Visual Literacy in the 21st Century Classroom

A workshop with Tim Phillips, sponsored by National Geographic

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Reviewed by Dina Antona (ELTAS)

In this workshop Tim Philips provided us with a plethora of information on using visuals in the classroom. Drawing on images from National Geographic and Ted talks, Tim demonstrated to us how we can maximise the opportunities offered by just one single image, so that it becomes a resource providing us with an assortment of possibilities that may be exploited for language learning.

Citing facts and figures, Tim explained how powerful the dissemination of visual information has become in our daily lives. Three hundred hours of video are uploaded to You Tube every hour, on average we take ten photos per day on our devices, predominately on our smart phones. As Tim suggested, images have become the currency of young people today if not increasingly for us all, too.

With regards to using visuals, Tim pointed out the importance of always trying to choose an image that is interesting and appropriate to your group of learners. We, as human beings are curious people, he added, reminding us also of children´s inquisitiveness that we, as adults, tend to lose. So, if we transfer this aspect to the classroom situation, picking a suitable image can ignite learners´ curiosity, engaging and inspiring them. Another crucial aspect mentioned was that there is no correct response to visuals as they are open to interpretation, so every response given is valid.

Images may be potent but how can we exploit them for language learning? Referring to Bloom´s taxonomy, Tim suggested that this educational framework could be deployed as a guide when using visuals. For example, at the knowledge level, low-level learners could list lexical items present in the image; moving on to the comprehension stage, we could ask learners to interpret the visual or give a prediction of what will happen next. We could continue in this way by increasing the complexity of the questions, or the tasks assigned to our learners in accordance with their language levels. (A list of questions/verbs to use that can easily be adapted can be found on the internet by searching Bloom´s taxonomy).

One image showed a workman painting the Golden Gate bridge which Tim revealed to us little by little adding to our curiosity, whilst eliciting responses to the question “Where was this picture taken”? In the classroom, this could lead to an internet search task to find out how long it takes to paint the Golden Gate, thereby increasing learner involvement - far better than just providing this piece of information ourselves. We then wrote a list of questions, each containing the pronoun “he” that could be posed to the workman.

Writing a caption for a photo, using no more than three words, was another enthralling group activity we performed for a different photo. A list of the captions could then be created with learners explaining their word choice followed by the entire group deciding on the appropriateness of each caption. Other suggestions concerning the array of interesting photos we were shown could be for learners to create dialogues for the people in the images, roleplay the picture, write a diary entry or use grammar, such as, connectors to create a story. In other words, using the visual as an impetus for new lexis, collocations and other language learning opportunities.

Ultimately, we are aiming to go beyond the aesthetic appreciation of an image, to be in the position to deconstruct it and find meaning, so that visual literacy promotes critical thinking. It was a stimulating and fruitful workshop and although it was a sunny afternoon outside it was well worth missing to come away with so many ideas.