

# 13 Using Pictures in Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 5 and 6 Classrooms

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of foreign language vocabulary has been the subject of much discussion in recent years and a number of research and methodology books have appeared on this topic (e.g. Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; see also the recent review in Schmitt, 2008). My particular interest in this study is the use of pictures to teach vocabulary in elementary classrooms. I am especially interested in the views of teachers and learners about the use of pictures; while it is reasonable to assume that pictures are a popular way of teaching and learning with both these groups, there has not been any research into this issue; additionally, my experience with the General Education curriculum in Oman suggests that it does not provide much visual support for the learning of vocabulary.

## 2 TEACHING VOCABULARY USING PICTURES

Vocabulary is, according to Hatch & Brown (1995), the list of words that speakers of a particular language use. As language teachers we use different types of teaching aids to explain the meaning of new words. Using pictures is one of the teaching aids that teachers depend on in their teaching. Harmer (2001:134) states that "Teachers have always used pictures or graphics – whether drawn, taken from books, newspapers and magazines, or photographs – to facilitate learning". In my experience, English teachers tend to feel that using pictures in teaching new words makes the process enjoyable and memorable. They also feel that pictures attract pupils' attention and deepen their understanding of vocabulary. Pictures can also help learners with abstract words, as associating the words with a concrete object makes these words easier to remember. Harmer (2001:135) states that "one of the most appropriate uses for pictures is for the presenting and checking of meaning. An easy way of explaining the meaning of the word aeroplane, for example, is to have a picture of one". Of course, not all new words can be taught using pictures but most concrete vocabulary can.

Nation (1990:51) lists a number of basic techniques through which teachers can explain the meanings of new words, all of which can be used in the young learner classroom. Some of these techniques involve the use of pictures from a variety of sources - pictures from computers; photographs; drawings or diagrams on the board; and pictures from books. It will be interesting in this study to see which techniques teachers use.

Of course, pictures must be chosen carefully and it is hoped that this study will shed some light on how teachers make these choices. According to Harmer (2001), pictures should be appropriate not only for the language to be learned but also for the classes they are being used for; if pictures are too childish students may not like them and if they are culturally inappropriate they can offend people. Pictures also need to be visible – especially if they are being shown to the whole class they need to be big enough for everyone to see. And it also helps if pictures are durable – that is, strong enough to be used several times.

As noted above, although it is generally accepted that pictures can play an important role in supporting vocabulary learning, we know little about teacher and learner perspectives on this issue. My study aims to address this topic in the context of elementary classrooms in Oman.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

The general research question for this study was: To what extent do teachers of English in a General Education school use pictures in teaching new words to pupils in elementary grades? More specific sub-questions were:

1. If teachers use pictures, how do they use them to teach new vocabulary?
2. What are the main sources for these pictures?
3. What are pupils' attitudes towards using pictures in learning vocabulary?
4. What are the teachers' attitudes towards using pictures in teaching new vocabulary?

#### **3.2 Context & Participants**

The study took place in a General Education school in the Sharqiya South region of Oman. The two teachers who participated in this study were colleagues of mine – they were chosen primarily because they were willing to take part. One teacher taught Grade 5. In General Education, Grade 5 learners are in their second year of learning English. This class had 27 pupils. The other teacher taught Grade 6 and there were 30 pupils in his class. I visited each class twice over the course of a month. In total, I observed four reading lessons during which the teachers had advised me that they were planning to introduce new vocabulary.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

This study reflected an interpretive perspective on research (see Ernest, 1994). I used a naturalistic approach and collected data about using pictures in teaching

new words to pupils in elementary grades using observation and interviews. I decided to use observation here because, as Patton (1990: 203) argues, observational data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather live data from live situations. During the observations I made fieldnotes related to my topic using an open-ended observation sheet. I also video recorded the lessons. Observation alone, however, did not allow me to understand the teachers' and pupils' views about using pictures in teaching vocabulary. Therefore, I also interviewed three pupils from each class and their English teachers after the observations to understand their views. The interviews were in Arabic with the pupils and in English with the teachers. I chose the pupils for the interviews by putting the names of all the pupils in a hat and randomly drawing three names for each class. I interviewed them individually. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio recorded.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

I started by analyzing the observation data, examining the teaching materials that teachers used for explaining the new words in the lesson. I also focused on how and when the teachers used these materials, using the video of the lessons to help me identify specific examples of vocabulary teaching using pictures from their work. I also studied the video for evidence of pupils' reactions when pictures were used to introduce new words. In analyzing the interviews, I translated the pupil interviews into English and transcribed those with teachers too (see Appendix for a sample teacher interview). I then looked for themes in the interviews which reflected teachers' and pupils' attitudes towards using pictures in the process of teaching and learning new vocabulary. I tried to identify issues that teachers and pupils agreed on as well as points where their views differed.

## **4 FINDINGS**

In the lessons I observed, the teachers used different techniques to teach vocabulary. They used different kinds of pictures such as posters, flash cards, drawings on cards (made by pupils), drawings on the board (made by the teacher), pictures in the class books and realia. They sometimes used pupils themselves as a resource in teaching new words. For example, the teacher in Grade 6 brought one of the pupils in front of the class and said 'Salem is tall and thin'. Teachers also used other techniques to teach new words such as miming, rhymes, acting and translation.

### **4.1 Grade 5**

#### **4.1.1 Observation**

In the first Grade 5 lesson, the teacher used pictures in the form of visual stimulus cards (VSCs). These are provided as part of the General Education curriculum. In this lesson the pictures were about a boy who was catching fish and examples of the vocabulary taught were catch and big/small fish. The teacher used

the VSCs to clarify the meaning of the new words. Most pupils raised their hands to participate in the class. After the warm up, the teacher showed the pictures to the pupils and got answers from them for his questions. For example, the teacher held up the pictures of a fish and asked his pupils these questions:

What is this?

Is it big or small?

Pupils responded enthusiastically and in doing so repeated the new words (e.g. fish, big/small) several times.

In the second Grade 5 lesson the teacher brought four cards with drawings on them. The cards showed a kilo of onions, a jar of coffee, a carton of milk, and a bottle of a cooking oil. The teacher drew these pictures himself and they were colourful. During the part of the lesson where the teacher held up the drawings the pupils were eager to participate. I am not suggesting that this is only because of the pictures, but some insight into the pupils' views emerge below when I discuss their interviews.

#### **4.1.2 Teacher Interview**

In the interview, the Grade 5 teacher mentioned that teachers can use realia brought into class, pictures, posters, drawings and visual stimulus cards to teach new words. He said that he preferred to use pictures for several reasons. Firstly, they are eye-catching and help pupils to pay attention. Secondly, they help teachers to explain new vocabulary without having to use the mother tongue to translate. As he explained: "Using pictures helps me to overcome the problem of translation. By using pictures I may not use the pupils' mother tongue". Thirdly, they help teachers to control the class well. The teacher said that he uses the ready-made pictures (i.e. the VSCs) which are supplied by the Ministry as part of the curriculum. He also said that he can print pictures from websites and he sometimes draws his own pictures too. He said that he sometimes asks good pupils to draw pictures.

#### **4.1.3 Pupil Interviews**

Grade 5 pupils said that they like lessons where the teachers use pictures, games and role playing. They mentioned that in these lessons they have fun and they feel more confident, and this enables them to learn new words easily. Pupils also mentioned that they like to draw pictures and bring them to the class. When I asked one of the pupils why he likes using pictures in learning new words he said "because they clarify and simplify the words".

### **4.2 Grade 6**

#### **4.2.1 Observation**

The first Grade 6 lesson was based on a reading text about a wadi rescue. There were some new words that the teacher wanted to teach his pupils such as a fort, mountains, a car and a bulldozer. So he planned to use flash cards (provided by the Ministry) and to bring objects to class (a car and a bulldozer). The teacher began his

lesson by putting the flash cards on the board. Then he asked his pupils to mention the things that they see in the pictures. They mentioned some words in English such as a man, a boy and a wadi, but they described other objects in the pictures in Arabic (e.g. fort, mountains, bulldozer and a car). The teacher pointed to the fort and said it loudly. He repeated the word three times and then asked the pupils to repeat it aloud. After that he asked some individual pupils to say the new word aloud. He followed the same procedure for the word mountains. For car and bulldozer, the teacher held up the objects he had brought to class and said the word. The pupils repeated the new words. Then the teacher asked some individual pupils to name the objects.

The second Grade 6 lesson was about Hassan's shop. The teacher brought some fruit and vegetables to the class. They were bananas, apples, tomatoes, potatoes and onions. The teacher held up the first object and said its name. The pupils repeated the word aloud. This was repeated for each word. The teacher also brought in pictures of these foods and he asked some of the pupils to colour in these pictures. He asked other pupils to match the realia and their pictures and to say their names. All pupils liked this task and participated eagerly in the class.

#### **4.2.2 Teacher Interview**

In the interview the Grade 6 teacher told me that teachers can use realia, pictures, objects, miming, acting and examples to teach new words. The teacher argued that he prefers to use realia, pictures and acting or miming because they are more enjoyable and memorable to the pupils. "Using realia, pictures and miming enable the pupils to get the meaning easily and quickly", the teacher claimed. He indicated that he mostly used pictures in reading and listening lessons since they facilitate understanding for the pupils. He mentioned a number of sources from which he could obtain pictures but did frequently use the VSCs provided by the Ministry. "We have ready-made visual script cards and as I have just said I can bring pictures from newspapers and magazines", he explained.

#### **4.2.3 Pupil Interviews**

Pupils in Grade 6 argued that they like lessons which have pictures, rhymes, competitions and discussion. They like to have fun in the class. They said that they do not like it when the teacher speaks all the time and they just listen. One of the pupils said "I like the pictures that the teacher brings from magazines, computer and newspapers".

## **5 DISCUSSION**

Both the teachers and the pupils who took part in this study had positive attitudes towards using the pictures for teaching and learning new vocabulary. Both teachers used different kinds of pictures in their lessons (though both widely used the visual stimulus cards provided by the Ministry) and in all cases the pupils responded with enthusiasm to the pictures that were used. Both teachers and pupils believed that using pictures makes lessons more enjoyable and memorable. The

teachers felt that pictures attract the pupils and deepen their understanding of words; teachers also felt that when pupils associate new words with a picture they find it easier to remember the meaning of the word. These positive views about the role of pictures in teaching vocabulary reflect those mentioned in the literature review earlier (e.g. Harmer, 2001). Both teachers also agreed that not all new words can be taught by using pictures but most concrete vocabulary can be, using pictures made by teachers or found in magazines and other resources.

Clearly, though, there are a number of limitations which need to be acknowledged here. Firstly, the teachers were aware of the focus of this study and may therefore have made more of an effort to use pictures in the lessons observed than they normally would have. Secondly, the interviews with the teachers were not wholly successful in providing insights into why the teachers felt pictures were useful in teaching vocabulary – teachers' responses were quite brief and my lack of interviewing experience meant that I was not able to prompt them to provide more detailed answers to my questions. The limited nature of the interview responses was even more evident with the pupils; here responses to my questions were never more than a few words long; I clearly needed to have both more questions as well as prompts to encourage the pupils to say more. Speaking to more learners would have also been valuable. There is clearly scope, therefore, for further research which analyzes in more depth how teachers and pupils feel about the use of pictures in vocabulary teaching and learning and why they feel the way they do.

## 6 CONCLUSION

I feel that this study has been beneficial to my development as a researcher; the classroom observations here went well and although, as already noted, the interview part of the study was less effective, in future work I will be better able to encourage teachers and pupils to discuss their views at length. In terms of findings, what we are left with here confirms what we would expect: teachers feel that pictures can make a positive contribution to vocabulary teaching and learning while learners also appreciate the role that pictures can play in helping them to learn English. Further research of this kind can look into these issues in more detail, particularly through examining the classroom practices of a larger number of teachers, discussing these practices in detail through interviews, and investigating in more detail and with a larger sample what benefits learners see in the use of pictures in learning vocabulary.

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## **APPENDIX: SAMPLE TEACHER INTERVIEW**

### **Grade 5 Teacher (R=Researcher; T=Teacher)**

R: What are the main ways of teaching new words?

T: Mr. Ibraheem generally speaking there are many ways of teaching vocabulary. In fact it depends on the level you are teaching. If you are talking about elementary level we can use real objects, we can use pictures (visual scripts cards, flashcards and other types of pictures), we can use students' books and drawings by pupils themselves.

R: What are the main sources of getting pictures?

T: In fact there are pictures available for us from the Ministry. We have ready-made visual scripts cards, we have ready-made flashcards. Also, I can ask my pupils to draw pictures about the given words. I can get pictures from the websites and magazines.

R: Could you mention the main advantages of using pictures in teaching vocabulary?

T: Frankly speaking there are advantages of using pictures. I think that using pictures in teaching vocabulary will help me to give an interesting class. It will help me overcome monitoring the class because pupils will get interested in looking at the pictures. Using pictures is eye-catching. Pictures are attractive for the pupils. I can say that using pictures can help me to save time and efforts since pupils only have to match the new words with the given pictures. Using pictures helps me to overcome the problem of translation. By using pictures I may not use the pupils' mother tongue.