

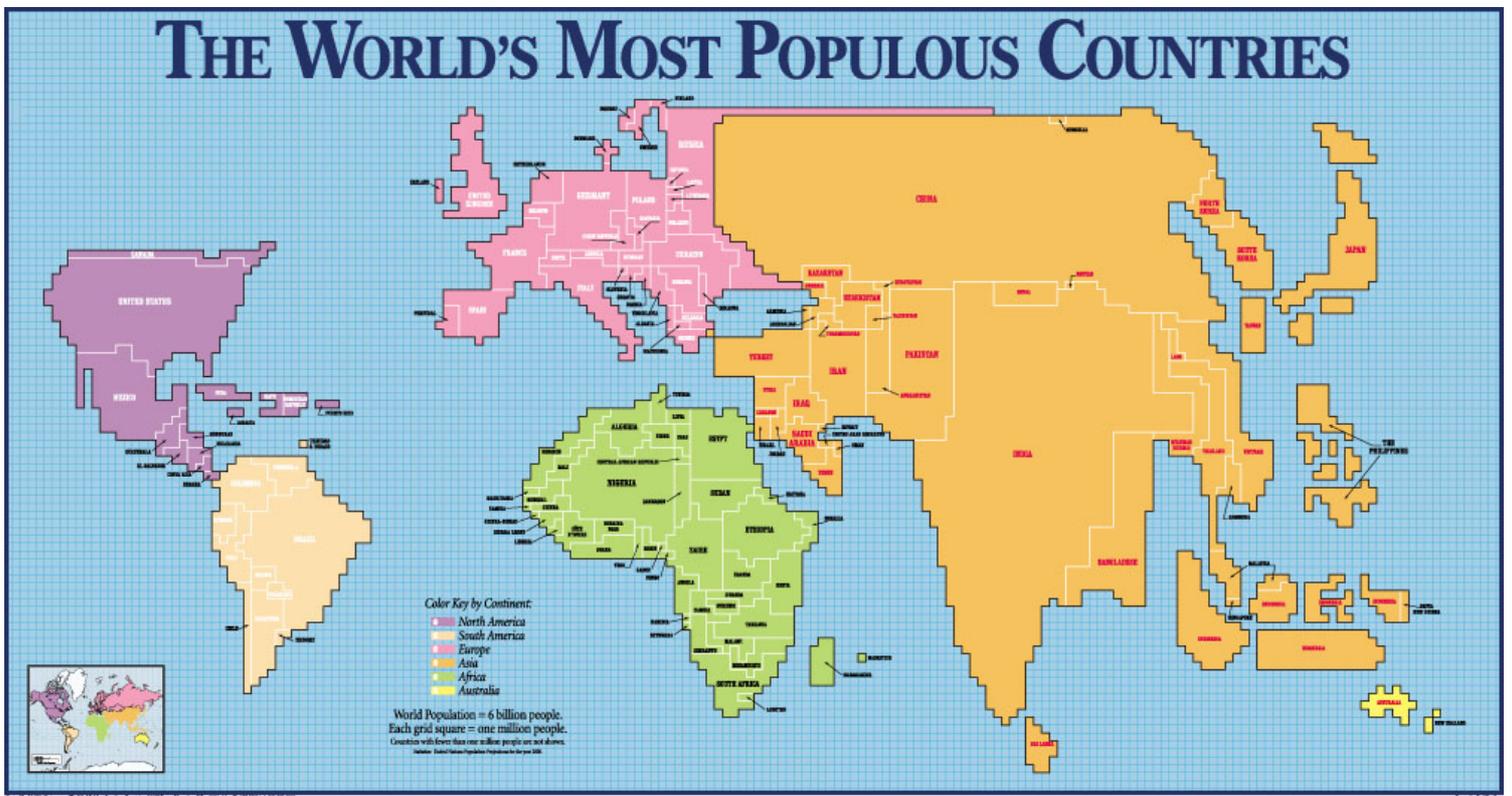
The Power of Image Ben Goldstein

Images – as visual aids – have always played an important (if subservient) role in language teaching materials. The Direct Method, for example, depended on the use of wall charts and flashcards to convey a whole range of grammatical and lexical concepts that might formerly have been conveyed through translation. With the advent of large scale ELT publishing, publishers have used images not only as visual reinforcement, but in order to make their products more attractive and hence more marketable. However, although our classroom materials are full of such images, most of these are used as a *support* to written texts, which provide the main focus of our attention in class. The images perform often a mere secondary or technical role or are seen simply as decoration.

Aside from their use as prompts, warmers or for purely mechanical task types (e.g. flashcards, 'spot the difference' matching exercises), images have rarely been placed at the centre of our teaching practice and are not generally given the attention they deserve. This is all the more surprising considering the impact that images can possess in class and their increased accessibility for both teachers and learners. Without realising it, we are trained to 'read images' from an early age, we are surrounded (and, indeed, frequently bombarded) by images every minute of the day and yet their value is often underestimated in a teaching context

For example, on the first page of a beginner's English coursebook, you may find a large photo or illustration of two people greeting each other, but students and teachers will tend to focus on the dialogue that appears alongside it, to the extent that the image itself loses any value. Likewise, an icon commonly found in language teaching materials is the standard map of the world, frequently used to teach countries, cities and continents. Its conventions are adopted without question. However, by providing an alternative world map (whose criteria is based on population growth, (see fig. 1) we will be giving the image *per se* a much more dominant role and focusing our learners on the visual component to a much greater extent. Not only that, an image such as the population map can help learners gain world knowledge through English.

THE WORLD'S MOST POPULOUS COUNTRIES



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<http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=2>

This emphasis on text over image is due to the fact that we are accustomed to reading and analysing text from an early age. We understand that texts may have particular features that make them coherent and cohesive but we don't normally consider how a visual image is organised. As Gunther Kress has stated in a recent study on visual design¹: 'in education, children are encouraged to draw but these drawings are seen as examples of self-expression, rather than communication'. Likewise, as we grow older or become more proficient in a skill, our textbooks contain fewer images and longer texts, as if we grow out of images as we get older.

Images are also interesting and invaluable 'media representations' in their own right, not merely 'innocent' reflections of a reality. As such, images may carry important political messages and serve as key educational tools, for example, to combat prejudice and challenge stereotypical viewpoints. In addition to this, it is useful for learners to see how images are presented in the media, how they are framed and positioned on the page, as well as how captions and accompanying texts 'help' or 'manipulate' our interpretation of them.

The current ubiquitous nature of images and their accessibility – due, in part, to the digital revolution and the increasing number of images in the public domain – can now help us to construct a more informed vision of the role of images in the classroom.

Why use images?

Range and accessibility

Thanks to digital technology, never before have we had access to such a wide range of different images. Many high-quality digital images are now in the public domain and their use for educational purposes requires no copyright payment. One of the advantages of using 'real world images' is tapping that shared knowledge and turning it to advantage in a classroom context.

As a motivational tool and shortcut

There is nothing like a striking image to capture attention and motivate learners. If an image has been specially selected for a teaching purpose, for example to accompany a written article, the image may act as a key way to gain interest in a topic or to trigger a quick response. Better still, if an image is chosen from the world at large – as an open-ended resource - its authenticity and immediacy can have an even more powerful effect in class. When students suddenly come across an authentic image from the real world – be it an advert, a sequence from a film, an emoticon, a piece of graffiti, a portrait, etc. – that often sparks a curiosity on the part of the learner about how the

¹ Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Routledge, 1996)

image will be used in the classroom. Furthermore, 'real-world images' can provide a unique shortcut in the classroom. An 'image' may be able to sum up instantaneously what a text and/or a teacher's explanation may take hours to do. In this sense, a picture can really be worth 'a thousand words'.

Uses of Image

Images have a whole host of functions both in the real world and in the classroom world. By placing an additional emphasis on the use of image we may be able to bring these two worlds a bit closer together.

1 Their cultural importance: As a window on the world / a questioning tool

Images are hugely influential. Every single day we are exposed to hundreds of them, from the cereal packet we see at breakfast time, to the junk mail on our doorstep, the online banners that pop up on our computer screen, the billboards that flash past us on the highway. Although seemingly innocuous or superficial, everyday images like these play an important role in shaping our ideas as well as introducing us to other people's worlds and cultural outlook. Visual literacy can therefore be seen as important as print literacy when trying to find our way through today's information-laden environment, helping us to gain knowledge and critical understanding of the wider world.

However, the images we see do not always tell the whole story, they may be open to multiple interpretations. Media representations can, for example, often contribute to and reinforce negative stereotypes. For this reason, students should be encouraged to question an image and look beyond its referential value to discover what it truly *represents*. This skill is particularly useful when analysing icons and symbols.

2 Their role as a visual aid/prompt:

Image has been used traditionally in the classroom as a support for introducing language items. An image can illustrate a concept rapidly and (if well chosen) memorably for students and can bypass lengthy and convoluted explanations (which often involve metalanguage), particularly in the learning of idioms, grammatical structures and metaphorical language. Images can also act as key prompts for certain task types, such as story telling, ordering and sequencing events and matching image with text.

Remember too to train your students in the art of visualising, an extension of which is imaging (a kind of pictorial thinking). Imaging has been defined as the 'ability to conjure up something in the mind's eye, move it around, change it and make judgements'² - in fact, this is something that all of us do everyday. However, only recently has it been exploited in a language teaching context. Such imagery work can be used as a first step to connect with students who

² Fletcher, Alan, *The Art of Looking Sideways*, Phaidon, 2001, p. 443

are used to high dosages of visual exposure, enabling them 'to go inside, extend their attention span and become more centred and clear-thinking'³.

3 Their iconic/symbolic dimension

An image very often stands for something or it may be a form of shorthand, i.e. a code or a sign. Such symbols are becoming more and more commonplace in a multi-media operated society in which people's concentration spans are becoming increasingly shorter and the differences between spoken and written language are becoming blurred through emails and text messages, etc. (the use of emoticons is one example of this phenomenon). Our learners can contribute a knowledge of these icons and symbols in class, having had contact with a vast array of emblems, logos, motifs, etc. For example, consider the image of the 'apple'. This is one of the first words we learn in English because the image of the apple is used as a flashcard when we learn the alphabet at school. The apple has evolved from being Adam and Eve's forbidden fruit to the logo of a well-known computer company. In fact, it can conjure up a whole host of different mental images from 'the Big Apple' to the Beatles' record label (Apple Records) to an Adam's apple (part of the body!), to apple pie, to William Tell and Isaac Newton, and expressions such as 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' or 'an apple for the teacher'.

³ Arnold, Jane, Puchta, Herbert & Rinvoluceri, Mario, *Imagine That!*, Helbling 2007, p. 165



4 Their creative potential

Most students enjoy taking a break from reading and writing and welcome the freedom that illustration can bring. But that doesn't mean drawing matchstick men any more, for example, with software such as *Photoshop*, *Google Earth*, *Panoramio*, *Sketch Up* etc. students can create their own 3D interactive images online with photos. While with the use of other technologies, such as interactive whiteboards, the potential for introducing creative tasks involving image have increased enormously. Such creative scope allows the teacher to set up a number of fun activities and games, which are particularly appropriate for younger learners. Student-generated images also puts greater responsibility on the learner, allowing him/her to have a greater role in the class and obliging teachers to be more reactive in their teaching practice.

5 In their own right

Learners may take great pleasure from describing and analyzing images for the sake of it – from familiar images in their own photograph album to prestigious and untouchable works of art – . Describing images may, indeed, be something students will need to do in their future professional lives especially if they choose to work in such fields as design, marketing, advertising, journalism, etc.

Conclusion

Back in the 1970s, John Berger, speaking within the context of 'high art', saw a new language of image as conferring a 'new kind of power', with which 'we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate'. He went on to say: "The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose"⁴

Over forty years later, surrounded by downloadable, copyright-free images, Photoshopping and image manipulation has become a form of social critique, and Berger's words could not be more prophetic.

It is hoped that having looked at these uses of image, teachers may begin to see the image as forming an integral part of their teaching practice and not merely as an accessory or visual aid (in the traditional sense of the term). Images surround us more and more each day, never have we been able to access or create such a variety in so little time – let's use that resource to aid the teaching and learning process the best we can.

Note

⁴ Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 1972, p. 33

Accessing images with 'flickr'

Apart from well-established search facilities such as Google Images, **www.flickr.com** has become the most popular online image-sharing service and is totally free. In a sense, it is to still photography what You Tube is to the amateur video. Flickr users upload photos onto the site and then tag them with a number of identifying words, names, locations, event descriptions, etc. The best way, then, to search for a photo here is to insert a tag or a key word. You can easily create a group of photos for your class by placing them into different sets, tagging each one with the name of the student who took the photo, etc. or using any other identification system you like.

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Biodata

Ben has taught English for over 15 years in Spain, currently as an online tutor at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Barcelona and on the MA Tesol Program of the New School, New York. He is the main author of Richmond Publishing's adult/young adult coursebook series 'Framework' and the methodology handbook 'Working with Images' (Cambridge).