

Images

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Jamie Keddie turns to the mind's eye as a classroom resource.

A burglar carefully removes bricks from the side of a house in order to break into it. Meanwhile, a dog barks at him. This is the strange mental image that my sister contrived in order to overcome the confusion that three similar-sounding Spanish words have been causing her:

Ladrón: burglar/thief

Ladrillo: brick

LadRAR: to bark



She tells me that by recalling the image whenever confusion arises and identifying the words in question, she has almost succeeded in adding three items of vocabulary to her active Spanish lexicon.

For some of us, mnemonic learning techniques such as this can be very effective. This is hardly surprising: we are creatures of image.

Visual messages

The human brain processes three types of visual message: *mediated*, *direct* and *mental*. A mediated image is any one that appears on screen or in print media. Until now, the articles in this series have been dealing with such images (photographs, art images, student sketches, computer-displayed images, etc). Direct images are those that we see in front of us with our own eyes without media intervention. Finally, mental images are the ones that emerge effortlessly inside our minds (pictorial thoughts, dreams and fantasies, for example). This inexhaustible stream of pictures that we are given access to inside our heads is brought to us courtesy of our memories and imaginations.

Mental images are the ones that emerge effortlessly inside our minds (pictorial thoughts, dreams and fantasies, for example)

! It is possible that your earliest memory is an image. If so, try recalling it right now. It may be a bit faded, blurred and lacking in detail, but that will not detract from its personal and emotional importance. Note how conveniently the slide can be located and inserted into the mental projector. Indeed, sometimes the efficiency of this facility can prove to be a liability. A few months ago I saw a little dog in the street going round in circles as it dragged its bottom along the pavement with its front legs in order to obtain a good scratching. Two days later, this funny image decided to pop into my head while I was in the dentist's waiting room causing enough uncontrollable laughter to be quite embarrassing.

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As a result of our imaginations, the mind's eye works overtime. It certainly doesn't close when we go to sleep. And strangely, at times, it seems incapable of retaining a blank screen. *They don't look anything like I expected them to*, a friend of mine said recently when I showed him a picture of a group that we had been listening to. Similarly, on journeys, we will often have fixed ideas of what new places will look like long before we get there. Of course, the mind's capacity to 'fill in the gaps' in such a way is an essential facility for human thought processes.

It would seem that the process of verbalising a series of mental images, emotions and events is, in itself, a memorable experience

The point is that despite what theories of linguistic determinism or linguistic relativity may have led us to believe, none of us thinks solely in language. There are many other key players involved and image is one of these. This article aims to examine a few of the many possible principles in which the images in our learners' minds can be exploited as a resource.

Pictures to words

Did you know that you are much more likely to remember a dream if you tell someone about it or write it down? It would seem that the process of verbalising such a series of mental images, emotions and events is, in itself, a memorable experience. Similarly, we may find ourselves relying on the numerous recollections of our earliest memories in order to reinforce them.

When images are converted to text (or vice versa), the result is a double-sided experience that proves to be a lot more effective and durable than either the pictorial or textual counterpart alone.

It follows that learning techniques which combine words with pictures will be more memorable than those which involve words alone. (This, of course, has been one of the underlying themes of this series.)

Consider how the image databases in our learners' heads can be exploited in the communicative language classroom. As an alternative to the standard Monday morning question: *What did you do at the weekend?* try asking your students if anyone can recount their dreams from the previous night or recall their earliest memories. Tell your students about your own personal experiences before asking them about theirs. If you are met with a lot of blank stares, increase the specificity of the questions you put to them. For example:

Dreams

- Did anyone have any interesting dreams last night/recently?
- Does anyone have any recurring dreams or nightmares?
- Did anyone have any recurring dreams or nightmares when they were younger?
- Has anyone ever dreamed of a place only to come across it in reality?

Memories

- What is your earliest memory?
- What is your earliest memory of your brother/sister/mother/father/pet/childhood friend/favourite toy, etc?
- What is your earliest memory of the place you grew up in?
- What is your earliest memory of school/teachers/learning English?

The resulting language that emerges can be used as the basis of written compositions. Make sure that your students include a personal sketch or two beside their texts.

The work of artists who are (or were) more interested in exploring the inner psyche than in depicting reality in a straightforward manner may help to get the ball rolling with activities such as these. Try any of the following: Marc Chagall, Francis Bacon, Salvador Dalí, Frida Kahlo, Edvard Munch. (Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory* might be a good choice.)



Words to pictures

! Read the following genuine learner utterances and, in each case, consider the image that forms in your head:

- *It is a stereotype that the British people wear umbrellas.*
- *I have been smoked for 18 years.*
- *They stole my grandmother.*
- *I went to look for bread. (meant to say 'get bread')*
- *When I was in Thailand I pierced my Neville.*

As professional language teachers, we are not supposed to laugh at our learners. Sometimes, however, it can be hard to keep a straight face. When we do find ourselves amused at the comical imagery that our students place in our heads with their mispronounced phonemes, confused words, incorrectly inflected verbs, etc, it can be a good idea to share it with them.

Make a note of such learner-derived utterances or sentences from written compositions. For each one, explicitly describe to your students the mental image that it gives rise to in your head. Draw these images if possible.



Importantly, keep all items for revision at later dates. In order to revise such items:

- 1 Write a phrase on the board.
- 2 Ask your students if they can remember the context and who said it.
- 3 Get them to recall the imagery that was associated with it.
- 4 Have them correct it.

The image of a singer

For this activity, you will need two music CDs. Think of some interesting-looking singers or bands that your students probably won't know.

Note: It is obviously important that the CD boxes contain a picture of the singer or musicians involved – if not on the front cover, then somewhere within the sleeve notes.

- 1 Play a track from the first CD and ask your students whether or not they like the music.
- 2 Stay with the same CD (change tracks if you like) and ask your class what they think the singer or musicians look like and what type of person their music is aimed at. Draw attention to and ask questions about any of the following:
 - When the music was recorded
 - The singer's age and nationality
 - The appearance of the singer or band members
 - Clothes
 - Jewellery
 - Tattoos
 - Singer or band members' body language in the CD sleeve pictures
 - Album cover design

- 3 Repeat the procedure for the second CD. Then, once your students have analysed their mental images for both CDs, divide the class into two groups. Give the first CD to group 1 and the second CD to group 2. Let your students have a few moments to compare the mediated images from the CD box with their mental images that were described.

- 4 Get students to form pairs. Each pair should contain a student who has seen CD 1 and a student who has seen CD 2. Students in each pair can now tell each other about the images that they have seen.

Dictionary definitions

Here is a way of getting your students to construct mental images that might help them to remember new vocabulary. Learners will need access to dictionaries (either mono- or bilingual).

- 1 Get each of your students to select a few new words that they think will be particularly useful to remember (eight would be a good number). This activity might work well at the end of a lesson, when learners have already been introduced to new vocabulary which is written on the board. Imagine, for example, that a student chooses the following words (each of which came from an article about a zoo vet who had his hand bitten off by a crocodile):

to rush to bite a vet surgery railings a dart let go forearm
- 2 The idea of this activity is for each learner to look up each word in the

dictionary and attempt to form a 'mental image relationship' between it and a neighbouring entry (ie another word) that they already know. For example, this could be any of the following:

- A Russian being rushed to hospital
- Biting a bitter biscuit
- A vegetarian vet
- A surfer having surgery
- A raisin beside some railings
- Throwing a dart in the dark
- 'Let go of my lettuce'
- A forearm wiping sweat off a forehead

- 3 Of course, you will have to demonstrate this process to your students in order to give them a clear idea of what you want them to do. I do this by telling them about words that I have learnt in Spanish using this technique.
- 4 After a while, have your students pair up and describe their mental images to each other. If any of them have chosen the same words, it will be interesting for them to share and compare the mental images they constructed. Encourage brave students to share any good images with the whole class. You could even get them to draw their images and put them on the classroom wall.
- 5 Once students have got the hang of this activity, it can be turned into a homework task at later dates.



Aristotle said that there can be no words without images. In the language classroom, it can pay to bear this in mind. **ETP**

Lester, P M *Visual Communication* Thomson Wadsworth 2006

Pinker, S *The Language Instinct* Penguin Books 1995



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