

The Neglected Tools Can Work for You

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Of all the resources and techniques available to the classroom teacher of English as a second or foreign language, none are more neglected than audiovisual aids. Properly planned, constructed, and employed, such aids can help not only to improve the overall language program but also to enhance the classroom atmosphere and to ensure greater student participation.

On assignments abroad in 1963 and 1965, I spent much time in the classroom teaching English as a foreign language. This classroom experience abroad proved both educational and motivating to me. I found myself more and more interested, as a personal objective, in working out ways to improve the nature and use of visual aids in the English classroom. In this article I would like to share with you my experiences and observations along these lines, in the hope that some of the ideas will help you put these tools to work more effectively in your classroom.

The psychology of the visual aid

The learner of a second language has many obstacles to overcome. Not only must he cope with different sounds and types of utterances; he must also learn to think and respond in the new language without recourse to his mother tongue. For the non-native learner of English, this can be a monumental task. The native speaker of a language, by means of a kind of mental photography, quickly learns his language by visual and word association, made easier by his possession of the cultural background of the language. Later he can refer to those mental pictures when he focuses on a like situation. Suppose a child's first encounter with a dog is unpleasant. Thereafter, his mind will remind him of that first meeting. He has stored a "life image" that affects his reactions.

The language student, like the child, photographs and stores life images and words—which must be provided for

him by his teacher. Needless to say, images, because of their vividness, are easier to recall than words. As far as possible, the teacher should expose the student to real-life situations; when this is not possible, the visual aid can serve as a substitute.

Most language teachers will agree with this basic premise. Many are already using visual aids—and also audio and audiovisual aids—effectively in the classroom. They will welcome suggestions that may help them to display their visual aids more efficiently, or to catalog and store them so they will be more readily available—to themselves, and to other teachers in the school who have not as yet developed their own aids. For the strengthening of learning by visual aids should be available to all students, starting with the beginner level of English and continuing as long as the student studies the language. After all, did not visual images help you and me to learn our own language? And do we not all want to give our students every assistance we can provide?

The starting point

My own experience in various schools has convinced me that each school can most effectively begin its drive to increase the impact of its visual-aids program by appointing a Visual Aids Committee to evaluate the existing program of the school and recommend practical steps to improve it. The committee's responsibility will be to determine just what the existing situation is and to explore the possibilities for improving those aids already in use and introducing any new aids needed. This will include plans for making all visual aids available to all teachers in the school.

A committee at work

An effective Visual Aids Committee that I have seen in action abroad consisted of five teachers of English. The group was divided into two teams of two teachers each, with

the fifth member designated as co-ordinator of the project. At the first meeting, the committee outlined its immediate plan of action as follows:

Team Number One was to make a list of all visual aids currently at the school and come up with recommendations for additions to those aids.

Team Number Two was to assemble all book and printed materials used at the school. In addition, it was to recommend any other printed materials that could be used as visual aids.

Three days later the committee held a second meeting, at which time the two teams submitted their reports.

Team Number One suggested that, to supplement the visual aids already on hand, the committee should acquire maps of the country and maps of the United States and install these maps in each English classroom. Finally, they suggested mock-ups of clocks and telephones, typical American menus, and language-training films.

Team Number Two recommended acquisition of illustrated catalogs and subscriptions to at least two magazines and one newspaper. The use of flip charts and easels was recommended at this time.

To the credit of the committee and the school authorities, all recommendations were approved and immediate action was taken to obtain the flip charts and easels, the language films, and the mock-ups. The magazines and newspapers were ordered and began to arrive at an early date.

What the visual aid should be

The actual work of assembling and constructing the visual aids then began. To guide it in its work, the committee followed these basic rules concerning visual aids.

1. *The Visual Aid should be directly relevant to a specific teaching objective and should be identified by the lesson with which it is to be used.*
2. *The Visual Aid should be a convincing representation of the actual object.* Inaccuracies or poor representations lead to misunderstandings and false starts by instructors and students. The key phrase in this rule is “convincing representation.” Visual aids need *not* be minutely accurate or artistically flawless, but they do need to be convincing enough to enlighten the students. When magazines and other materials available do not provide suitable pictures for mounting, teachers or students can draw simple pictures to represent the objects desired.
3. *The Visual Aid should be of suitable size for teaching.* The aid must be large and clear enough to be easily visible to all students in the teaching situation for which it is designed.
4. *The Visual Aid should conform to some agreed-upon stan-*

dard for size. Keeping to some standard size facilitates reproduction and storage of aids.

5. *There should be provision for storage or protection of Visual Aids when they are not in use.*
6. *The Visual Aid should be simple, graphic, and easy to use or manipulate.* Visual aids that require a great deal of manipulation or complicated explanations are of little value, as they take up more class time than they are worth.

The blackboard

The basic and indispensable—and probably the most misused—visual aid is the blackboard, or chalkboard, as some like to call it. Under certain conditions, the blackboard may be the only visual aid the beginner teacher has to work with. Experienced teachers as well as beginners often misuse the blackboard because they fail to understand its full potential or do not properly exploit the simple techniques involved in its most effective use.

The teacher can develop desirable blackboard techniques by following these simple suggestions:

1. Write large enough so that all your students can read it easily.
2. Stand to one side as you explain, so the students can see what you are talking about. A pointer comes in handy at this time.
3. When you have finished with the material, erase it. Present only ONE idea at a time.
4. Use colored chalk for emphasis and not for beautiful effects.
5. Draw simple sketches instead of elaborate pictures. Stick figures, carefully drawn, convey as much meaning as detailed drawings of people.
6. Keep your work neat, clear, and orderly.

The flip chart

Before starting their work, the committee I have been referring to built and assembled these items:

1. Easels (they can be made or bought, and their size is determined by the size of the classroom)
2. Poster board size 20” x 30” x ¼” thick
3. Mechanical lettering set
4. Felt markers
5. Scissors
6. Protractor and 18” ruler
7. Strong, quick-setting glue

The committee then went through each textbook used in the English classes and listed the items that exemplified the central ideas in each lesson. Some lessons needed only one picture (the geography of the United States, for exam-

ple) while others required more pictures (such as the eating habits of Americans). The best source of pictures proved to be magazines. Some pictures for the flip charts were drawn by teachers and students.

An Example. A reading selection dealt with the geography of the United States. After studying the selection, the committee decided to obtain standard maps of the United States for each classroom as well as standard maps of their own country. They secured for this purpose maps of about the same size. To supplement the maps, they provided for the flip charts scenes of each country showing various features of the terrain of each, for purposes of comparison and contrast.

Another Example. A particular dialogue dealt with the eating habits of Americans. The committee prepared two charts for this dialogue, one depicting the most common foods eaten by Americans and the other the most common eating utensils.

Slip charts

Slip charts are simple to construct and extremely useful in drill work. The frame can be made of heavy poster board throughout, with the right edge left open to receive the slip charts (you “slip” them in). Inserts are made of lightweight poster board on which are printed the sentences, phrases, and key words for use with specific lessons. The size of the frame is the teacher’s choice: a 17” x 22” frame with a 2” border has been found to work well in many situations.

Mock-ups

Realism is one of the most important considerations in language training. The mock-up helps to familiarize the student with cultural situations in the countries in which the language he is studying is used. The object of a mock-up is to duplicate as accurately as possible an object found in a common setting in order that it may be used in the teaching-learning situation.

The three mock-ups that, because of their extreme value to the student, should be standard equipment in every school that teaches English are the telephone, the clock, and the menu. Dummy telephones may sometimes be obtained from the telephone company. The companies can be very co-operative once they understand the nature of the request. Clocks can be constructed out of plywood and should have movable hands for classroom use. The size of the clock depends on the size of the classroom. It is better to have a large clock than to have one that cannot be easily seen from the back row. Menus can be made of lightweight poster board or heavy paper. Make them simple and easy

to read. Remember that the selection of foods in the menu should correspond with foods found in the average British or American restaurant. Teach the student the names of foods that he would be likely to eat if he visited England or the United States.

Catalogs and magazines

Catalogs serve as convenient illustrated dictionaries, and magazines can keep the class abreast of the latest cultural trends. Pictures from these same catalogs and magazines can be cut out, mounted, and used as teaching aids. The simpler pictures can be used with beginner classes, and the more complex pictures can be used in advanced classes. The stories in the magazines, properly selected by the teacher, can be used as supplementary reading for intermediate and advanced students.

Language films

Language films are admittedly harder to secure and perhaps to use than the other teaching aids discussed. But they can bring to the students activities that they could not otherwise observe or become involved with. The tendency of those who view films to identify themselves with the actors and the situations makes films highly valuable for image forming and language learning. I have used English-language films with considerable success in quite varied situations. In addition to their value for actual language learning, they break the monotony of classroom and laboratory work and provide variety to the curriculum.

In one situation, we mounted a large frosted window-pane on an indoor window. Used as a screen, it gave a television effect to films projected onto it. The indoor window was part of a small adjacent room that housed the master tape console. We used the so-called rear-screen projection method, which involves—to avoid reversing the image—projecting the picture onto a mirror at a 45-degree angle, which in turn throws the picture onto the back of the window-screen. The films were projected from behind the pane and the soundtrack of the films was connected into the master console. This permitted the students to listen, repeat, and even record the filmed lesson. Films for this purpose, of course, must be carefully chosen, so they will reinforce rather than interfere with the regular language material.

In this particular case, we used films from the two television series, “Let’s Learn English” and “Let’s Speak English,” which we borrowed without cost from the local United States Information Service. Each class was scheduled for two 15-minute films a week, and the films were programmed according to the level of English ability of each class.

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cognitae is part of the professional responsibility of every English teacher. Equally so, every teacher should have a complete familiarity with all of the kinds of information a dictionary has to offer—and the requisite skill to find it. I believe, moreover, that training in full and resourceful use of dictionaries should be an important part of the formal preparation of every English teacher.

In closing

There is a quaint sentence in one of DeQuincey's essays in which he says, "I enjoy wandering among a library." Today we would use the word *browsing*, but his was a new use of the word in DeQuincey's time. Browsing in libraries

is delightful: it offers the fullest opportunity for serendipity, the finding of valuable or agreeable things not sought for. So too does browsing in dictionaries, which rank high among the incomparably rich resources of the language. But one must know how to find the nuggets. And when he has them in hand, he must be able to distinguish diamonds from glass, real gold from fool's gold. It is my firm conviction that, in order to discharge his professional potential, every teacher of English, whether as a native or a foreign language, must become an inveterate, an ingenious, a critical and a sophisticated dictionary browser. Then he can more easily and more confidently answer the barrage of questions endlessly aimed at him.

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The British Council also has several series of English-teaching films, which they are glad to lend to teachers of English without cost. In most instances, either of these organizations is able and willing to provide a projectionist and a regular screen for the purpose of showing their films.¹

1. Editor's Note: Having a regular screen set up in the classroom eliminates the necessity of the rather complicated rear-screen projection described by Mr. Ramirez, but it has its own disadvantage: To project the film onto the screen, you must have the projector in the classroom (or outside the room, shooting through an open door); and this creates a distracting noise. The rear-screen method described by Mr. Ramirez, by placing the projector in the closed (and perhaps insulated) master-console room, eliminated the projector noise from the classroom. These considerations suggest that films are less than ideal for classroom use, even when everything needed is at hand. Probably the best situation for showing films is in an auditorium with an enclosed projection booth in the rear—a facility not readily available to many teachers of English.

Conclusion

These, then, are some of the ways in which you can enrich your English-teaching program by making often-neglected visual, audio, and audiovisual teaching aids work more effectively for you. The possibilities for visual aids are practically unlimited, and success comes to the teacher with foresight, ingenuity, and imagination.

But always remember that everything described here—pictures, charts, mock-ups, tapes, films—are aids to instruction and not ends in themselves. They are not substitutes for teaching. Ultimately, the responsibility for teaching the language to the students, and employing any aids that can help in the process, rests not with the school administration (though it can help greatly) but with the teacher. It is a great step in the right direction when both the school administration and the teacher recognize the need for such aids. It is a tremendous leap forward when both DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. Taking this leap forward can put these often-neglected tools to work for you.