

EXAMINING THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF IMAGES IN ELI CLASS MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focused on the pedagogical value of images used within originally created English Language Institute (ELI) materials for the Freshman English course at Kanda University of International Studies. A theoretical framework was used which establishes four distinct categories of how images are used, and it was found that an overwhelming majority of images in teacher-designed materials have a strong pedagogical purpose in various linguistic contexts. There are areas for future development by increasing the number of images used in materials within each course folder.

INTRODUCTION

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words; a cursory glance at an image has a plethora of purposes for its intended audience such as creating appeal, gaining attention, and establishing context. People are constantly exposed to images in various contexts with a multitude of purposes, and regardless of whether we are consciously aware of it, they can have a profound effect. Given the vast range of English as a foreign language (EFL) coursebooks, ranging from low to high-level learners, young to old etc., images have a range of pedagogical purposes that can assist learners of all ages and abilities and facilitate language acquisition.

For this research, materials were scrutinized in various sections of the English Language Institute's (ELI) shared materials folder at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in order to assess the types of images used and their pedagogical value in facilitating language acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An *image* has been defined by the online Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a visual representation of something". This can be through a digital copy of a photograph or a hand-drawn cartoon, and there are various ways in which

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images have pedagogical value. Canning-Wilson (1999) states that visuals enable strategies “to organize knowledge into semantic or associate clusters” (p. 2), and states that images can make situations “more real” (p. 4). Harmer (2001) explains how images can help provide linguistic context, especially for young learners. In addition to this, Harmer states that images have the pedagogical use of “ornamentation” in that they “enhance the text, giving readers (or students) an extra visual dimension to what they are reading” (pp. 178-179) and claims that this will enable more visually oriented learners to become more engaged. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed a “grammar of visual design” whereby images can convey meaning independently from written grammar via consistent patterns which are understood by their intended audience.

Jolly and Bolitho (2011) describe the cultural impact and significance of images and how this can be beneficial to pedagogy. They explain how locally produced textbooks can utilize materials which conform to a culture’s conceptual view of the world and what the needs and expectations are of its learners. Thus, “the further away the author is from the learners, the less effective the material is likely to be” (p. 128) which has been supported by various studies (Elmiana, 2019; Kiss & Weninger, 2017). However, Hill (2003) bemoans the lack of pedagogical value of images when textbook design is entrusted to an editing department which may not be mindful of how these images can promote language acquisition.

Much of the existing research on this issue has focused on analyzing EFL textbooks. Research by Tahirian and Sadri (2013) found that images in Iranian textbooks had pedagogical value but were not utilized to their full potential as they were found to reinforce gender stereotypes and used outdated imagery to represent various objects and ideas. A study by Hill (2003) found that a majority of images used in selected textbooks were decorative and had little to no relevance to the linguistic activities presented on the page. These findings were echoed by Romney and Bell (2012) who found that only 27% of images in a larger selection of textbooks had any instructional use. Conversely, Romney (2018) found that 82% of images within their selected textbooks fulfilled at least one pedagogical function. This was mirrored by Roohani and Sharifi (2015) who found that only 5% of images were purely decorative and that a vast majority of images had some pedagogical value.

Such pedagogical functions were outlined by Levin (1981) who proposed an 8-point typology list of the role images have in pedagogical materials: 1.

decoration, 2. remuneration, 3. motivation, 4. reiteration, 5. representation, 6. organization, 7. interpretation, and 8. transformation.

Romney (2018) tweaked the above criteria to provide a more succinct, albeit broader, categorization: “decorative”, “weakly supportive”, “strongly supportive” and “instructional”. Based on these broader sub-categories, Romney’s research found that only 0.8% of images were “decorative” (zero pedagogical value) and 82% were considered “strongly supportive” and “instructional” (there are instructions for learners to acknowledge the image). The difference between “weakly” and “strongly supportive” is somewhat ambiguous, so this research has added extra clarity to differentiate the two categories.

METHODOLOGY

There are various English courses taught in the ELI at KUIS, and the Freshman English course folder was chosen as this focuses on all four of the main language skills and is a more neutral space for assessing the value of images. Conversely, other courses were not chosen as they focus on specific skills such as academic reading and writing, as well as presentation and speaking skills.

Typically, in a semester at KUIS, 3 units on various topics are taught in the Freshman course which span from four to six weeks. Within the Freshman English folder, there are 12 units from which ELI lecturers will usually choose six. These units include Animal, Environment, Film, Games, Global Issues, Happiness, Japan, Music, Orientation, Travel, UN, and World Englishes. Each unit has materials that have been specifically designed for use at KUIS and which all lecturers can access.

For this study, an “image” consists of a still picture, hand-drawn image, or cartoon which visually represents something tangible. Video images were not considered for this research. The materials selected for this research include only those that have been specifically made for learners within the Freshman English course at KUIS, although this did not include answer sheets or copies specifically for teachers.

The materials considered included documents and worksheets for learners to either complete or refer to, as well as slide presentations. Slide presentations with multiple slides were considered as only one material. Other materials such as weekly outlines and instructional notes not intended

for learners were not analyzed, and any materials taken from another source on the internet were not considered as the material editing and design were the responsibility of external creators. These included worksheets and newspaper articles, unless the article itself was used as an image within the material. The pedagogical value of all images was considered except for QR codes linking materials with external sources, and images which appear multiple times on the same material on different pages such as those used as a page header, unless they had differing pedagogical purposes.

The theoretical framework for this research is based on the categorization by Romney (2018) who presented 4 categories: “decorative”; “weakly supportive”; “supportive”; and “instructional”. Decorative images serve no pedagogical value, and instructional images have direct instructions for learners. The difference, however, between “weakly supportive” and “strongly supportive” is somewhat vague and is predicated on whether an image directly or indirectly supports learning.

For this analysis, the above framework has been slightly modified. The new framework has four categories: “decorative”, “facilitative”, “contextually supportive”, and “integrated”. “Decorative” images have no relation, contextually nor semantically, to the material and are used purely for gaining attention through appeal or to make the material look more presentable. “Facilitative” images can be related to the same semantic field as the material, for example a picture of a baseball bat on a material about sports. This is not directly linked to a specific topic but is generally related. “Contextually supportive” is a level higher than “facilitative” in that the image is directly related to the item or concept being discussed, for example an image of Abraham Lincoln appearing on a material about, or at least a material section or question relating to, Abraham Lincoln specifically. Finally, “integrated” pertains to images which are directly linked to the material and learners are instructed to look at or consider the image in some way. For example, extrapolating information from graphs and data, or interpreting various kinds of meaning from a relevant image.

RESULTS

A total of 376 images from 242 eligible materials in 12 Freshman ELI course folders were analyzed and the overall findings for the four sub-categories are presented in Table 1. The findings show that only 7 (1.6%) images were “decorative”, 89 (23.6%) were “facilitative”, 163 (43.3%) were “contextually supportive”, and 113 (30%) were “integrated”.

Table 1

Decorative	Facilitative	Contextually Supportive	Integrated
6	89	163	113

The different types of images found in each unit are displayed in Table 2. Only seven “decorative” images were found in the entire Freshman English course materials. In the Environment unit, a picture of KUIS campus was used at the top of a document about a climate action project which had no pedagogical connection to the theme of the material. Likewise, in the Film unit, a clip art image of a stack of books was used as a header to a group discussion section on a material about favorite films. Other images included a lightbulb in a grammar section in the World Englishes unit, a clipart image of a clipboard and checklist on a material about the world’s happiest places in the Global Issues unit, and a stickman figure doing martial arts in the Orientation syllabus. None of these images have any pedagogical value directly related to the topic task on the material and were used only for decoration.

89 facilitative images were found and were fairly evenly distributed with the bulk of them appearing in the Environment unit (16). These included various images of the sun and earth on materials to facilitate the emphasis on considering the effects on the planet, as well as images conveying abstract concepts such as relationships through a couple holding hands. Various facilitative images were also found in the Travel unit such as suitcases, passports, and planes which fall within a related semantic field to support the context of the material. Likewise, various facilitative images were used in the Music unit which included various symbols such as instruments and musical notes.

The majority of images analyzed were contextually supportive and the bulk of these were found in the Japan and Film units. In the Japan unit, 55 contextually supportive images were used for a circumlocution activity in which students should describe a variety of Japanese cultural items so that other students can guess the answers. Small cards were designed with an accompanying image related to the cultural item in order to help the students if they are either unfamiliar with the item or if they do not recognize the item written in English lettering.

Table 2

Unit	Decorative	Facilitative	Contextually Supportive	Integrated
Animal (63 materials)	0	1	20	25
Environment (14 materials)	1	16	5	11
Film (9 materials)	2	7	35	0
Games unit (9 materials)	0	1	0	0
Global Issues (34 materials)	1	14	6	0
Happiness (17 materials)	0	6	3	13
Japan (12 materials)	0	6	58	2
Music (19 materials)	0	12	5	1
Orientation (24 materials)	1	3	23	0
Travel (both combined 21 mat)	0	12	1	43
UN (8 materials)	0	3	2	0
World Englishes (13 materials)	3	6	6	17

In the film unit, 35 contextually supportive images were used as examples of movie storyboards and to demonstrate different camera angles. The Animal unit, too, had a sizeable number of 20 contextually supportive images. These included accompanying images of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles in order to explain five different animal types, as well as individual images of various animals being discussed such as a Bengal tiger and an echidna. The Orientation unit contained materials on how to make a movie using iMovie, as well as how to use Google Classroom, and both had

contextually supportive images showing the relevant icons for different features and how they are used.

Finally, a total of 113 integrated images were found in the Freshman ELI materials. The majority of these were used in the Travel unit for an activity of matching vocabulary items such as “passport” and “airport” with their corresponding picture. In the Animal unit, 25 integrated images were found which included learners having to circle animals which fell into categories of mammals, amphibians, birds, fish, and reptiles. Various units made use of data sets such as graphs, particularly in the Happiness and World Englishes units, and instructed learners to refer to and analyze the data. Both the Japan and Music units made use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) chart and instructed students to look at the chart and identify certain sounds in order to complete linguistic tasks.

Table 3 outlines how 65% of materials contained one or more images, and 35% contained none at all. Google slides materials were counted as only one material despite having multiple slides, and some presentations had more than 10 slides with no accompanying images.

Table 3

Number of Materials	Containing Images	Without Images
242	157 (65%)	85 (35%)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

With regards to the quantity of different types of images used, the results were not overly surprising as previous research (Romney, 2018) following a similar framework also found a comparably low number of decorative images and a higher number of both contextually supportive and integrated images. What is encouraging from this research is that lecturers within the ELI are seemingly aware of the pedagogical value of images by incorporating a high number of contextually supportive and integrated images in materials. This in turn strengthens the pedagogical value of materials and potentially increases the chances of language acquisition.

As this research focused on only one ELI course folder, future research could include a comparative analysis of various course folders and establish

whether they have a similar degree of pedagogical value. In addition to this, research could be conducted on the extent to which images facilitate language acquisition for vocabulary items such as adjectives or nouns.

LIMITATIONS

This analysis was conducted during April-May of 2022. However, the ELI course folder is often updated with ongoing course development. Some of the course folders analyzed could potentially look very different in the coming months and many of the materials altered in a variety of ways. Despite this ongoing development, it is encouraging to note that there is already a sizeable number of pedagogically useful images being used in ELI course materials.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Based on the theoretical framework, an overwhelming majority of images used in the Freshman ELI materials have pedagogical value and serve to support language acquisition in various ways. A distinct minority of images were purely decorative with no pedagogical function, although they still have the function of, as Harmer (2001) claims, enabling visually oriented learners to become more engaged. The use of facilitative images related to the semantic field of a topic supports Canning-Wilson's (1999) claim about learners organizing knowledge "into semantic or associate clusters" (p.2). The vast preponderance of contextually supportive images ensure that learners can more broadly conceptualize a topic and deepen their understanding. Such images also provide linguistic context which supports Harmer's (2001) claim and give a multi-faceted conception of a given topic. The use of contextually supportive images in the Japan unit supports what Jolly and Bolitho (2011) state about the cultural impact of images. Finally, the sizeable number of integrated images shows that many images have a direct pedagogical purpose in that they are directly related to the linguistic context and facilitate learning and language acquisition.

For future development of ELI materials, 35% of materials contained no imagery at all. Given the various pedagogical uses outlined above, it is worth considering an increased use of imagery on materials in order to engage visually oriented learners and to make materials more appealing. This would enable materials to have broader scope to facilitate language acquisition and strengthen the efficacy of English teaching at KUIS.

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