The Use of Pictures and Illustrations in Teaching English

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Abstract
This article reconsiders the function of pictures and illustrations and examines their usefulness in language learning. Nowadays, colourful pictures and illustrations are very commonly used in English textbooks. They are instantaneously appealing to learners and have the power to engage students in their learning. Thus engaged, learners have a better chance of improving their English. Pictures and illustrations can be used in multiple ways. They can be used in preliminary activities before reading English passages. By using them, learners can predict what they will be reading. These predictions can be done individually and silently, or can be done in the form of discussion in pairs and small groups. In their discussion learners can be as creative and imaginative as they wish to be. Thus reading can become a more holistic activity when used in combination with more directly communicative aspects of language learning such as speaking and listening.

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The use of visuals such as pictures, illustrations, and flash cards¹, are common nowadays in teaching English. They help teachers to teach better and students to learn better. Pick any current English textbook commercially available on the market. They are full of pictures and illustrations, most often in colour. But this was not always the case as recently as the 1980s. In those days, with a few exceptions, English textbooks hardly had any pictures and were usually only print. Even if there were textbooks with pictures and illustrations in them, their use was very selective and the pictures were often in black and white. I remember that when I was in the UK in the mid-1990s, one of my former English teachers said, 'Students won't work nowadays if there is no pictures in the textbook.'

I was rather surprised to hear a senior high school English teacher, during a 2011 workshop, saying that she wished that there would not be so many pictures or illustrations in textbooks. She continued to explain her reason, saying that students would easily understand what the passage they were studying was all about without having to read the accompanying English. As far as she was concerned, that kind of immediate understanding by students, helped by the visual aids, was rather harmful and detrimental to their studies, and a hindrance to her teaching. She seemed to believe that students should always struggle and struggle only with actual words and sentences when learning English, without such easily available help as pictures. She may have been thinking of the English university entrance examinations in which visual aids are usually not provided. I remember that when she expressed her unfavourable opinion about pictures and illustrations, she almost sounded 'jealous' of such visual aids. She

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¹ Flash cards: small cards with a word on one side and its translation or meaning on the other side, used for quick and repetitive practice.
might have thought that all her efforts to teach English would become meaningless because of the very existence of pictorial aids. What was really more surprising was that she was not alone in having such a negative view of visual aids; other English teachers who were there with us at that time mostly agreed with her!

Despite what this particular teacher might think of these visual aids, they are in fact quite helpful for teaching and learning English. Brown talks about the use of realia in teaching and learning: 'Realia are probably the oldest form of classroom aid, but their effectiveness in helping students to connect language to reality cannot be underestimated' (143). He continues to say, 'Posters, charts, and magazine pictures also represent ‘old-fashioned’ but effective teaching aids' (143). We can safely include pictures incorporated in the textbooks as having the similar effect. Harmer (Practice 2007) says that 'Pictures can be in the form of … photographs or illustrations (typically in a textbook)' and 'facilitate learning'(178). Harmer (1998) also says:

Most people can remember lessons at school which were uninvolving and where they 'switched off' from what was being taught them. Frequently, this was because they were bored, because they were not emotionally engaged with what was going on. Such lessons can be contrasted with lessons where they were amused, moved, stimulated or challenged. (25)

He continues by mentioning that pictures can be stimulating and can engage students emotionally: 'Activities and materials which frequently Engage [sic] students include: games …, music, discussion …, stimulating pictures, … etc.' (25). Colourful pictures and illustrations are often entertaining and beautiful to look at. Pictures as 'ornamentation' (Harmer, Practice 2007, 178) appeal to students and engage them in their learning:

pictures … are often used to make work more appealing. In many modern coursebooks, for example, a reading text will be adorned by a photograph … The rationale for this is clearly that pictures enhance the text, giving readers (or students) an extra visual dimension to what they are reading.

… it should be remembered that if the pictures are interesting, they will appeal strongly to at least some members of the class. They have the power … to engage students. (Harmer, Practice 2007, 178-9)

Thus engaged, students have 'more “fun” and 'learn better than when they are partly or wholly disengaged!’ (Harmer 1998, 25). Harmer (how to 2007) emphasizes that 'Engagement of this type is one of the vital ingredients for successful learning' (52). His conviction that pictures are useful in learning was already stated by Broughton et al. (1978, 1980) who said that devices 'which may help to foster better understanding are those which involve the use of pictures, diagrams, chats and models' (107).

Pictures and illustrations are very useful in more ways than one. They are useful for introducing new words and expressions. For example, by using the following illustration, we can introduce a set of vocabulary useful for describing a picture.
Picture dictionaries and some monolingual English dictionaries have similar illustrations in them, which are useful for giving learners immediate visual understanding of ideas and concepts.

Pictures and illustrations ‘are useful for getting students to predict what is coming next in a lesson. Thus students might look at a picture and try to guess what it shows’ (Harmer, *Practice* 2007, 179). Harmer continues to say that ‘This use of pictures is very powerful and has the advantage of engaging students in the task to follow’ (*Practice* 2007, 179). I mentioned the senior high school English teacher who had complained about the pictures in textbooks. She might have been confused about two things: the benefit of pictures that prompt prediction on the part of learners, and their true understanding of English. Being able to predict and to understand English are not the same: the former never replaces the latter. Rather the one helps learners to achieve the other.

Visual aids are also useful for ‘communication activities’ such as describing and discussing pictures between pairs of students or in small groups (Harmer, *Practice* 2007, 178-9). Students can do these activities before reading related passages, for example. An advantage of these communication activities is that ‘Pictures can … be used for creative language use’ (Harmer, *Practice* 2007, 179) in which students can bring in their ‘personal experiences, feelings, values and opinions’ (Griffiths and Keohane, 1).

The following example demonstrates how learners can be encouraged to predict what they will be reading in a passage that incorporates visual aids. In the process of predicting, they can be involved in communication activities in which they can say freely about what they see. The passage ‘A TRAIN JOURNEY’ is preceded by the following illustration.
With this illustration there is a set of questions that read: ‘Look at the picture. Who do you think the people on the train are? Do they know each other?’ Thus learners are first encouraged to think about the picture. The teacher may let them discuss what they see in pairs or small groups. They ‘won’t know the answer for sure’; what they are asked to do is to ‘speculate’ (Soars, Soars, and Maris, 110) freely. They are not required to get the situation right. They are entitled to be ‘wrong’ in their speculation. It does not matter much if they get the situation wrong. For instance, some learners (in fact, a lot of learners, I imagine) might think that the picture is of a family with the parents and their three children enjoying their outing. In fact, this is NOT a picture of one family, which learners will only realize after they read the passage. The woman is not the mother but an aunt of the three children; the man is not the father but a total stranger. Thus learners’ rather natural expectations are not realized. But who knows the correct situation, and who cares? The point is that learners are thus engaged in the process of learning, which is the most important thing, as Harmer points out. We can argue that learners’ expectations being thus undermined is itself a calculated device to heighten their involvement in learning. For, if their expectations are disappointed, this will cause a certain amount of surprise in their minds, and such a surprise inevitably engages them more in their learning. A very shrewd learner may notice that, for a family outing, what the man is wearing is rather too formal, and therefore he may not be the father. This kind of both very sensible and sensitive observation is a sure sign of deep engagement by the learner. Some learners may focus on the elder boy who is standing by the window, pointing out of it and talking to the others. In fact, learners can come up with anything related to the picture, and be creative and imaginative in what they see and what they say. Thus the whole process is designed to serve as communicative preparations that will engage learners in their learning. In this way teachers can make them ‘think of a topic before asking them to read about it’ (Harmer 1998, 25).

Scrivener says that pictures and picture stories ‘are very useful … as material for speaking and listening activities’ (334). Using the above picture of ‘A TRAIN JOURNEY’, not only do learners exchange their ideas freely with others and thus get engaged in their learning, but they also have ‘an opportunity to use the language more fluently in the speaking activity’ (Scrivener, 335). Pictures thus provide learners with a wider horizon of English learning, in which reading is holistically combined with other aspects of language learning such as speaking and
The passage ‘A TRAIN JOURNEY’ is a story in which there is another story, that is, a story within a story. The story within is again preceded by the four-piece set of pictures below.

As you can see, the instruction above the pictures asks learners to think what happened to Bertha. Thus the teacher can ‘get students to predict what happens to Bertha from the pictures’ (Soars, Soars, and Maris, 111). The prediction can again be done individually and silently at first, and then students may be encouraged to exchange their ideas in pairs or small groups. At this stage the teacher should ‘accept any interpretation that students give’ (Soars, Soars, and Maris, 111). It does not really matter very much what interpretation they give because the point of this communicative activity is to get students engaged and involved in the learning process. Errors and mistakes in their use of spoken English do not matter much either; they should be allowed to express their ideas freely without worrying too much about correct English. After reading the story, students ‘can compare their ideas with the actual story’ (Soars, Soars, and Maris, 111), or they can be encouraged to ‘retell the story of Bertha working from the pictures’ (Soars, Soars, and Maris, 111). The teacher can also ‘encourage them to add in any details they think relevant’ (Soars, Soars, and Maris, 111). Thus pictures can be utilized in many different and useful ways.

We have examined the use of pictures and illustrations in teaching and learning English. They are, first of all, beautiful to look at and appealing to the learners. Their appealing beauty captures learners’ minds instantaneously and thus they have the power to engage them. Once engaged, they have a better chance of improving their English. As Harmer says, ‘Pictures of all kinds can be used in a multiplicity of ways’ (Harmer, Practice 2007, 178), such as for prediction of what the learner will be reading, and for discussion as preparation for reading. In their activities, learners can be as creative and imaginative as they are capable of being. In such activities, they do not have to worry too much about errors and mistakes they may make in their use of spoken English. Such shortcomings should not discourage their creativity and imaginativeness because the whole point of doing activities with pictures is to engage learners in the process of learning, which is the most important thing. The use of visual aids tends to encourage learners to learn English more communicatively, in which various aspects...
of language learning such as speaking, listening, and reading are effectively combined in a holistic way. This is an excellent by-product, as it were, of the use of visual aids. Thus pictures and illustrations bring a surprising amount of benefit into the language classroom and they are a gold mine of language teaching and learning. Ignoring and dismissing them is a waste of these very useful resources.

Note

1. If you are interested in how to utilize visuals, you can refer to: Andrew Wright and Safia Haleem 1991; Heather Westrup and Joanna Baker 2005, especially the chapters 8 to 10. If you would like to draw better on the board, you could practise drawing with: Andrew Wright, Pearson Education 1984, Addison Wesley Longman 1996.

References


