

Visual Literacy and Teaching English Online

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Abstract: Visual Literacy has a great role to play in education and particularly in language education. This paper is an attempt to think over the role of visual literacy in our English textbooks and consequently in teaching English online. It has a big stake in online classroom interaction. In English textbooks, Visual literacy is interwoven with theme-based discourses, textual information, language skills, grammar, vocabulary, study and information skills, etc. Teachers can use or adapt online resources available on the internet to optimize the visual experience of the students in the teacher-learning process, such as; videos, animations, photographs, illustrations, icons, visual maps, infographics, pictographs, typography, interactive tools, etc.

Teachers should keep certain points in mind while teaching English online. Teachers should consider visuals as a significant component of teaching. They should give sufficient time for discussion on visuals while teaching English online. Teachers should follow step by step approach; Look – See – Describe – Analyze – Interpret – Communicate. This sequence will activate mental processing of information, understanding the intended message or theme, and develop skills of communication in different ways. Teachers should make students active viewers. Teachers should encourage them to have interactions by posing perceptual – structural – critical questions. Teachers should understand the integration of visuals with the text and other media is very important. Many activities can be added by teachers in addition to textbook activities, such as; Caption a photograph, developing timelines, taking photos, recording videos, creating infographics, generating memes, etc. Such activities will develop students' visual communication skills.

It is important for teachers to integrate visual literacy into pedagogy to meet students' needs, requirements,

learning outcomes and promote lifelong learning. Visual Literacy matters in teaching English online, because it matters in developing language skills, study skills, information skills, and teaching universal values to students.

Index Terms- Visual Literacy, Teaching English Online, Pedagogy,

INTRODUCTION

Education sector is one of the deeply hit sectors of life, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Guidelines have been coming from GoI, State Government, and Local bodies from time to time since the outbreak with the statement that, 'Online/Distance learning shall continue to be permitted and shall be encouraged.' Initially, teachers were panicked due to the sudden exposure to online teaching, and then we accepted the reality that there is no way out other than embracing online teaching and this pandemic is not going to end soon.

Gradually, teachers learned to carry out the process of teaching online through different conferencing tools and online platforms, creating e-resources like; e-text, videos, ppts, images, etc. Even those teachers, who could not operate computers and are reluctant to make a simple PowerPoint presentation, are now running classes through their mobiles, sharing learning resources in WhatsApp groups of students, making instructional videos, and running their own YouTube channel. Pandemic has been manifesting online teaching skills of our teachers.

Online Education is a new normal now. Herodotus, who was considered as Father of History, rightly said, "Circumstances rule men; men do not rule circumstances (brainyquote.com)." Ultimately, the overall circumstances of the Covid-19 Pandemic have

been shaping and setting up the strong foundations of online education in the country.

Every classroom has various types of learners, such as; Visual Learners, Aural Learners, Physical Learners, Verbal Learners, Logical Learners, Social Learners, Solo Learners, Natural/ Nature Learners, etc (viewsonic.com). Many kinds of research were carried on students' styles of learning. Let's look at the findings of some of the research studies (visualteachingalliance.com);

- “Ideas presented graphically are easier to comprehend and remember than those presented as words.” – Kliegl, R., Smith, J., Heckhausen, J. & Baltes, P.B. (1987)
- “Our eyes can register 36,000 visual messages per hour. 40 percent of all nerve fibers connected to the brain are linked to the retina.” (Jensen, 1996)
- “It only takes about 1/4 second for the human brain to process and attach meaning to a symbol. By comparison, it takes us an average of 6 seconds to read 20-25 words” (Thorpe, S., Fize, D. & Marlot, C., 1996)
- “Approximately 65 percent of the population are visual learners.” (Mind Tools, 1998)
- “90 percent of the information that comes to the brain is visual.” (Hyerle, 2000)
- “Visual information is transferred quickly. The brain processes visual information 60,000 times faster than text. Visual aids in the classroom improve learning by up to 400 percent.” (3M Corporation, 2001)
- “Only 10 percent of secondary students are auditory learners, 80 percent of instruction is delivered orally.” (University of Illinois Extension, 2009)
- “Visual information develops understanding. Any information that we receive with any kind of meaning or usefulness to us is retained in our long-term memory.” (Niveadha, 2019)
- “Visual information is memorable. Viewers retain 95% of a message when they watch it in a video, compared to 10% when reading it in a text.” (Wire Buzz)

Therefore, our learning is mainly visual learning. There is a saying, ‘A Picture is worth a thousand words.’ Learning to read pictures/images / visual

communication is fundamental to all types of learning. A child learns to communicate in sign language, distinguishes people, understands facial expressions, and further learns to speak in his/her mother tongue before taking admission in a school. It is only possible because a child associates words/signs with visual images. Hence, learning from visuals is innate to human beings.

We are living in the age of information and communication technology that is full of visuals. Visuals are omnipresent; at every place, on every book, on every paper, on every signboard, on every road, in every building, on every product, on every gadget and almost every means and medium of communication carries visuals. Hence, Visual Literacy has a great role to play in education and particularly in language education. In this paper, I would like to think over the role of visual literacy in our English textbooks and consequently in teaching English online. It has a big stake in online classroom interaction.

What is Visual Literacy?

The term ‘Visual Literacy’ was coined by John Debes in the year 1968. Let's try to understand the meaning of visual literacy through some definitions.

According to John Debes, “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 (visualliteracytoday.org).”

According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, “Visual Literacy is the ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images (merriam-webster.com)

According to Bomford (2003), “Visual Literacy is what is seen with the eye and what is ‘seen’ with the mind.”

According to Wikipedia (2021), “Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, extending the meaning of literacy, which commonly signifies interpretation of a written or printed text (Wikipedia, 2021).”

According to Donnchaidh (2021), “Visual literacy is the ability to read, write and create visual images. Both static and moving.”

In short, Visual Literacy is the ability to make meaning out of visuals and the ability to communicate through visuals which develops critical thinking and enhances the intellectual capacity.

Visual Literacy and English Textbooks:

The present generation of teachers has been witnessing the before and after of digital technologies. We have been witnessing, the changes in our textbooks, from black and white textbooks to colorful books, from printed books to ebooks, from multimedia books to multimode books, integration of videos, and other resources through QR coding, so on and so forth. All these changes in textbooks are the results of continuous researches and developments in the field of education.

The progress in printing technology facilitated the production of high-quality English textbooks. We are able to use a variety of colorful pictures and visuals in English textbooks. Nowadays, textbooks try to cover all types of learners, particularly visual learners, because they form the majority of the classroom.

After going through English Textbooks of Telangana state, I would like to mention my general observations on how the content of English textbooks is interwoven with visual literacy to facilitate learning of the English language and development of different skills.

Theme Based Discourses:

Almost every chapter or unit of English textbook deals with one or more core values mentioned by national curriculum frameworks or educational policies of the country, such as; the inculcation of scientific temper, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, etc. In textbooks, these themes are introduced with the help of pictures, and different theme-based oral and written discourses/activities are given to sensitize students along with developing their mental, affective and psychomotor skills. For example:

Visualization:

The contents of prose and poetry are visualized maximally side by side to visualize the text. Situations, scenes, characters, processes, information, statistics, etc are given in the form of pictures, images, graphs, tables, timelines, maps, concept maps, diagrams, cartoons, etc to facilitate understanding of the content in the simplest way possible.

LSRW Exercises:

English textbooks are activity-oriented and full of interconnected language activities intended to develop language skills with the help of visuals, such as; listen and draw pictures, listen and draw a map, listen and color pictures, Look and write, Look and Describe, Look and Answer the Questions, Look and read, Look and Roleplay, writing stories based on the pictures, developing conversations based on pictures, so on and so forth.

Grammar:

Functional Grammar is promoted in contemporary English textbooks, rules are explained with the help of visuals and use is emphasized than rules. Students are encouraged by giving visual clues to frame sentences and make use of grammar in their speech and writing. So, functional grammar is promoted with the help of visuals.

Vocabulary:

Picture associations are used to teach vocabulary. Activities like; Look and Write, Read and Draw the picture, etc are provided for practice and visual memorization. So, Vocabulary is also with visuals.

Study Skills:

Study skills are also interlinked with visuals like tables, charts, graphs, maps, etc. so as to enable students to read and comprehend information given in such forms.

Information Skills:

Students are asked to process and interpret the information and convert the information from one form to another, such as; text to table, text to concept map, text to timeline, graph to text, text to picture, etc.

In short, English textbooks are complimentary to develop the visual literacy of students. Teachers should

make appropriate and maximum use of this visual to develop the visual literacy of students.

Visual Literacy and Online Resources:

Teachers can use or adapt online resources available on the internet to optimize the visual experience of the students in the teacher-learning process, such as; videos, animations, photographs, illustrations, icons, visual maps, infographics, pictographs, typography, interactive tools (e.g. Mentimeter), etc. The selection of online resources should be based on the needs and requirements of the content and learning outcomes. Teachers can also create their own visuals by using different photo and video editing software.

Online Teaching provides the platforms and tools to easily integrate these resources in teaching. Teachers should remember that one can use these resources freely only for classroom teaching purposes with proper attribution and referencing. Teachers should refer to copyright features of the resources before publishing any teaching content online or offline.

Teaching English Online:

Nowadays, schools teachers are mostly using conferencing tools like; Zoom, Google Meet, Webex, etc for teaching English online. Teachers should keep certain points in mind while teaching English online.

- Every visual carries lots of information in it. If a teacher considers it as a support tool only, then s/he may skip by asking one or two questions on it. Teachers should consider visuals as a significant component of teaching. They should consider visuals as a whole package of information. These visuals are learning aids rather than teaching aids.
- Teachers should explain the nature of activity and rules of interaction before starting the activity to avoid noise and indiscipline in online classroom environment
- Teachers should not rush to complete the discussion or interaction on the visuals. Let the students to grasp each and every aspect of the visual.
- They should give sufficient time for discussion on visuals while teaching English online. Encourage students to participate in discussion or answer the questions. If they are not able to answer – give them clues.

- English textbooks are already full of visuals. Every chapter, every activity, every language skill is interwoven with visuals. Visuals are used right from the introduction of any unit or chapter to the project work assigned at the end of the unit or chapter. These textbook visuals are associated with activities for skill development. All these activities should be carried out online for the development of visual literacy among students.
- Teachers should understand the integration of visuals with the text and other media is very important. The activities in the textbooks are designed to facilitate this integration.
- Teachers can also use videos and visuals available on the internet in addition to the textbook visuals for more meaningful learning of students.
- Teachers can also create their own visuals with the help of various photo and video editing softwaes.
- Teachers should follow step by step approach; Look – See – Describe – Analyze – Interpret – Communicate. This sequence will activate mental processing of information, understanding the intended message or theme, and develop skills of communication in different ways.

Following steps would help in developing students' visual communication skills learning:

- (i) The screen of mobile or computer dominates the span of attention of students. This screen should be used to catch and keep the attention of students. The visuals should be properly projected on the screen.
- (ii) Teachers should make students active viewers. Teachers should ask them to look into every bit of the visual. Teachers should introduce the names and features of all types of visuals to the students, such as; maps, timelines, tables, different types of graphs, infographics, icons, etc.
- (iii) Teachers should encourage them to have interactions by posing perceptual – structural – critical questions, by allowing them to ask questions, by giving them clues on - Subject matter, color, angles, symbols, vectors, lighting, facial expressions, gestures, gaze, shapes, directions, etc.
- (iv) Teacher should post critical questions to help students to analyze the theme and message of the visual. Teacher should facilitate students to

distinguish, differentiate, comprehend, compare, connect, categorize and relate with the visuals.

- (v) Teacher should facilitate students to interpret visuals in terms of purpose, subtext, context, show-cause effect and overall meaning of the visual.
- (vi) The last step is communication or application of the visual into different activities and exercises, such as; creating timelines, concept maps, graphs, diagrams, roleplay, debate, conversations, LSRW exercises, etc. Many activities can be added by teachers in addition to textbook activities, such as; Caption a photograph, developing timelines, taking photos, recording videos, creating infographics, generating memes, etc. On Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, we are witnessing that how people are making creative use of visuals to express themselves.

So, such activities will develop students' visual communication skills.

CONCLUSION

It is important for teachers to integrate visual literacy into pedagogy of online teaching to meet students' needs, requirements, learning outcomes and promote lifelong learning. Marissa Moss, an American author of children's book, rightly said, "Not only is writing more important than ever, but visual literacy is vital. We don't teach enough design, art, visual things. We have

to recognize what we're seeing. It matters if you send someone a cluttered design. It matters more than ever." I will say, "Visual Literacy matters in teaching English online because it matters in developing language skills, study skills, information skills, and teaching universal values to students."

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