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VISUAL LITERACY IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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The role of the teacher has changed in the light of current trends in education, technological advances, information explosion and communications revolution. The teacher is no longer the only source of information, he is a facilitator of learning, a coordinator rather than a director of learners' activities.

This situation has created new demands on the part of the teacher. Among his many tasks is the task to incorporate digital technology into the classroom.

Here are some words that did not exist before this century: infographic, kinetic, screener, meme, vine, augmented reality, etc. They are all connected to looking or watching and show the renewed interest in visual literacy and how it may be taught.

The need to understand and interpret images isn't new, for many years the teachers used visual aids at their lessons.

But today the information that the students receive in English comes through a complex combination of text and image. L. Burmark states that "...students must learn to process both words and pictures. To be visually literate, they must learn to 'read' (consume/interpret) images and 'write' (produce/use) visually rich communications."

Let us look at three levels of visual literacy and how these relate to classroom teaching.

At a basic level, visual literacy means looking at an image and answering the question, 'What does it mean?' We use this kind of literacy every day. In the classroom we show students the pictures and ask them to match them with the words.

Before reading an article we may show students a photo in the newspaper and ask them to predict what the text is likely to be about.

At the second level we ask students not only to describe what they see but to speculate about what could happen next.

Very often, these tasks use images where the message is not instantly recognizable and they generate discussion or require critical thinking.

The third level of visual literacy is not only about 'reading' and responding to images but also about developing the ability to 'write' or 'create' your own images.

At present the teacher sets a homework exercise where the students take an image or make a video, upload it to a website and record their own story.

Or the students write their own mini-script, with which they can make their own animated movie in seconds. It is a powerful combination of imagery and text.

Today creative visual literacy is very much linked to digital literacy.

A real classroom example is given by Nicky Hockly on her blog where she started the lesson by writing 'water' on the board and invited her students to go out and use their phones to take a picture of something related to it.

The students returned to the class and presented the images to the group, explaining their connection with 'water'. This activity is an example of student's own productive and creative visual literacy combined with language.

In the past teachers used images for lower order thinking and for critical thinking, but now they have more opportunities to allow students to draw on the creative side of their visual literacy and to create, share and combine their own images as part of their language learning.

One form of creative teaching is multimodality, which is defined as 'the crafted' integration of two or more ways, or modes, of communication, so that their combined meaning as a whole is greater than either mode separately or their simple combination'.

An example of this is the combination of print, audio, video and hyperlinks.

A multimodal approach to teaching a foreign language presupposes a visual literacy as its part. It is one means by which the teacher can create an artificial foreign language environment for the students, helping them to master a new language.

Teaching English as a second language in a foreign country by a teacher who is not a native speaker relies greatly on modern digital technology giving students the possibility 'to get plunged' into the imitation of the language environment and improving their command of English.