

Gauging Students' Visual Literacy Skills Through Picture Interpretation

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Abstract

Students nowadays are highly visual. Still pictures, films, paintings, drawings, virtual educational games, and others accompany many students' classroom reports and presentations. Teachers, too, have to cope with this growing interest of students in order to sustain their attention in the classroom. The proliferation of these various visual materials eventually changed what it means to be literate in our modern world. This paper explores the level of Visual Literacy Skills of students enrolled in a writing class and their thought organization in analyzing the picture shown. The students were asked to write an essay interpreting a photo showing different kinds of clocks. Forty papers were randomly selected and were assessed for the students' visual literacy skills.

Findings show that majority of the respondents failed to interpret what was seen in the picture. For the few students who attempted to interpret the photo, the highest percentage settled on the literal level of interpretation, followed by the critical level, the inferential level, and creative level. It was also found that the thought organization of the students in writing their essays start from their schema about 'time' before focusing on the photo in which their interpretation goes from concrete to abstract. Implications and pertinent recommendations about the possible inclusion of Visual Literacy Instruction in the Language Curriculum conclude the paper.

Key words: Visual Literacy, Perceptual learning, Distinctive features, Levels of Interpretation Concrete to abstract Reasoning, Instructed visual literacy,

Introduction

Literacy skills are traditionally limited to reading, listening, speaking, and writing. From kindergarten through high school, traditional instruction focuses on reading, writing, and verbal forms of communication (Yeh, 2010). With the introduction of various visual or graphic arts that eventually conquered the academe, modern and creative teachers started to incorporate these materials in their teaching to enhance the presentation and the comprehensibility of the lesson. Still pictures, films, paintings, drawings graphic organizers, and virtual educational games are just few visual aids used widely by teachers in order to satisfy students of this generation who are described as highly visual. For this reason, the coverage of literacy skills nowadays is being extended to visual communication or perceptual learning.



While there is no doubt that due to the increasing interest of students on visuals that means lesser interests in textual materials, almost all teachers are doing their best in making use of visual aids in their instruction. The question is that, how many teachers have actually assessed the capacity of the students to read and interpret images? It is observed that very little attention is paid to the form and quality of visual messages. Direct measures of visual ability, aside from spatial rotation tests, are absent from most testing; in general, a student's visual ability is ignored in favor of a verbal one (Yeh, 2010). If this were a 21st century skill, then it should also be given a primary attention. Before giving students any activity involving their visual skills, teachers must foreground it on assessing students' visual literacy skills in order to inform them of better ideas on how to improve language teaching incorporating this skill.

The International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) provided four "official definitions" of visual literacy (Pettersen, 1993, p. 140 as cited by Yeh, 2010):

Visual Literacy is a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences, (b) the learned ability to interpret the communication of visual symbols (images) and to create messages using visual symbols, (c) the ability to translate visual images into verbal language and vice versa, and (d) the ability to search for and evaluate visual information in visual media. These four definitions incorporate Debes' (1969) original definition of visual literacy as the competencies of interpreting, creating, and searching for visual messages. Today, IVLA uses Debes' original definition of visual literacy as its official definition which states, "Visual literacy refers to a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visual actions, objects, and symbols, natural or manmade, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others.

In Language Teaching, visual literacy, in its sense, is a component of reading comprehension. It is considered as a sub-skill of reading, but not given so much attention to in the instruction. Visuals are simply used without the users (teachers and students) conscious knowledge that students can enhance their literacy skills through these materials if used properly. In Australia, visual literacy is integrated in all literacy syllabus documentation across states and territories. This inclusion recognizes that students need to develop new literacy skills, multi-literacies, in order for them to negotiate the growing number of texts that populate their home and school lives (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; New London Group, 2000, cited by Callow, 2008). On the contrary, in most schools here in the Philippines, if not all, assessing visual skills and understanding related skills that go with it is given less attention in classroom instruction. While it is true that it is still part of the whole teaching and learning process, it is reduced to a simple classroom activity such as a form of a quiz, group work activity, or extended activity for a reading lesson. In most cases, the students are not instructed about how to develop certain skills that go with interpreting images unlike in the teaching of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. Also, feedback as to which skill is their weakest

and strongest is not usually provided to them. To date, very little specific research has been done on the what of assessment with even less on the how of assessment within multimodal contexts, particularly when assessing the metalanguage students might have about visual images (Callow, 2008).

Picture interpretation is one of the several activities that call for visual skills. Teachers find this an easier classroom task since pictures are everywhere, but sometimes they do not realize that interpreting pictures can already inform them of various literacy skills that students possess, most particularly, those related to comprehension and cognition which are important in the learning process. Comprehension, in this situation, is making sense out of what the students see (Navarro, Cruz, Tovera, & Lucido, 1988).

Since graphical interpretation can be attributed to reading skill, the levels of reading comprehension skills may be adopted to gauge students' level in visual literacy. These are literal, inferential, critical and creative.

Particularly, the literal level includes skills such as context clues, synonyms, structural analysis, and identifying significant detail. In this study, **identifying significant details** will be the focus of the literal level. This entails recognizing important details or images and understanding its value in the picture. This can also be referred to as the perceptual skills of the students. These are skills that students need to master before progressing to the next level.

The second level of comprehension is the inferential level with the following sub-skills: making inferences, predicting outcomes, determining meaning of relationships, and forming conclusions or generalizations. The correctness of inferences to a particular situation depends on a large extent on the reader's ability to determine facts and their relationships, the depth and breadth of his prior knowledge and experience, and his ability to understand the language signals of the writer (Villamin, et al., 2001). Krantz and Kimmelman as cited by Villamin, et al., 2001, claimed that putting details together and sensing relationships that are not explicitly expressed but merely implied by the author are the sub-skills of inferring. This kind of reading is essential to our everyday life because most of the reading that we do each day, whether of printed media or non-verbal sign and symbols, require the ability to infer. This involves making logical conclusions from given or proven facts.

The third level of reading comprehension is the critical level. Like the inferential level, critical level is reading beyond the literal level. Making judgments is the center of the critical reading skill. Adams and Patterson (2010) quoted a well-known reading expert, Dr. Francis Triggs, who said that, "Critical reading requires a contribution by both the author and the reader and an interplay which usually results in a new understanding." This skill tests both the person's understanding of the image and his existing knowledge about the world. Background information or knowledge of the visual material refers to the reader's existing knowledge about human condition, social issues, and other topics about other fields of knowledge which are basically acquired when one has enough exposure to the world. In reading, this is called the **schemata**, a set of background information or existing knowledge and experiences that may be related to a reading matter



The fourth and the highest level of reading comprehension is the creative level. This entails related skills such as developing new insights/perspective about a given subject matter. This level is the most challenging to most students since creative level involves skills that involve internalizing the emotional experience embedded, reasoning, judging, and creating. This is supported by Gates' definition as cited by Fries (1963), i.e. reading is not just a mental activity; it involves dynamic and emotional processes where the reader does more than understand and contemplate—his emotions are stirred, his attitudes and purposes are modified; indeed, his innermost being is involved. Villamin, et al. (2001) wrote:

The end-goal of creative reading is production of divergent and varied responses, not put answers to questions. To be a creative reader, one must respond beyond the literal level, even beyond the inferential and critical levels. The reader should go beyond facts and literal details, and consider deeper meanings, implications, consequences, possibilities. The reader thus, extends his thinking beyond what are implied or expected and allows his imagination to soar.

All these four levels of reading comprehension are applicable in gauging students' visual literacy skills since what is being tested is also the students' understanding of what their eyes can see in a form of a nonverbal medium instead of printed words. Yeh (2010) cited in his study the need to look into the VL Skills of College students:

Matusitz (2005) suggested that college and university students gain at least a basic understanding of how visual communication works so as to promote the familiarity with signs, symbols, illustrations, diagrams, and graphics used in textbooks and instructions. Furthermore, Metros and Woolsey (2006) indicated college and university students often lack the skills, precision, and depth, as well as the education to understand, interpret, and create, today's information-age visuals.

Since the researchers have observed the same status of visual literacy in their university, they conceptualized this study to measure the Visual Literacy Skills of students taking up basic communication arts and to provide pertinent recommendations based on the findings that will help improve their university's program in English Language Teaching.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and it made use of descriptive method in measuring the visual literacy of first year students. The respondents were four classes of engineering students who were taking up Basic English (Communication Arts 2). Each class is composed of 40 to 50 students. Since the subject is focused on developing writing skills of students, the researchers gave an essay writing activity using a picture to be interpreted by the students as data. The subject matter of the picture is "Time." Each student was given a picture of clocks with different sizes. The class was instructed to write an essay about what they can understand as the message of the picture. Subsequently, ten compositions from each class were randomly selected for evaluation.



Fig. 1: The photo interpreted by the students

In gauging the students’ level of visual literacy skills, the researchers adopted the levels of reading comprehension skill such as literal, inferential, critical, and creative with selected sub-skills that would satisfy the skills needed in visual literacy.

Below is a diagram showing the levels of visual literacy skills and the expected flow of the students’ thought in their picture interpretation.



Fig.2: Levels of Visual Literacy Skills (adapted from reading comprehension skills)

The essays were also evaluated as to the students’ thought organization in their attempt to interpret the photo. Findings regarding this are backed up by concepts in psychology regarding the test of cognition, particularly on visual processing.

Interpretation of Findings

Level of Visual Literacy Skills of Communication Arts Students

Figure 3 shows that out of 40 respondents, 24 students (60%) came up with essays with the same subject matter as the photo but not necessarily interpreting it; thus, labeling them as having poor VL skills. Only 16 students (40%) interpreted the picture; however, out of the sixteen, seven (17%) of them



were categorized under the literal level, three students (8%) were under inferential level, four students (10%) displayed critical level in interpreting the picture, and two students (5%) were labeled as having creative level of interpretation.

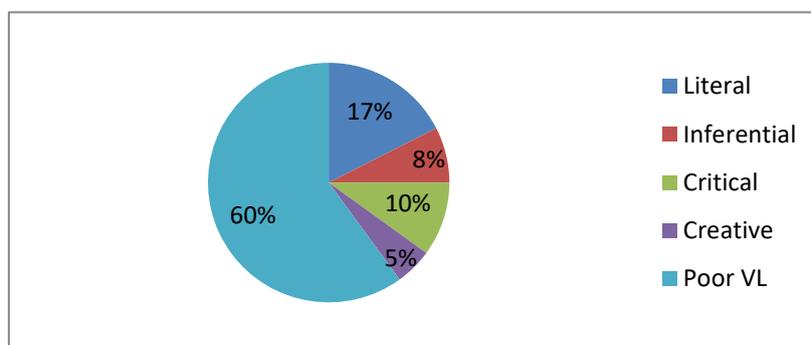


Fig. 3: Level of Visual Literacy Skills of the respondents

The high percentage of students who were not able to interpret the picture well is already a clear manifestation that many students lack a deeper understanding of the essence of what their eyes can see. They tend to just perceive the whole and not the parts which are more important in arriving at a logical interpretation of something. In other words, they lack the most fundamental skill in visual literacy which is identifying details—a helpful skill in arriving at the higher levels of comprehension.

You can move the hands of the clock, but never the hands of time. No matter how hard we try to rewind time, the circle of life continues, and the world will just spin. The world won't stop for you if you fall, so it's your choice whether or not to get back up and fight.

Psychologists say that people who can manage their time well are immune to negative thoughts. Meaning, people who do otherwise will most likely experience regret, which is very rampant today. Why do people feel regret anyway? Here are few reasons why. The first is they are not contented on the result. That the result was probably not what they had expected, and they tend to become the second which is doing their least effort. Sometimes, I wonder why people hide their true efforts and abilities. That happens because they are shy to admit that they can also make mistakes, but that's what spices up everyday life. To be carefree and conquer yourself can be the best reward of something you poured your time and effort to. People tend to retrogress, feeling discontented. Well, it's about time that you push yourself a million newtons further because you come here to be yourself, not anybody else. So, don't waste your time pretending to be the person who you are not. Do not care on what other people say. We are just humans and humans after all. We smile, make mistakes, jump, and go the extra distance. What matters is how we use our time to the best of our ability.

Finding reasons why things happen to us is just a waste of time. Life is short, when you're done, you're done. You live on this earth to prove something to humanity, and live a legacy.

While it is true that this student essay is talking about the subject matter of the picture which is ‘Time,’ we can infer that the student did not attempt to study the picture well. How do the clocks look like? What kind of clocks are there? What time is set in the clocks? These and other details in the picture could have helped the student arrived at a more relevant essay rather than just talking about time in general. Adams and Patterson (2005) quoted:

Think of total comprehension as diamond. If we want to look more closely at that diamond, we can look separately at each of its facets or polished sides. The more facets, the more glimmer to the diamond.

Looking at the picture of the clocks, a student who is observant enough can observe that the clocks come in different sizes, shapes, and designs. Perhaps, he would even notice that some of the clocks have similar time while the others have different time. This skill is what Gibson (1969) as cited by Reed (2010) refers to as Perceptual Learning Skills:

Perceptual learning occurs through the discovery of features that distinguish one pattern from another. Further, feature theories allow us to describe a pattern by listing its parts. For example, we might describe a friend as having long blond hair, a short nose, and bushy eyebrows. On the other hand, distinctive features refer to characteristics present in one pattern but absent in another, aiding one’s discrimination of the two patterns.

The absence of these two perceptual learning skills as manifested in the 24 student essays means that the writers of these essays lack discriminatory skills that could have been helped them thought of a deeper interpretation of the differences in the clocks’ features. Instead the photo simply served as a stimulus that activated their schema about the concept of time where most of these compositions revolved. While it is true that the 24 essays are talking about time and clocks in general, there is no evidence that the writers attempted to examine every facet of the picture that should have been the main idea of the essays. This further means that the visual literacy skill of the respondents is low; thus, it needs to be enhanced through instruction.

Figure 3 also shows that of the 40 students, there are seven or 17% who interpreted the picture only at the literal level. Literal level is the rudimentary level of reading comprehension, and the lowest among the four levels. At this level, the reader is expected to identify the basic details, follow instructions, and understand specific rules and orders (Bernardez, 2007). Applying this to visual comprehension, the students should be able to identify surface details of what their eyes perceive. The essay below is an example of a purely literal interpretation of the picture.

Clocks are the main instrument for us to know time. It will help us manage our time. People need to know time every hour or every minute. They use it to make their personal works, family bonding, resting, etc. Most people are time conscious. They need to see their watch, their phones, and clock for them to know time.



Our world now is engaged in modern technologies. Architects and Engineers are also inventing modern technologies. One of these technologies is making our clocks modernized. As we try look and notice the clocks in the picture, there are different styles, structures, and even their shapes. When I see a picture wherein there are different clocks, I have concluded that clocks can be what we think. Some are big and tall, others are small.

The result of the picture interpretation activity of the Communication Arts students, having the literal level as the highest level achieved by the students who interpreted the photo, informs us that the students' visual literacy skill is only superficial. On the other hand, the result also presents that even without being exposed to Instructed Visual Literacy, some students possess the basic skill in interpreting an image. With more practice and guidance, these students would soon probably reach the higher levels which are inferential, critical, and creative.

Critical level in comprehending the picture given to the students is the second highest among the four levels. This level can be explained as perceiving beyond the literal level. Making judgments is the center of the critical reading skill. A well-known reading expert, Dr. Francis Triggs, says, "Critical interpretation requires a contribution by both the author and the reader and an interplay which usually results in a new understanding" (Adams & Patterson, 2010). This skill tests both the person's understanding of what is seen and his existing knowledge about the world. Background information or knowledge of the reading material refers to the reader's existing knowledge about human condition, social issues, and other topics about other fields of knowledge which are basically acquired when one is well-exposed to the world. In reading, this is called the **schemata**, a set of background information or existing knowledge and experiences that may be related to a reading matter.

Although four students out of 40 is somewhat alarming when it comes to the critical level of visual literacy, the result shows that somehow, there are still students can think critically in interpreting images. The essay that follows is an example of one that has reached the critical level of interpretation.

Clock, it is one of our daily needs in our life. All I can see now in this image are different designs of clock. But they are all similar because they give the same time we want to know. We need a clock to check the time because many Filipinos say, "Time is gold," It is one of the famous sayings in our country.

What is the use of clock to us? We need to check the time in our different clocks when we are in school, office or even in our house—the time we need to go home, to eat, to sleep and even if we have a date. We need it so that we will not be late. We need to manage our time so we can live happily. Many things are important for us but for many people, clock is the number one that they need.

This sample student essay is said to have reached the critical level since the writer was able to relate some characteristics of the clock that he saw in the picture with his own experience about managing time. He did not only talk about his own knowledge about time but tried to establish a connection with how the clocks were presented in the picture. Despite this, in order to have a clearer picture of the students' idea, he could have developed his essay more.

This essay is also in support to the findings that many of the respondents have an excellent schema regarding the subject matter of the picture, which is time, since the writer of this essay, including the other three students, was able to relate the details that they see in the image with what they know or have learned and read about time.

The inferential level, which involves the skill in sensing relationship between and among details, is the third highest among the four levels of visual literacy. Three, out of 40 students have reached this level in interpreting the picture of the clocks. This means that after identifying the details they can see in the picture, they were able to give meaning to each characteristic of the clock that they have observed. This sample student essay, especially the second paragraph, presents how the writer noticed the differences in the features of the clocks and his wonderful interpretations of these features.

In the picture, there are seven clocks and they have different shapes and sizes. These clocks are important to us because if we don't have any basis of time, we don't use our time properly. It is also a basis for our schedules and other important things to do in a specific time.

The picture shows how important time is. For me seven clocks represent the seven days of the week and for each day we must use our time carefully, wisely and properly. The tallest clock represents the most important day or the day that you have important things to do while the smallest clock represents the day when you have lesser things to do.

An inference is a conclusion or an opinion drawn from reasoning based on known facts. For instance, when people smile we infer that they are happy. Our inference is based on experience and/or knowledge. In his famous book *Language in Thought and Action*, S.I. Hayakawa defines an inference as “a statement about the unknown made on the basis of the known.” It's a good educated guess based on experience and knowledge. Without experience and knowledge, however, inferences we make are based on shaky ground (Adams & Patterson, 2005).

As evident in the essay, the writer made an attempt to sense the relationship between and among the clocks in the picture. Out of the 40 respondents, the writer of this essay is actually the only one who was able to notice the number of clocks in the picture and to come up with an excellent interpretation of the number. Other than that, the student was able to come up with a meaningful relationship between the smallest and the biggest clock. Adams and Patterson stated that children learn to identify an object by being able to identify differences between it and other objects. Perceptual learning can be facilitated by a learning procedure that highlights distinctive features. Obviously, the four students who reached this level of interpretation display these know how to identify and understand distinctive features of objects. In addition, Villamin, et al. (2001) quoted:

Krantz and Kimmelman claimed that putting details together and sensing relationships that are not explicitly expressed but merely implied by the author are the sub-skills of inferring. This skill is essential to our everyday life. Most of the reading that we do each day, whether of printed media or non-verbal sign and symbols, require the ability to infer. This involves making logical conclusions from given or proven facts.



The correctness of inferences to a particular situation depends on a large extent on the reader's ability to determine facts and their relationships, the depth and breadth of his prior knowledge and experience, and his ability to understand the language signals of the writer

Despite the success of the writer in this level, we can say that the essay did not yet progress to the higher level of comprehension. Moreover, only four, out of 40 students, who were able to interpret the picture at this level, is quite alarming. The study, therefore, proves that the respondents lack the mastery of these analytical skills which are important in any academic tasks. It is therefore important to note that these skills must be given emphasis in their education.

Finally, creative level which is supposed to be the highest level of comprehension is found to be the lowest level of visual literacy skills of the students as reflected in their essays. Creative interpretation entails related skill such as developing new insights and perspective. These skills are reflected in this student essay:

Clocks, big or small remind us the time and its importance. We must know what time it is so that we could manage our activities like school, work, meetings, dates, and appointments. Our time should be managed properly to increase our productivity and efficiency. Without knowing our time, the world would be in chaos and disorder. Quality bonding time should also be spent with our family, loved ones and friends because we do not know the dangers that might come along our way. Sometimes we also need a break and try to make our time pleasurable by going on vacations, attending a party and other fun activities.

Time is gold and should never be wasted because it will cost us a lot. We could never take back our lost and wasted time; therefore we must use it properly and efficiently to make the most out of it.

This is supported by Gates' definition as cited by Fries (1963), i.e. reading is not just a mental activity; it involves dynamic and emotional processes where the reader does more than understand and contemplate—his emotions are stirred, his attitudes and purposes are modified; indeed, his innermost being is involved. Villamin, et al. (2001) wrote:

The end-goal of creative reading is production of divergent and varied responses, not put answers to questions. To be a creative reader, one must respond beyond the literal level, even beyond the inferential and critical levels. The reader should go beyond facts and literal details, and consider deeper meanings, implications, consequences, possibilities. The reader thus, extends his thinking beyond what are implied or expected and allows his imagination to soar.

Having only two students who have interpreted the picture up to the creative level implies that the students' reading style is still superficial and the enrichment from reading is not yet heightened. There is a great need for students to widen the scope of their schemata to become sensitive viewers and to get the most from what they see.

Table 1: Summary of the Visual Literacy Skills of the Respondents

N = 40		
Level of VL Skills	No. of students categorized under the identified level	Percentage
Low/Poor	24	60%
Literal	7	17%
Critical	4	10%
Inferential	3	8%
Creative	2	5%

Table 1 presents the summary of the performance of students in the picture interpretation activity wherein having a poor level of VL Skills is the highest percentage, followed by the literal level, the critical level, the inferential level, and lastly the creative level.

In general, this study presupposes that the very reason why the respondents did not arrive at a favorable interpretation of the picture is that due to their non-mastery of the basic visual literacy skill (Literal Level), that is involving the skill on identifying and understanding certain distinctive features present in the picture. Though, this is considered as the lowest level of comprehension, the skills under it can be considered complex since they require complicated process before one can gain mastery.

Inferential level, critical level, and creative level of reading comprehension are said to constitute the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) since it goes beyond what is literal. All three levels require meta-cognitive strategies such as higher thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and integration skills. According to Wittrock and Baker (1991), a myriad of studies on reading comprehension (that includes nonverbal interpretation) gives clear evidence of the increases in reading achievement produced by teaching students to use strategies and metacognitive processes as they read stories or tests. These are complicated skills in themselves where students can become proficient only by mediating learning, constant practice and wide reading. Since interpreting graphics also tests the comprehension skills of students, it is but proper for language teachers to teach the different skills students need to develop in interpreting images and other visual materials in order to increase VL skills of the students.

Common Thought Organization Pattern Used by the Students in Interpreting the Picture

Out of the 16 essays that were somehow developed with reference to the picture of the clocks, the common thought organization evident in these essays is from the writers' prior knowledge about the subject matter, that is time, to more specific examples using the clocks in the picture, then to a generalization about life in relation to time. Disregarding the writer's introductory paragraphs about time in general, the common thought organization pattern seen in the majority of the essays is from concrete to abstract. The essay below is an example of this type of thought organization. Note that the essay is developed until the creative level of visual literacy skills.



Introduction

In our everyday life, clock has a very important role to us. It helps us determine whether if its morning, afternoon, evening or midnight. It builds our plan more accurately and efficiently by what time will we do our chores and what time it will be accomplished so we can move on to our next work and finish it from time to time. At school, clock is displayed everywhere on the campus, and in every 1 hour, the bell rings that signals the students that their classes are dismissed and go to their next class.

Concrete

As of today, many people make and design clocks, they do not only make simple clocks but also they make high quality clocks that can merely last forever and it has creative designs that the rich people tend to be attracted and buy to them for their houses.

Abstract

There are many kinds of clocks; a very good example of it, is the wall clock. It is placed almost everywhere like in the school campus, house, canteen, churches, and so many places. People do this so they can be aware of the time, and they can spend their time wisely because every second that will pass cannot be returned, and every time that we waste will end up with regret because as many of us say, “Time is gold.”

The first paragraph is talking about the student’s prior knowledge about time which is obviously recalled from what he had been hearing from his teachers, parents, and other people, or most probably from his own readings and his own experiences. In other words, the student talks about the general concept of time; not necessarily about what he can see in the picture considering the size, shape, and kinds of clocks.

In the second paragraph, there is already an attempt on the part of the student to look closely at the details of the clocks in the picture. So he has noticed the different designs which are so creative and not very simple. He also noticed one kind of clock in the picture which is the wall clock where his attention was fixated. Then he proceeded talking about the function of wall clocks associating it with his own experience or observation about why people use them. Here, it can be observed that the student has reached the critical level of interpretation already, but the student did not expound his ideas well. The last sentence in the essay contains an idea which is a manifestation of the students’ creative level of interpretation, although, just like in the other levels of interpretation, it was not elaborated well.

Despite the fact that the student’s interpretation of the picture lacks ideas and elaboration of what is seen from the picture, there is a clear manifestation that the student’s flow of thought when it comes to the interpretation of the picture moved from the surface level or what is concrete to a more creative interpretation which is abstract. The other fifteen essays which are products of the students’ interpretation of the essay displayed the same flow of thought organization which is from concrete to abstract, with the exemption of seven essays which simply settled on the literal level or concrete level. This means that their thought organization did not go beyond the concrete interpretation or what is

physically seen by the eyes. On the other hand, only nine students were able to interpret the picture beyond the literal level, but arriving at different levels of abstraction.

The ‘concrete to abstract’ pattern of thought organization is said to be the most relevant way of organizing ideas with regard picture interpretation. It is just proper that as a writer, the student has to start talking about the details of the picture so as to give the readers a clear picture of what he is talking about in the essay. On the other hand, to show that he has really comprehended the picture well, a concrete description of the picture is necessary. On the aspect of assessment, it is here where the evaluator would see if the student is really analyzing details of the picture shown to them. An article in the website (www.schoolpsychologistfiles.com) about this topic explains how the brain processes information perceived visually by a person:

When a person views the world, the brain will interpret what is seen through the visual processing. This allows us to identify what we see and derive meaning. Ideally the brain will correctly interpret size, perception, and distance, and be able to discriminate between differences and similarities among shapes. When the brain misinterprets, problems may occur.

This means that considering visual literacy skills, the first activity of the brain is the processing of details or information seen by the eye. The brain must correctly interpret what is being perceived such as color, shape, size, and other physical attributes of an object. These physical features that are being processed should then help the person arrive at a logical interpretation or meaning of what has been perceived by the eye.

After understanding the features of the object/s in the picture, the student is now ready to establish the relationship between and among the details found in the picture, then later proceeds to the higher level of interpretation, anchoring it on the concrete ideas established earlier. This is now the abstract interpretation. Following this thought organization, a student’s idea or interpretation about the picture can be understood better. This is also a clear evidence of how one’s brain processes the information he sees in the picture. Barry (2002) explained how the brain processes information perceived by the eyes:

The process of visual perception involves several basic parts, including the sensing of information; the use of past experience, both real and genetically acquired; and the processing of information along dual pathways. First, raw information is gathered from the external world. As we look at the world around us, the right hemisphere of the brain scans the environment and the left hemisphere jumps in when attention is needed. Both cognitive and emotional systems work in parallel, and both store separate memories of the experience. Second, templates of past experience are compared and matched by executive functions in working memory to what is experienced now. These templates act as maps for understanding new stimuli and events. In the process, emotional feelings, generated by different sub-symbolic systems and involving many brain systems, provide the vast amount of material in the process. Feelings, unconsciously developed and processed, prepare us to cognitively understand what we see.



In the case of the respondents, many ignored the details of the picture and it can be inferred that they did not take time in scrutinizing what the picture is trying to tell them. Many of them proceeded immediately to generalizations about ‘time’ which is the subject matter of the photo but with little or no reference to the different kinds of clocks included in the picture. An elaboration of the importance of emphasizing on the concrete to support abstract ideas is discussed below:

Why is it that we turn to abstractions and generalizations when we write? I think part of it is that we’re trying to offer ideas or conclusions. Your dad promises to pick you up at four o’clock, but leaves you standing like a fool on the corner until after six. Your boss promises you a promotion, then gives it instead to his boss’s nephew. From these and more specific experiences, you learn that you can’t always trust everybody. Do you tell your child these stories. More probably, you just tell your child, “You can’t always trust everybody.” It took a lot of concrete, specific experiences to teach you that lesson, but you try to pass it on with few general words. You may think you’re doing it right, giving your child the lesson without the hurt you went through. But the hurts teach the lesson, not the general terms. “You can’t always trust everybody” may be a fine idea for an essay or paragraph, and it may be all that you want your child or reader to grasp—but if you want to make that lesson clear, you’ll have to give your child or your reader the concrete, specific experiences (Friedlander).

This clearly elaborates that even if abstract thinking is higher than the concrete thinking, concrete ideas are as important as the abstract. In picture interpretation, it is suggested that in order to have a more organized way of presenting ideas and a better comprehension of where the writer is coming from, he should start writing about the details of the concrete (what is visible to the eyes) so that even if readers may not see the picture being talked about, they can still understand what the topic is all about. Abstract ideas may come after presenting the concrete ideas. This study shows that most of the respondents proceeded to abstraction immediately without even mentioning concrete examples that will support their ideas. It is a common observation that students, not only in language subjects, that they tend to jump to conclusions immediately without discussing details on how did they arrive at such. This is why teachers should not fail to incorporate the development of these skills, especially to improve their visual literacy skills since we believe that students these days mostly depend on visual learning. According to the cognitive models growing from recent researches, teaching influences achievement through changing the ways students think about, organize, and process information, including how they relate it to their experience and knowledge, and how they apply it to their daily lives. The research indicates that teaching influences achievements by inducing students to construct meaning from the instructions.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

The respondents (freshman university students enrolled in writing) displayed a poor or low level of Visual Literacy skills as manifested by the 60% students who did not develop their essays with reference to the clocks in the picture shown to them.

Only few attempted to really interpret the picture; however, most of these students displayed a literal level of interpretation only.

The students who interpreted the picture developed their essays following the concrete-to-abstract thought organization; however, lack of development of ideas, especially involving abstraction, was observed in all essays.

All the respondents began their essays with long presentations of their schema about time which is the subject matter of the picture, but not necessarily drawing it from the features or characteristics of the clocks in the picture. Little amount of ideas was given to the supposedly bulk of the discussion which is on the abstract level.

In the light of the findings of this study, the researchers recommend the following:

Teachers should prepare exercises for picture interpretation or other similar exercises for students to practice and develop their own VL skills in all levels of interpretation/ comprehension.

Inclusion of Instructed Visual Literacy in ELT, particularly the basic skill of perceptual learning procedure giving emphasis on distinguishing distinctive features; and Teachers and program developers should create a standard tool for measuring the visual literacy skills of students; and Schools must organize trainings for teachers regarding strategies on how to teach Visual Literacy to the students.

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