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USING VISUAL MATERIALS IN TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS¹

Abstract: Visual materials play a significant role in teaching young learners, not only languages but other school subjects as well. The paper aims to provide the theoretical background on teaching English to young learners, with a focus on the classification and benefits of using visual aids in the classroom. The empirical research was designed to investigate the use of visual materials in teaching English to young learners and to register teachers' and learners' attitudes towards using such materials. The use of visual materials in the classroom was determined by a questionnaire for teachers of English. Learners' attitudes towards using visual materials in the classroom were examined by an interview. According to the research results, the most used visual materials in the classrooms were pictures and flashcards while television, videos and computers as tools were rarely used. The paper contributes to improving practice in the area of teaching English to young learners by providing some ideas for teaching English with the help of visual materials.

Keywords: teaching English to young learners, visual material, creative activities in teaching English to young learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interest in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) has grown during the past years. Brunfit (1991) claims that it is necessary to know child's psychology and learning style in order to maximize the learning process. Shin (2006) suggests that visual materials are very useful and helpful in teaching English to young learners especially when we supplement activities with visuals, realia, and movement. She explains that young learners tend to have short attention spans and a lot of

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physical energy that needs to be channeled (Ibid.). Further, Scott and Ytreberg (1990: 2) write that young learners' "understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times". One way to capture YLs attention and keep them engaged in activities is to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets, or objects to match the ones used in the stories that teacher tells or songs that he/she sings (Ibid.). These visuals can help in motivating children to learn, making the language input comprehensible and can be used for different follow-up activities. It may take a lot of preparation time to make colorful pictures, flesh cards, puppets and other material. Therefore, Shin (2006: 3) suggests that teachers build their own resources, to create a "Visuals and Realia Bank" together with other teachers at school by collecting toys, puppets, pictures, maps, calendars, and other things and to save them for the future usage. Therefore, learning English at young age (from 6 to 11) is crucial and needs to be carefully planned, organized and supported by visual materials, creative activities, problem solving and many other aids that can improve both teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Accordingly, children are more likely to understand the purpose of their learning.

2. VISUAL MATERIALS IN TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS

According to Billows (1968), visual aids and materials can be divided into three main groups: 2-dimensional aids – include wide variety of pictures and drawings, such as all kind of pictures, postcards, posters and magazines, maps and plans, tables, charts, diagrams, graphs, mind maps and time lines, picture stories, cartoons and comic strips, film, video, television and cinema; 3-dimensional aids which mean teacher's and students' body language (mimes, gestures, facial expression, acting a situation, puppets); other visual aids – almost everything that presents information visually and is used in teaching process. These are realia such as a calendar, a clock, a mirror, toys and art – paintings, albums, and sculptures. Visual aids provide information to students through the sense of sight, and their use is considered the oldest and simplest research technique (Blagdanić & Bandur, 2018). Based on their didactic function, we distinguish between static and dynamic aids, while in Basic Science education, visual aids can be natural and artificial (Lazarević & Bandur, 2001). Visual aids and materials have many different forms, but they have something in common – they all represent ways of human communication which transcend spoken or written language. These are used as a medium of conveying a message and play an important role in a communication system. The choice of visual aids depends of many factors. Visuals are thought to be suitable for all levels and age groups, but not every visual material is appropriate to every class (Ćirković-Miladinović & Stojanović, 2016). The teacher is the one who should decide if the materials match the needs of his/her pupils. Wright

(1974) presents a chart with a wide range of factors that should be considered before choosing supplementary materials. He divides them into three groups and one of them is connected with learning situation. According to Wright (Ibid.), student's age is probably the most important factor the teacher needs to take into account when he/she plans a lesson. Not only topics, but also the methods, techniques and aids should be related to the lesson plan (Stojanović, 2017). The younger students are, the simpler (less detailed), more colorful pictures and the shorter films should be presented (Stojanović et al., 2020). Student's age is not the only factor which influences the choice of teaching aids. The moment they like the tool, game, interesting proposal or idea of the teacher, there is intense concentration, devotion, perseverance and persistence to participate in the game, activity or conversation (Golubović-Ilić, 2020). There are more learners' individual differences that should be considered. These are their language level, language abilities, motivation, character, interests, social and cultural background and their previous experience in learning the target language (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2017). In this context, the use of visual aids should be planned, guided, focused on concrete, clear concepts so that students can mentally process what is shown to them (De Zan, 2005). Even the elder students who begin learning English need topics and teaching aids suitable not only for their age but also for their language level. A general rule is that materials should be slightly higher in their level of difficulty than the student's current level of English proficiency. Furthermore, student's intelligence also impacts their ability to take advantages of different supplementary materials.

Another factor which influences the choice of teaching aids is environment. Teaching involves the creation of environment and activities that effectively invoke learning. Technology, such as slides, video and computers supports learning, but the problem is that there are many classrooms which are not well equipped. When English language classroom does not have technical conditions, the teacher has no choice and has to resign from using visuals that require technology. One of the solutions is to use the wide variety of other visual aids.

Namely, it is obvious that a safe, comfortable and attractive classroom stimulates learning and helps build a classroom community (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2019). It could be a great idea to decorate the walls. Attractive visual aids, such as bulletin boards and posters are key components of an effective classroom. Wall decorations should be colorful, appealing and relevant to current class work. It could be very useful to create a student's work display and present children's drawings and projects because it would make them proud of their contribution to classroom decoration and could be a very motivating factor (Ibid.). Properly designed and selected visual aids meet their educational goals only with an adequate role of the teacher and an appropriate way of communicating with students (Golubović-Ilic, 2020). Wright (1974) emphasizes the role of drawings and encourages teachers to use it. The experience and personal motivation of the teacher also influence the choice of materials. A keen teacher expects to try out materials and ideas

which are unfamiliar to him/her, but it would be unwise to plunge into a method of teaching which is quite new and for which he/she is unprepared (Ibid.). For less experienced teachers, who are not self-confident, using video or film is a way of presenting correct English pronunciation, though there are teachers who are not very familiar with technology and avoid using it.

Komorowska (2002) emphasizes that visual aids activate "visual memory" and both brain hemispheres – the left, responsible for language learning and the right, which is responsible for emotions. She suggests that thanks to beneficial effects of such stimulation, learners concentrate on the lesson and better memorize the language material. According to her, visual materials should be used at different lesson stages: at presentation stage they illustrate introduced vocabulary and grammar structures; at consolidation stage they help to eliminate mother tongue and suggest successive ideas for expressed sentences and at the skills formation stage they are used as context, which helps to understand spoken or written text or as a prompt to learners to express themselves (Ibid.). Nevertheless, visual materials must be clear and easy to understand, too much of visual information can result in misconception and wrong relation of one meaning to many different perceived things.

Finally, even the most interesting picture will not be linguistically useful if it does not fit the topic, the purpose and learner's level or if it is not big enough to be seen with all necessary details.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of this research is to contribute to improving practice in the area of teaching English to young learners with the use of visual materials. The empirical research was designed to investigate the use of visual materials with young learners and to register teachers' and learners' attitudes towards using such materials. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and an interview and presented in the form of descriptive statistics.

This research was conducted at the end of 2022 and at the beginning of 2023. A total of 80 teachers from Serbia were surveyed online so as to investigate what kind of visual materials they usually used in the YLs language classroom and how often they used these visuals. Students (N = 24) of fourth grade from four primary schools in Jagodina: "Boško Đuričić", "Goran Ostojić", "Rada Miljković" and "17. oktobar" were interviewed about what visual aid from the questionnaire they liked the most. The students had to range the visual materials from number one to number fourteen, choosing number 1 for the visual material/aid they like the most towards number 14, a visual material/aid they like the least or dislike. Students had been introduced to the purpose of this group interview before we started it. Different visual materials were put on the table or presented on power

point slides and each visual material was numbered from number one to number fourteen. The students had to write down the numbers on the piece of paper from number one to number fourteen and then to assign each number a visual material (number 1 – the material they like the most, number 14 – the material they like the least). They were given a clear instruction and there was no time limit for this. The second instrument – the questionnaire, was completed online by English language teachers from different schools in Serbia and different teaching experience (the range was from 5 to 27 years).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 FINDINGS FROM TEACHERS

In the questionnaire the teachers were asked to report which visual materials they used in the classroom and how often. The materials that were listed in the questionnaire were the following: posters, pictures, flashcards, postcards, objects, charts, graphic organizers, picture books, television, computers and word calendars. The teachers could add extra material if they found that a certain material was not given as an option. The Table 1 below shows the results from the questionnaire.

Table 1. Teachers' responses on the frequency of use of different visual materials

Visual materials	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
	%	%	%	%	%
Pictures			12.5	62.5	25
Posters			37.5	50	12.5
Postcards	25	37.5	7.5		
Flashcards				12.5	87.5
Word calendars	25	25	6.25	25	
Objects			37.5	25	25
Graphics	25	25	6.25	12.5	12.5
Tables	12.5	37.5	7.5	25	
Picture books			50	37.5	12.5
Board drawings			37.5	12.5	50
Gestures			25	12.5	62.5
Television			12.5	12.5	
Videos			12.5	25	
Computer			25	12.5	25

According to the teachers' answers, it could be said that 25% of them never use postcards, word calendars and graphics, while 12.5% of teachers never use tables. This could be explained by the fact that young learners (from the first to the

fourth grade) are not very familiar with the tables and graphics. In her research, Papancheva (2017) found that Bulgarian primary school learners face problems when they need to use tables or graphs, especially when they need to read the data from these. It was a surprise to find out that 25% of teachers never use postcards and word calendars because these are very easy to get and use. Husniyah et al. (2016) showed in their research that postcards improved writing skill and added fun to the class atmosphere, so the students were encouraged to write. This can be taken into account in practice, i.e. more attention should be paid to postcards in teaching English with visual materials. Furthermore, 37.5% of the examined teachers reported that they sometimes used objects and board drawings. This result was also a surprise if we consider the fact that 50% of examined teachers reported that they taught first and second graders. Using objects (toys, fruit, vegetables, various models, etc.) in English lesson proved to be very effective in teaching vocabulary and in motivating YLs to learn while they observe, draw and play with objects.

In addition, the examined teachers answered that they often used posters (50%) and pictures (62.5%). Posters and pictures are colorful, attractive learning media which can enhance learning environment especially at this age. Teaching English to first and second graders is specific in terms of the fact that these learners do not practice reading and writing in English (they still struggle to read and write in their mother tongue), so posters and pictures could be used only for the benefits of speaking. Making posters during the lesson and being a part of a group was also proved to be very effective in teaching foreign language to YLs (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2017). In line with this, Akister et al. (2000) in their research state that posters are very valuable in the educational setting, offer suggestions on selecting posters for learning, and include examples of various types of learning posters.

The most used visual materials/aids, according to the examined teachers, were flashcards (87.5%) and gestures (62.5%). This was not a surprise because flashcards help students to remember new vocabulary in English more easily and not to get bored quickly in learning. These visuals can also be very cheap and easy to get by downloading the pictures teachers need from the internet or they can draw pictures together with their learners during a lesson. Flashcards are helpful in terms of visualization of a word, so learners can both hear the word and see the object the word represents. Muhyiddin (2019) points out that flashcard media not only improves the ability to listen, speak, read and write, but can also train students' abilities in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and spelling. Hence, it is not a surprise that the examined teachers use this media very often, and according to some teachers, always.

The results of this research illustrate that there was an increased usage of computers in the period from 2020 to 2022 because the examined teachers were forced to cope with the situation of teaching a foreign language under unusual circumstances during the pandemic. Most teachers were left to make their own decisions on which ICT tools (e.g. email, Viber, Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft

Teams etc.) to use to contact with their students. Most of them were struggling to learn how to use computers as teaching/learning tools/aids. However, it should be highlighted, which is also confirmed by a Polish researcher (Plebańska, 2017), that digital resources were often used in English lessons even before the pandemic.

4.2 FINDINGS FROM STUDENTS

The students (N = 24) were interviewed about what visual aid they liked the most. They had to range their answers from number one to number fourteen starting from the visual aid they liked the most (number 1) to the one they do not like (number 14). Students were interviewed only about the visual materials listed in the questionnaire in order to find out if and to what extent there was an overlap between teachers' and students' answers. According to the examined students, the visual aid/material they like the most are flashcards (41.66% – the first place in the list) and pictures (25% – the second place in the list). Then follow with a greater percentage gestures (25% of students put these in the fourth place) and posters (29.15% – eight place). 50% of students said in the interview that they did not like graphics and word calendars (37.59% of students put this visual aid in the twelfth place). The results are presented in the Chart 1.

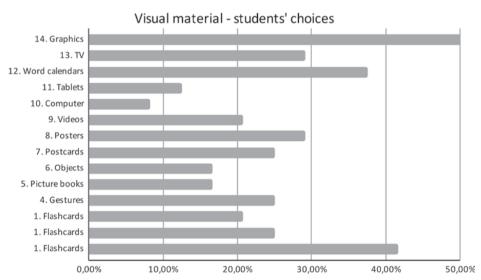


Chart 1. Students' responses on which visual aid/material they like the most

Students' answers are in line with teachers' answers, meaning that both groups of participants favour flashcards and gestures together with pictures. Even though posters are put in the eighth place, 29.15% of students think highly of these materials. When asked about posters, students replied that creating posters was more motivating activity in English lesson for them then just using a poster that had been already made. Overall, posters and pictures provide good practice in which students not only develop language skills and broaden vocabulary knowledge, but also improve their language usage, add fun and vigor to the process of learning (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2022). Either in person or online, materials used in the lesson should be chosen carefully and with a purpose, not just for the sake of fun (Golubovic-Ilic & Cirkovic-Miladinovic, 2020). From the number of students (20.83%) who said that board drawings are popular in the classroom, it can be concluded that drawings on the white-board can help to increase the interest in a lesson, and these visual aids may be a good way of showing meaning and helping in remembering the given word. Simple drawings are cheap, easy to make, and always accessible when teachers need them. These drawings or works of art can be more than useful in the classroom. Namely, Selaković (2023) specifically highlights that fostering students' metacognitive abilities can be accomplished by instructing them to pose questions related to the artwork or drawings employed. This approach holds the potential to elevate students' comprehension of the instructional content.

4.3 COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' RESPONSES

The teachers and the students who were participants in this research agree that flashcards are one of the most effective visual aids in teaching vocabulary to young learners. The students like to use flashcards in the classroom and the teachers use it always in teaching new vocabulary. This shows that flashcards are effective and their use in the classroom is very frequent (Muhyiddin, 2019). The examined teachers and students agree that pictures also have a big role in the teaching process. Teachers reported that they often used pictures in the classroom and the students said in the interview that they liked when these are used in English lessons. The teachers almost always use gestures in teaching new vocabulary and the students like when this is used in the classroom. This indicates that gestures can be a very motivating and effective tool in the classroom.

However, the students' and teachers' attitudes towards posters are slightly different. The teachers often use posters in the classroom, but students put them in the eighth place and reported that they did not like when teachers used already made posters. In fact, students like posters but those they create in the classroom. This is where art takes place, meaning that students like when they are given the opportunity to draw, paint and be creative even in language lessons (Ćirković-

Miladinović & Stojanović, 2016). Both teachers and students agree about the use of postcards in the classroom and they both believe that this visual material is not so effective in learning a foreign language. Nevertheless, postcards are easy to get, therefore, this visual material could be used more often.

According to the research, both groups of respondents agree that television and graphics are not so popular and, therefore, these were put at the end of the list of visual aids. The students' responses show that they do not like to use graphics in the classroom and the teachers said that they did not use them so often. Both students and teachers agree that the use of television is not very desirable in the classroom (not many schools possess TV sets in the classrooms, what is more, in this research not a single classroom was equipped with the TV set), but using videos have become more popular since the pandemic. Certainly, it is more efficient to find a video on a certain topic and with a specific purpose to present it to students then to adjust the lesson to the time of the educational TV show. Nowadays, most teachers are proficient at using different visual and audio tools from the internet, together with educational videos; therefore, modern teaching is becoming more and more efficient in terms of foreign language learning based on language material created by native speakers.

5. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

It is believed that students learn best when they are engaged in the activities instead of just being passive listeners to their teacher's explanation. Moreover, the use of various types of visual materials gives the students the opportunity to use their own ideas and improve their vocabulary knowledge. On the basis of the findings given in this study, the following recommendations for the teachers could be given in order to improve teaching English to young learners with the use of visual materials: 1) teachers should use visual materials that are easily available or created by themselves or students; 2) the use of various types of visual materials can be used for the benefits of all four language skills, i.e. to help students to improve writing, listening, speaking and reading skills; 3) teachers should use flashcards and pictures in the classroom in order to facilitate learning of YLs, especially in the first two grades; 4) graphics and flashcards could be designed during a lesson time so the students could be creative and learn the language at the same time; 5) in order to improve the use of computers in the classroom, teachers can use classrooms with computers (learning centers or computer rooms) or can bring their own laptops to the class, which is possible for most teachers these days. In addition, students use smart phones on daily basis and these can be used for the learning purposes as well.

It is interesting to consider at this point that there are many possibilities for the effective use of visual materials, but efficient teaching depends more on teachers' creativity then just on the theoretical knowledge on how to use a certain teaching aid.

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УПОТРЕБА ВИЗУЕЛНИХ СРЕДСТАВА У НАСТАВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА И ПРИРОДЕ И ДРУШТВА НА МЛАЂЕМ УЗРАСТУ

Резиме: Квалитетна настава подразумева правилно коришћење визуелних средстава од стране наставника како би активности биле разноврсне и диференциране, а тиме би се и учење и разумевање нашло на вишем когнитивном нивоу. Визуелна средства играју значајну улогу у подучавању ученика на млађем узрасту, не само страног језика већ и других школских предмета. Рад има за циљ да пружи теоријска објашњења о подучавању енглеског језика на млађем узрасту, са фокусом на класификацији и предностима употребе визуелних средстава у учионици. Емпиријско истраживање је имало за циљ да истражи употребу визуелних материјала у настави енглеског језика на млађем узрасту и да евидентира ставове наставника и ученика према коришћењу таквих материјала. Учесталост коришћења визуелног материјала у настави утврђено је анкетним упитником за наставнике енглеског језика, а ставови ученика према коришћењу визуелних материјала у настави испитани су интервјуом. Према резултатима овог истраживања, најчешће коришћени визуелни материјали

у учионицама су слике и флеш-картице, док су телевизија, видео и компјутер као средства ретко коришћени.

Рад доприноси унапређењу праксе у области наставе енглеског језика на млађем узрасту дајући могуће сугестије за ефикасније подучавање уз помоћ визуелних материјала. Осим што визуелна наставна средства повећавају активност, мотивисаност и фокусираност ученика на садржај, предности примене наведених средстава се огледају и томе што у великој мери обогаћују садржаје наставе, повећавају креативност наставника приликом њихове употребе или креирања, али значајно утичу и на развој језичких вештина код ученика.

K речи: настава енглеског језика на млађем узрасту, визуелни материјал, креативне активности у настави енглеског језика на млађем узрасту.