

Images

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Jamie Keddie puts forward the case that many activities and techniques are more powerful with pictures.

Aristotle said that thought is impossible without an image. It is also the case that language production is impossible without thought, and in the first article of this series we considered the idea that images may be more suitable than imported texts for setting up speaking and writing activities in the classroom. We saw how a single engaging image can give rise to curiosity, questions and conversation and can be used as a starting point for writing, story telling, roleplay, dictation, dictogloss and more.

In this second article, I would like to demonstrate that many of our favourite classroom activities and techniques can be enhanced through the incorporation of image. In order to do this, I would like to draw on a number of my own teaching experiences.



Case 1: Explaining images

Do those uncomfortable student–teacher interrogations ever arise in your classroom? I remember one particularly harsh one in which I was forced to explain to my learners the difference between a *purse* and a *wallet*. Of course, the natural thing to do would be to ask everyone to get theirs out. Unfortunately, there were only two wallets in the classroom and it became clear that this was not enough for my learners to form their own understanding of the words.

It seemed that the more I said in an attempt to clarify the difference between a purse and a wallet, the more confusion arose. How do you deal with questions such as these?

- *So wallets are for men and purses are for women? Always?*
- *So you can't keep bank notes in a purse or coins in a wallet? Is that right?*
- *Are wallets always bigger than purses?*

Interrogations like this are frustrating for both students and teachers alike. Fortunately for me, there was a simple way of diffusing this specific learner confusion point.

If you have internet access in your classroom, then you also have access to the most versatile and powerful picture dictionary available – a Google image search.

Obtaining images from the internet

- Go to www.Google.co.uk and above the item entry space, you will see the word *Images*. Click on it and you will be taken to the Google image search site.
- In the search window, type in, for example, first *purse* and then *wallet*.
- In each case, you will find multiple copies of thumbnail (miniature) images of purses/wallets.

The multiple images that are obtained from a search like this are infinitely more valuable to our learners than verbal descriptions of the words in question. In order to appreciate why this is, it is useful to consider the cerebral organisation of language.

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its sound, its syntax, its logic, and the appearance of the things it stands for.'

Let us represent what Pinker says schematically:

As language teachers, we may tend to attach a lot of importance to the grammar and pronunciation of a word. But from what Pinker says, it is apparent that we should also be aware of *the appearance of the things it stands for*, ie the image of the word.

According to this model, image is meaning. In certain situations, a Google image search will allow learners to see things for themselves and thus relieve the teacher of the redundant task of 'explaining images'. In addition, the teacher may even be surprised by the

results. For example, in this particular image search, I became aware that *purse* can also refer to what I would call a *handbag*. My sister tells me that this is the American usage of the word.

Case 2: Severe image denial



Marmite is a British savoury spread with a distinctive and powerful taste. It has been described as a national institution. On March 16, 2005, a headline in *The Times* read 'Giant brown blob is not to children's taste'. The article* reported how a Marmite TV ad had 'left children terrified and having nightmares'.

In the advert, which was apparently inspired by the 1958 science-fiction film *The Blob*, a giant brown amorphous object moves through the main street of a small American town while the residents are seen either running away from it screaming or running towards it licking their lips. This image reflects the polarised public opinion to the product which is encapsulated in the company's

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In his book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker says that, 'A word is a bundle of different kinds of information. Perhaps each word is like a hub that can be positioned anywhere in a large region [of the brain], as long as its spokes extend to the parts ... storing



marketing slogan: *You either love it or hate it.*

Having decided that the text would make good classroom material, I set out to plan a lesson around it. This started off with my learners having to predict the content of the article from eight isolated words taken from it. It ended with them taking on the roles of concerned parents and writing emails of complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority.

For my students, this was a particularly unmemorable class. For me, it was a missed opportunity to create a particularly unforgettable one. Instead of focusing on the text, why didn't I focus on the Marmite advert itself? It can be seen on www.youtube.com. Google image search could have been used to find a poster of the film *The Blob*. Most importantly, everyone should have been given the opportunity to taste (or at least smell) the product for themselves. (It is available in more than 25 countries worldwide.)

Some less severe cases of image denial

- Any song which is not accompanied by the album cover and/or a photograph of the singer or band.
- Any text that has been downloaded from the internet and has been stripped of its accompanying images as a result of the 'printer-friendly version' having been selected.
- Any situation in which long-term students have never seen a picture of your close friends and family members to whom you habitually refer.

Case 3: Five-minute discussion

This is a simple vocabulary consolidation activity that I came across at a workshop a few years ago. Just before the end of a lesson, pair up the students and get them to talk to each other for five minutes. In doing so, they have to incorporate as much of the day's vocabulary as possible.

This activity appealed to me and I decided to try it out in class. Unfortunately, the majority of my adult

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learners weren't very enthusiastic, and it didn't go down well at all. The activity requires imagination as well as a certain amount of willingness to produce language that may seem contrived and possibly a bit silly.

With hindsight, I realise my mistake. Simply asking students to talk is rather a cold way of doing things; the task is too vague and there is a severe lack of engagement.


Recently, I decided to repeat the activity, this time incorporating an element of image. I found a photograph in a local Barcelona newspaper of three notorious Catalan politicians engaged in a discussion. I put my students into groups of three, asked them to imagine they were the politicians in the picture, and told them to recreate the (imagined) conversation. Again, the object of the activity was to incorporate as much of the day's vocabulary as possible.

The presence of a picture clearly helped. It seemed to engage my students and set up the conversation much better. Whereas before, the language seemed a bit contrived and silly, the photograph made it more natural. This was perhaps also a result of the fact

that my learners were effectively roleplaying. After all, everyone expects politicians to talk a bit of nonsense once in a while.



To recap, here are a few points to consider.

- A word's image is a part of its character and learners will often need to be shown the image of a word in order to acquire it. In cases such as these, we should resist the temptation to explain verbally. Instead, do a Google image search or draw a picture if this is not possible (see Case 1).
- As language teachers, we may at times be susceptible to giving text-based materials the greatest weight. This can result in lessons being unmemorable for learners (see Case 2).
- Many of our favourite classroom activities and techniques can be improved through the incorporation of image (see Case 3). 

* The article can be seen online at www.timesonline.co.uk. Simply run a search of the headline given.

Pinker, S *The Language Instinct*
Penguin 1995



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