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INTERPRETING VISUAL MESSAGES IN AN EFL UNIVERSITY COURSE

Статья посвящена исследованию возможного применения основ визуальной грамотности в рамках курсов английского как иностранного языка на уровне высшего образования. Исследование ставит целью определить, является ли включение практик интерпретации визуальных сообщений полезным для студентов бакалавриата. Автор приводит обзор существующих подходов к проблеме визуальной грамотности и предполагает, что в преподавании английского как иностранного правомерно пользоваться культуралистским подходом, согласно которому визуальное определено как зона обмена социальным опытом, где встречаются конвенциональные практики создания изображений и неявные социально-культурные практики. Визуальная грамотность, таким образом, может быть определена как способность ученика «передвигаться» по этой визуальной культурной карте. Далее автор приводит варианты интеграции заданий, направленных на объяснение визуальных сообщений, в курс английского языка и анализирует обратную связь от студентов и преподавателя, полученную после двухгодичной апробации курса по языку медиа. Опробованный метод предполагает освоение основ интерпретации визуальных сообщений через шесть стадий: интерпретация идентичностей, степени реализма, избирательности изображения, символизма, фокуса эмпатии и моделирования контекста изображением. Обратная связь по итогам курса демонстрирует, что предложенный метод позволяет студентам практиковать целевую лексику в видимо неконтролируемом общении в ходе собственно речевых упражнений, помогает преодолеть фрагментацию знаний, полученных при изучении других гуманитарных дисциплин, а также

повышает осознанность действий при выборе средств обучения в дальнейшей педагогической деятельности.

Ключевые слова: цифровая грамотность, визуальная грамотность, интерпретация текста, язык медиа, гипертекстуальность, английский как иностранный.

The article is devoted to the research into possible applications of teaching visual literacy within the frame of EFL courses at a university level. The aim of the article is to define whether integrating activities on interpreting visual messages is possible, viable and beneficial for university students. The author focuses on the problem what various researches understand by visual literacy and suggests that educators adopt culturalist approach where the visual domain is understood as a cultural zone of social exchange, a space where the conventions in the construction of visual imagery and the prevailing or imminent social and cultural practices meet, “visual literacy” is the capacity to negotiate or “navigate” this visual cultural zone. The author then elaborates on how visual literacy elements may be integrated into an EFL course in the form of activities on interpretation of visual messages and analyzes student’s feedback and instructor’s feedback from a test course on mass media taught during two consecutive years where elements of teaching visual literacy were implemented. The tested method suggests that interpreting visual messages in an EFL class can include six stages of analysis: interpreting identities invoked by the visual message, interpreting the degree of affinity, interpreting framing effects in the image, interpreting symbols in the image, interpreting the focus of empathy and modelling the context. The feedback from the test course shows that the suggested method helps students practice their target language in a free uncontrolled environment to achieve genuine communicative tasks, overcomes fragmentation of knowledge received in other courses on the humanities and improves students’ awareness of the inventory they possess to improve their performance in their professional sphere.

Keywords: digital literacy, visual literacy, text interpretation, mass media language, hypertextuality, TEFL

Introduction. The Problem of Visual Literacy

The traditional understanding of “a text” as built primarily of words has been challenged ever since the early 1960s, when the arrival of poststructuralist philosophy, semiotics and hermeneutics offered new opportunities for interpretation of meanings derived from the written word. Diversity of environments in which an individual meets a text and diversity of experiences from which an individual understands or misunderstands a text was then greatly increased by the rapid progress of mass media, publishing industry, international commerce, and finally the Internet that provided a new eclectic medium to reflect and enrich the range of possible experiences. Globalization of ideas, that followed globalization of markets, expanded the borders of possible impacts of texts, and the emergence of social networks facilitated distribution of texts globally, virally, within the timeframe of days. However, the notion of “a text” complicated by such philosophers as

Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Umberto Eco, Julia Kristeva, Paul Ricœur, John Fiske et al had relatively little impact on the educational community [Bolter, 3]. Mainstream, mass education has just started adopting the idea of a text as a semiotic unity where graphic information, the context of perception, the time of perception, and the perceivers themselves are essential and basic elements of text interpretation.

Federal state educational standards of higher education in Russia as of 2018 include a variety of target professional tasks and competences connected with the ability to interpret, analyze, create and generally process written and oral texts in many ways expected to prove useful in the career of this or that bachelor or master graduate. At the same time the notion of visual literacy, the ability to interpret images, has distinctly influenced only the educational standards for the so-called “creative professions”. We suggest that a modern individual copes daily with so

massive a stream of images that an ability to interpret images consciously is now a basic part of well-being, and an ability to create images gives a competitive advantage in all or next to all professional spheres, though perhaps these skills do not have to be taught on a compulsory basis.

Visual literacy is a concept that was first introduced by John L. Debes as early as 1969 [Fransecky, Debes. 9]. At that time, it implied the educational change brought about by television, and then it further developed into a concept connected with digital learning and hypertextuality. The Internet has an eclectic and collective character, and it is hypertextual in nature. It brings the mediaeval scholastic idea of a text that never ends to a whole new level in a medium, where everything is a text, everything is interconnected, perception is non-linear and never ends but continues for as long as an individual finds it possible to continue. As a structure it is designed to be explored in a number of ways, where there is no beginning and no end. As a medium it possesses a graphic and a verbal character at the same time. The graphic elements in each page precondition the order of perception, the continuity of perception and the response of the perceiver to a large degree. Absence of graphic images is no less meaningful and influences our perception of “the outdated” and “the less-prioritized”. As early as 1998 J. D. Bolter suggests that internet hypertext is not non-linear, but rather multi-linear, and brings several examples of texts organized in such a way before the digital era: printed dictionaries, newspapers and magazines are supposed to be read in a variety of orders [Bolter,5]. Therefore, visual literacy may be defined with the help of the instrumental approach where the ability of an individual to interact with a visual text is stressed. For instance, Ron Bleed suggests that visual literacy can be defined as the ability to interpret messages as well as generate images for communicating

ideas and concepts [Bleed, 2].

The instrumental approach cannot be applied to education philosophy, as it would lead to a mechanical implementation of courses on design and graphic editors. A culturalist approach seems to suit the needs of educators better, as it understands the visual domain as a cultural zone of social exchange, a space where the conventions in the construction of visual imagery and the prevailing or imminent social and cultural practices meet. In this way, a definition of “visual literacy” could be the capacity to negotiate or “navigate” this visual cultural zone [Elkins, 98]. A possible implication of this definition is that cultural contexts for verbal messages are set by visual messages, so that fast perception of a page or a screen without reading the text in it preconditions the impact of the verbal text to some significant degree.

Interpreting Visual Messages in TEFL

Integrating plenty of images in TEFL classes, textbooks and aids is an observable trend justified by the principles of clarity and visibility. Graphic and photographic images serve as illustrations and lend an aesthetic ring to educational books. It should also be noted that EFL textbooks with plenty of colorful illustrations are often perceived by teachers as “authentic” and “foreign” in contrast with the Soviet tradition where textbooks were filled with verbal text and simple black-and-white drawings. Describing pictures in the target language is an established semi-controlled activity and anticipating the contents of a verbal narration from an illustration is a standard pre-text exercise. Beginner, elementary and pre-intermediate textbooks also resort to images as compensatory ways to explain a new word when it denotes an object of the material world and the use of an image thus serves as a means of explanatory economy. We can also meet characteristic text designs with graphic elements that prompt the learners

to read the given text within the rules of a specific genre: a letter, an e-mail, a text message, a newspaper article, a webpage, a note, an announcement, a poster, an advertisement, a visit card, etc. No doubt, the visual turn has been recognized in the discourse of teaching English as a foreign language [Merse, 197]. And if an image is understood as a cultural zone of social exchange then these context-setting designs are also setting the context of communication which is characteristic of the target culture or of the globalized international culture of communication.

Reading is an active process of meaning construction, so readers must relate the textual elements to their cultural environment in order to make sense of what they see [Bolter, 6]. In TEFL, the cultural environment that was referred to by the author of the image is different from the cultural environment of the target audience, so a lot of images will be available not only for the conscious perception of what is in the picture, but also for the conscious analysis of what cultural information is implied by the picture, what signs are introduced by the author. An education process oriented to signs could be an advantage for language teaching or learning because signs are cultural constructions [Zarifi, 68]. If these signs are expressed in the verbal text and supported by a visual message their appropriation and reconstruction may become easier.

With this in mind, we may suggest that visual literacy in TEFL is going to introduce a rational element into the perception of cultural signs, so the introduction of elements of interpreting visual messages into EFL classes will be aimed at the honest and rational answer to the question "What do I think I see and how do I understand I see it?" For instance, if the learners state that they see a room on a sunny day, the next level of rationalization is that they conclude it is sunny "outside" because they see a sunlit room, but we will also

ask them to explain what elements, colors, shades and juxtaposition make them conclude that the room is sunlit. In other words, visual literacy suggests seeing an image for what it is intended to mean. As images now come not as isolated signifiers that by some external arrangement come together, but as connected to other media, as text and sound [Farias, 15], and while an illustration in a textbook does not probably have complex layers of interaction with our mind, a trained and observant mind will find it easier to decode complex layers in a situation where they are a critical factor in behavior choices, such as in advertisement and commercials.

Breidbach argues that visual literacy has three dimensions: deconstruction, production and reflection of visual communication, all of which are dependent on their cultural contexts [Breidbach, 68]. Deconstruction can be included as an element of rational explanation mentioned above, reflection can be included in classroom situations in the form of follow-up discussion of the implications of the picture and its possible outcomes, but including production of images is complicated: we cannot expect students execute rational drawing choices on the spot, and we typically cannot justify a teacher's choice to assign valuable classroom time for a prolonged non-speaking activity. One possible solution for training this dimension of visual literacy is activities aimed at choosing a picture that best illustrates an idea or a situation supported by verbal explanation of the reasons why it is the most adequate for the task. If students understand basic elements of visual design, technique and media, comprehend representational, explanatory, abstract and symbolic images, they become informed viewers, critics and consumers of visual information. As a result, teaching visual literacy can enhance student learning in K-12 classrooms and improve students' options in the workplace [Burmark, 3].

Another possible benefit of an analytical approach to images in an EFL classroom is that they can be processed from several aspects and used as an aid for emotional and holistic learners. Fisch suggests the example of working with film posters in an EFL classroom that may be approached as a) recorded social history b) reflection on the international cultural context c) genre-specific interpretation d) the interpretation of their production and visual effect. [Fisch, 130]. Similarly, any visual message may be dissected as a social sign, a cultural sign, a set of stylistic choices or an effective message. The questions “why do I like this image?” or “why does it make me smile?” may be complicated to answer in a native language, and in a target second language they may create a challenge equal to a free stimulus to use the target language for communication.

Based on all this, we took the following statements as principles in developing our EFL course on Mass Media in 2016-2017: 1) we introduce complex, multi-layer images to enable variation of analysis; 2) we introduce professionally created images aimed at advertisement or promotion to provide a challenge for EFL students to interpret social signs and behavior-changing stimuli; 3) we introduce the context of minimal choices of the author to motivate the students think about elementary decisions in every aspect of image creation; 4) we introduce authentic images from various English-speaking cultures to enable the opportunity to interpret the cultural signs implied in the images; 5) we use the images as a basis for oral and written speech primarily and thus set the conditions as close to realistic communication as possible. In other words, the aim to practice various domains of vocabulary, descriptive syntactic structures and concise utterances was implicit, but the aim to demonstrate analytical observations was explicitly stated and promoted to the front. The linguistic assistance was provided as a list of useful expressions

and several example texts, but lexical, grammatical and phonetic mistakes were not corrected.

Case Study: a University EFL Course with Elements of Interpreting Visual Messages

In 2016-2017 we launched a new elective course on mass media for students of Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University who study at the faculty of foreign languages to become teachers of English as a foreign language. The course was developed during the summer 2015-2016, and then was tested for the first time during the 2016-2017 academic year. The sample included 26 students from two groups who studied independently from each other; their feedback and the classroom tests led us to the conclusion that the students could have managed longer and harder texts with more stress on the interpretation of visual messages. 17 of the 26 students also noted in their uncontrolled answers that the section on the language of advertising was the most useful and motivating, so during the summer 2017 we worked through the course preparation again, remodeling the suggested activities and independent work in this direction. During the academic year 2017-2018 the elective was chosen by 30 students from 3 groups, and the course was tested again. The suggested method of integrating visual messages interpretation was deemed appropriate and effective based on the feedback from the students and the self-analysis on the course instructor.

The inventory of interpretation in the course included six stages. Each stage included interpretation of an aspect of the visual message under analysis, and each type of interpretation was assigned an instrument or instruments that enabled students to break the result total into a series of elementary choices as the author faced them.

Stage 1. Interpreting identities invoked by the visual message. As any image is

referred to a symbolic field of an individual and their assumptions about minimal dichotomies such as main vs. insignificant, topical vs. outdated, commonly accepted vs. controversial, etc., the image invokes group identities of the perceiver and it sets the limits of the act of perception. An image may appeal to national, regional, ethnic, professional, gender or any other identity through the recognizable signs it includes. The instrument for this interpretation is an attempt to describe with maximal rational honesty what the perceiver sees in the picture, how the image is segmented and divided into minimal elements. The individual interpretations may be compared in class so that the students could add more details. This comparison is a valuable speaking activity and the emotional attitudes prompted by the image may be so diverse that the students easily arrive at the understanding that their emotional attitude influences the recognition of minimal elements. This is why we arrived at the conclusion that this stage should be the first one, as it allows the learners to achieve a sufficient degree of emotional independence and rational distance in their observations.

Stage 2. Interpreting the degree of affinity. The style and method of artistic execution in an image sets the conditions for the register of the decoded message. A realistic photograph accompanies news texts and lends them credibility, animated images raise expectations for humor, black-and-white images may refer to a historic period or underline the exquisite style of the advertised item, golden filters hint at nostalgia, etc. Affinity of the image may be interpreted via the analysis of colors, proportions, focus, precision of lines, the degree to which the image is simplified. It is important to understand and state in words how the image was created, if it is a photograph, a drawing, a painting, a computer graphic, etc. A conscious assessment of the degree of affinity lets

us predict the intended target effect of the visual message under analysis.

Stage 3. Interpreting framing effects in the image. A text in general, and a visual text in particular constructs its message through reflecting a few choice fragments of reality rather than all of it in a way that intensifies the representation of an idea, a symbol, a value, a sign or a group. For an image this framing may be set by the literal frames of the image and by the position of the viewer from which we are suggested to look at the image. For instance, if we see a close-up of a human hand in a photograph we assume that there is a human whom it belongs to. Depending on the position of the elements we may conclude that the hand is “ours” or that it reaches out to us from a character. Framing may be deconstructed through the analysis of the juxtaposition and the comparative sizes of the elements, the inner geometry of the image and the assumption what elements could be in this image logically but are omitted.

Stage 4. Interpreting symbols in the image. Images that aim at conveying abstract ideas and generalizations often involve symbolic representation of commonly accepted narratives [Zafiri, Kourdis, 54]. This representation is achieved through the incorporation of recognizable elements of the narrative and it invokes a complex of relations and conditions typically surrounding the element in the narrative. For instance, if we see an apple as a central element of an image, it may refer us to the apple of discord, or the forbidden fruit, or the discovery of gravity, or the modern designer genius of computer technology, or the representation of creative classes. The exact reference will be triggered by another element or elements, such as Greek columns in the background, or a woman and a man reaching out for the apple, or a person with a book under a tree, or a silhouette in a black jumper. Thus, an appropriate instrument of interpretation will be constructing a chain of associations

with the key elements of the image that are visibly promoted as the center of the image.

Stage 5. Interpreting the focus of empathy. An image that contains several characters or roles implies that we do not treat these roles or characters equally, and one or several of them may be promoted by graphic means to be positioned in the focus of the perceiver's attention. Artistic or verbal means may provoke a more intensive emotional response to one role, and this intended focus of empathy may be called semantic. Or the perceiver may disagree with the author's intention and set a different role in the focus of empathy. This secondary response may be called pragmatic, and it will often lead to a critical assessment of the author of the image. We may use the analysis of color, light and brightness distribution in the image as an instrument here.

Stage 6. Modelling the context. The visual message intended by the author of the image triggers identity markers and is then referred to and reflected through the individual cultural experience of a person. During this process the perceiver is modelling the accompanying factors and circumstances that were not directly expressed. For instance, a photograph of a crying child with a broken toy will make us imagine the corresponding sound, and the position of the toy in space will be modelling our perception about the causal effects involved in the situation (whether the child broke his or her toy accidentally or it was a deliberate action of some unknown agent). Modelling the context can vary significantly depending on the cultural constraints of the perceiver. A classical example is the change of causal and temporal effects between three pictures positioned in a line depending on the script tradition in a given culture: speakers of English will perceive the left picture as earlier and causal, whereas speakers of Arabic will perceive the same left picture

as later and consequential. Modelling the context may be interpreted through the analysis of positions and assumed movement of elements of the image, but the interpretation is greatly dependent on the learner's self-analysis of cultural constraints as well.

We shall also add that as any classroom activity, interpretation of visual messages may be performed at various levels and a useful method to relieve the pressure on the students who are new at this may be assisted alternatives where the teacher suggests changing a single element of the image and predicting what effect it is going to make.

Discussion

Interpreting visual messages in an EFL classroom is an effective activity for several reasons. In their feedback 8 students from both the sample groups mention that the eight cases of independent analysis of visual messages integrated in the course were motivating and engaging, and that the discussion of their interpretations was vivid to a degree where the stimulus to speak was so powerful that the students forgot what language they used. 5 students mentioned in various words that the fact that the course was executed in English was perceived as a non-changeable condition and as the rules were set from the very beginning they did not think about the images in Russian at all but tried to think within the frame of the target language available to them at their level. The instructor also observed that in the course of the semester the analyses of visual messages grew longer, more detailed and deeper. By the end of the course the majority of the students had no trouble dissecting more from smaller and less complex images that were offered for interpretation earlier. The volume of a written analysis of a visual message was restricted to one written A4 page, and if in the beginning of the course during the 2016/2017 academic year

69 % of students marked the question about the sufficiency of this limit as “excessive”, “challenging” or “too large”, then by the end of the year this number dropped to 20 %, and 7 students actually complained that the restriction of the volume for an independent analysis was unnecessary and they had struggled to fit their observations within this 1-page limit.

The feedback also shows that the skills of interpreting visual texts correlate with the skills of interpreting traditional verbal texts, as figures of speech correlate with figures of position, color and light. Activities aimed at image interpretation present a wide experimental test for the knowledge received by students during their classes on philosophy, psychology, education theory, world culture, art, economy, and concepts of modern science and may help to overcome the fragmentation of humanities, a major problem in the modern Russian system of higher education. As these activities also allow the EFL learners to practice their target language in a free uncontrolled environment to achieve genuine communicative tasks, we may consider them effective for incorporation in the TEFL courses taught in the target language.

One more important, though unintended, effect that was mentioned in the students’ feedback and noticed by the instructor in self-analysis reviews is that some of the students felt they now made better choices in selecting the public domain images to illustrate their statements and target language material in the digital presentations they designed for other courses or their teaching internships. It is logical that increased visual literacy would manifest in productive activities as well, and the understanding of choices made

by authors of images would make it easier for the students to make similar choices themselves.

The difficulties that were noticed by the students and the instructor are that such a course is rather time-consuming, that students with lower levels of English proficiency are considerably disadvantaged in the classroom discussion and need much more preparation time, and that to make the course interesting the instructor should select a wide range of images for analysis, and renew a lot of them every year, as part of the positive reception of the course was connected with the fact that the material offered for analysis was fresh, widely discussed in mass media and was recognized by the students who previously encountered the advertisements in a natural setting.

The so-called millennial learners who currently populate college classrooms are purportedly digital natives whose repeated exposure to a host of new technologies has allegedly resulted in enhanced skills in several areas, including those related to technology and visual communication. However, Eva Brumberger states that the level of interpretation of visual material by people born after 2000 does not considerably differ from the level of interpretation observed among older learners [Brumberger, 44]. The implementation of our course and the integration of interpreting visual messages in it has shown that while the students are aware of a wide range of opportunities connected with the digital media they rarely have a chance to make a conscious attempt of awareness of how these opportunities function. We may conclude that implementation of this course may be overall estimated as successful.

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