

Visual representations as effective instructional media in foreign language teaching

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A familiar arena in which text and image interact is the foreign language coursebook. But though few publishers today would contemplate launching a language learning series that was not replete with attractive illustrations, there is a striking dearth of research on the uses, effects and effectiveness of visual representations in foreign language learning and teaching. By contrast, hundreds of empirical studies focussing on instructional visuals in natural science and technical domains have been published since the 1960s (for overviews, see Carney & Levin 2002, Anglin et al. 2004) and research in these areas continues apace, with the focus shifting in recent years from the question of what *kinds* of pictures and graphics produce learning effects, to the exploration of the effective *use* of visuals to reduce cognitive load and support schema formation (e.g. Paas et al. 2003).

Cognitive psychologists interested in learning with pictures and graphics may well have avoided the area of foreign language teaching simply because of the difficulty of constructing valid, reliable and quantifiable lab-style experiments in this domain. With or without the backing of research though, publishers clearly believe visual elements are essential in language coursebooks; and in a questionnaire I administered to 71 teachers in the adult education sector in Germany, the respondents strongly affirmed that they considered pictures and graphics a vital part of their teaching resources. However, most of the respondents stated that they had never had any training in the effective use of visual materials in the classroom. A survey of the course materials they used revealed moreover that illustrations were very seldom accompanied by processing instructions which elucidated their intended functions as aids to language learning. Pictures and graphics, it seems, are assumed to speak for themselves whilst automatically fulfilling their (undeniable) learning-enhancing potential.

On the basis of my own experience both as an illustrator of language learning materials and teacher of ESOL, I question however whether pictures are always used to their fullest potential by teachers and learners in the language classroom, and, above all, whether they are perceived as important instructional resources that require attentive processing (Weidenmann 1989).

I will present examples from further research I carried out with intermediate and advanced language learners performing an authentic classroom task in which they were asked to use visual information as a basis for free language production. The results of this research suggest that pictures in this kind of instructional context are not processed any more carefully and consciously than the floods of other, mainly decorative, images (in the media, on packaging, etc.) that bombard us daily. I would contend that the full potential of visuals in language learning can only be realised if the producers of materials treat them as serious instructional media: this implies having explicit language learning functions in mind for all the visuals deployed, and providing clear user guidance so that learners and teachers are able to work effectively with the visual as well as verbal elements of the materials.

References

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