THE ROLE OF IMAGES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING

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In this study, we will analyze the scientific role of illustrations. The use of images, video projections, documentaries, as teaching method, is both a desire to facilitate the work of students and the awareness of the importance of the visual role in teaching and learning. There is a major difference between teaching foreign languages without visual methods and teaching foreign languages with visual aids (using photos, images and videos). Furthermore, we will exemplify the importance of eliminating the native language in the process of learning a foreign language. The students implied in our study have knowledge of Romanian or French. Also, in the case of the students wanting to learn Romanian, the teachers know nothing about their native language. In these circumstances, English is the transfer language spoken by both teachers and students. These are the cases which we will analyze and illustrate in this study.

Keywords: Pictures, Motivation, Foreign Language, Visuals.

Introduction

Tardy identifies four functions of the role of images in the context of language teaching:

* “A psychological function of motivation;
* A designation functions because it is similarity between the image of a term and the designated subject;
* An inductive functions because the image means to describe, to narrate;
* A function of inter-semiotic mediator (or trans-semiotic – in Greimas’ opinion) - a kind of connection between the two linguistic systems: native language (L1) and the target language (L2)”.

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When we teach a foreign language, a picture is much more than an image. Pictures are essential when it comes to engaging students who are learning a new language at any level, because picture offer a multi-dimensional perspective.

“Traditionally, the image was therefore used firstly because of its convincing power and appointment and, secondly, because of its supposed ability to facilitate learning”.

We will illustrate in this study that a picture made by students can be the base for learning a foreign language. *A picture is worth a thousand words* is an English idiom, so teachers can use pictures for the beginners, but also for advanced students.

“The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) provides a comprehensive description of the competences necessary for communication in a foreign language, the related knowledge and skills, as well as the different contexts for communication. The CEFR defines six levels of proficiency (from A1 Basic user to C2 Proficient user), enabling the progress of foreign language learners and users to be measured”. 3

**Romanian Language as a Foreign Language**

If the process of learning Romanian is begun in college, the most common method used by teachers is talking. Since the beginning, we should mention that students talk about studying Romanian thinking at the lowest level, having no knowledge of it at all, not even the basics.

There are positive and negative sides when a teacher has students aged over 19 years old. The best parts are:

- “They have a whole range of life experiences to draw on.
- Adults tend to be more disciplined than some teenagers.
- They come into classrooms with a rich range of experiences which allow teachers to use a wide range of activities with them.
- Unlike young children and teenagers they often have a clear understanding of why they are learning and what they want do get out of it”.
- Beyond doubt, there are also dark sides that may put the teacher in difficulty:
  - “They can be critical of teaching methods. Their previous learning experiences may have predisposed them to one particular methodological style which makes them uncomfortable with unfamiliar teaching patterns.
  - They may have experienced failure or criticism at school which makes them anxious and under-confident about learning a language”.

We can say that no matter the age of the student learning Romanian, he needs a careful explanation in order to learn a foreign language, different from his native language.

Within the Department of Applied Modern Languages of the University of Craiova there are foreign students learning Romanian. Language transfer is not their mother tongue because the groups are made up of students from different countries.

With no common language transfer, the surest way of understanding words is using pictures, templates, designs. For the word “flower”, the teacher shows the students a picture of a flower. When learning the alphabet for each letter, the professor uses photos with images and puts them into words. This may seem rather a method used for children, but in this case, concerning students that speak different languages but none of them common to all, is very successful. It is preferable that all the photos used by teachers be exhibited in the classroom where students come to classes every day. Involuntarily, students see the pictures and words. It is the very safe way for them not to forget the words.

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Also, the teacher should constantly encourage students for individual learning. The teacher should provoke them to learn more and more. So, with this aim, the teacher should give the students a topic within a drawing. This drawing must be “explained” by the students to the teacher and their colleagues in Romanian. Correction of language mistakes is also a very common and appreciated method.

The students we are talking about have one single academic year to learn Romanian. At the end of the preparatory year when they should learn Romanian, students have the liberty to choose the subjects of study, in Romanian, at a faculty of their choice. The textbooks used by teachers are suggestive in terms of images. Even actions spoken of are transposed into images. Therefore, as we mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, images are primary in learning a foreign language.

French Language for Students of Non-Linguistic Faculties

“Students are generally described in three levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced and these categories are further qualified by talking about real beginners and false beginners. Between beginner and intermediate, we often class students as elementary. The intermediate level itself is often sub-divided into lower intermediate and upper intermediate and even mid-intermediate”.6

Students of non-linguistic faculties at the University of Craiova are real beginners or elementary. The level of French language depends on the high school they studied. Some students studied French language four years, others six, others eleven. Some students studied an hour a week, others two hours.

Certainly, the students from non-linguistic faculties do not study French as philologists. They study French language concepts specific to their specialization. Therefore, the level is not advanced. Students do not have the possibility to study specialized language in secondary school and in high school. Specialized French language appears simultaneously with the specialized language connected to the subjects studied in college.

The texts for study must be accordingly with students’ specialization. It is very important for students to learn the basics of their specialization in French. In this way, they can have access to scholarships abroad. When leaving Romania, in order to learn in another country, students learn their subjects in French. In Romania, they study their subjects in Romanian. In order to be able to write and understand the subjects taught in French, students must be familiar with the specific terms of their profile.

“Students learning style is different. Keith Willing produced the following descriptions:

- Convergers: These are students who are solitary by nature, prefer to avoid groups, and who are independent and confident in their own abilities. Most importantly they are analytic and can impose their own structures on learning. They tend to be cool or pragmatic.
- Conformists: these are students to tend to be dependent on those in authority and are perfectly happy to work in non-communicative classrooms, doing what they are told.
- Concrete learners: they are interested in language use and language as communication rather than language as system. They enjoy game and group-work in class.
- Communicative learners: these are language use orientated. They are comfortable out of class, they are much more interested in social interaction with others speakers”.7

In our experience, we can say that in a class there is only a certain type of students. In a group, students may be: convergers, conformists, concrete learners and communicative learners. Normally some students are better prepared than others. Some students learn easier, some harder, some are more motivated, others less motivated.

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Varied Reactions to Visual and Linguistic Stimuli

We all know that some people are better at some things than others, “this would indicate that there are differences in the ways individual brains work”\(^8\).

Teachers work with students who learn more easily than others, with students who have difficulties of understanding, or with students who have a rich imagination and vocabulary, with students who have difficulties in expressing themselves. We are teachers so we know that a class is not compact.

In the following lines, we will give a concrete example: annually, the Department of Applied Modern Languages of the University of Craiova organizes a Students’ Symposium called Foreign Languages Week. At this Students’ Symposium students from non-linguistic faculties of the University of Craiova and foreign students from the Romanian language preparatory year are involved. With a different specific topic every year, students must make some posters. The topics of the past years were: European Citizen Year, Students without borders, Personal and Professional Development in Europe. This year, the topic was: Volunteering.

It’s easy to categorize students in terms of: how they react to the voluntary activities, how they externalize the ideas, the feelings: thoughts verbally or by drawing.

The students work in teams of three or four. But they appoint one student for oral presentation of the poster in a foreign language that they choose to study during the university studies: French, English or Romanian. Again, it is a good opportunity for teachers to see who speaks freely, without inhibitions in front of teachers and peers.

Let us return to the subject of our presentation: why do we need pictures to stimulate our students to learn foreign languages? For any work that requires minimal training, often students read the proverbs or maxims on the topic proposed at the Students’ Symposium Foreign Languages Week, in order for them to be able to present orally in a foreign language (French, English or Romanian). All participating students in the four years at the Students’ Symposium Foreign Languages Week have testified that they loved more the foreign language “visualized” in images and contexts.

Conclusions

This is why we say that pictures are very important in foreign language learning. Visual representation of the spoken word is the key to learning foreign languages. So the steps are: teachers stimulate students to draw a poster on a specific topic, students draw the poster already thought in the foreign language. The connection between a picture and the specific vocabulary is very close, as well as the connection between thinking and speaking in a foreign language.