example, an activity of paper folding (origami) can be encouraged. The teacher may ask the students to sit in pairs— student A and student B. The teacher ask the Student A to instruct student B through picture description, and student B has to perform accordingly. It will develop an understanding of the picture and enhance their comprehension to perform correctly.
- Show them any picture for about 10–12 seconds. For example, the painting titled 'The Bedroom' by Van Gogh. Later ask them

questions related to the image. This fun activity will check their memory of how fast they visualise things and remember them. This activity will develop communication and interactive skills, and activate vocabulary related to images, colours or numbers.



Annexure I : 'The Bedroom' by Van Gogh

- Narrate fairy tales, folk stories, or fables to children in the classroom. For example, narrate 'The Thirsty Crow' or any age-appropriate story.



Annexure II: 'The Thirsty Crow'

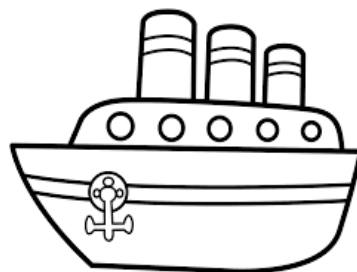
Ask them to sit in groups. Give them pictures and ask them to put them in order according to the story they listened to. This activity will develop listening skills, memorising skills, and comprehending the story to retell it by putting pictures in order.

- Provide them pictures of the four seasons. Ask them to draw a comparison and contrast among the four pictures according to the season, and whether they can visualise the given image. This activity will develop children's speaking skills, listening skills, writing skills and vocabulary.

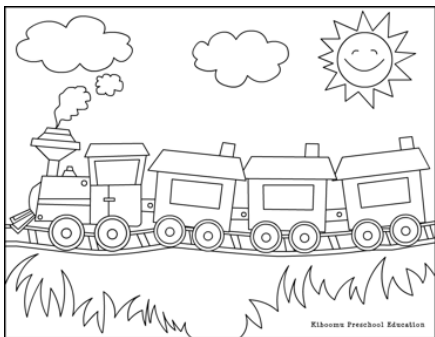


Annexure III : The Four Seasons

- Young learners are excellent and are fond of colouring or sketching any work using colourful pens,



Annexure IV : Steamship



Annexure V: Christmas Train

crayons or dark pencils. It will help them develop their artistic elements and spatial-visual skills of the learners, but give a side activity either of describing or writing a story behind the pictures, which will generate the linguistic output of the students.

CONCLUSION

"Pictures are invaluable aids in learning" (Chakrabarti, 2015: p.106). Using picture reading in the English classroom will help learners enhance their reading comprehension. It will help them retain information for a long time, as pictures are easier to recall. It will strengthen their language development. Reading pictures will be stimulating and enjoyable for young learners. There will be no boredom, and the class will be engaged, interactive, exciting and lively. Visuals might encourage, boost and motivate learners to improve their communication skills. Hence, developed activities will help learners reinforce visual literacy skills, reading comprehension, and other literacy skills.

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FIGURES

FIG.3.1 https://www.123rf.com/photo_151907453_illustration-vector-graphic-of-restaurant-icon-fit-for-food-eat-dining-lunch-etc.html

FIG.3.2 <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/school-children-traffic-sign-red-triangle-1779050549>

ANNEXURES

- I- <https://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/the-bedroom.html>
- II- <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/illustration-story-thirsty-crow-1632330754>
- III- https://www.lakeshorelearning.com/products/puzzles/wooden-puzzles/Seasons-and-weather-puzzle-set/s/PP217?%20utm_source=pinterest&utm_medium=social_media&utm_campaign=SeasonsPuzzle
- IV- <https://coloring-4kids.com/ship-transportation-coloring-pages-steamship-for-kids-printable-free/>
- V- <https://coloringhome.com/coloring-page/1701431>