Get the Picture: Teaching with Multimodal Texts

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Abstract

Our students encounter many texts in their daily lives which combine linguistic, auditory and visual methods of representation. These rich, multimodal texts provide authentic and engaging materials to explore how meaning is created and to help students at any level to communicate more effectively in different contexts for a variety of audiences and purposes. They can also be used to engage students in many kinds of learning activities to develop skills for critical thinking, speaking and listening. This paper offers a research-based rationale for pedagogies using examples of multimodal texts and a set of strategies for the English classroom which are intended to enrich the experience of learning.

Introduction

To be literate in the 21st century, learners need to be able to interpret their increasingly prevalent and complex media environment, understanding that all media messages are, sometimes despite appearances, merely representations of reality, not 'reality' itself. That is, such messages are inevitably selective, partial and incomplete. They are constructed to entertain, to inform and to persuade, often with a political or economic purpose. Different types of media and forms of text have their own unique features which viewers must be able to understand so that they can respond discriminately. Increasingly, texts such as websites and videos are non-linear, that is, messages are presented simultaneously and viewers are expected to make their own choices about what to view and in what order. The messages often use stereotypes as well as emotive language and images, which are open to different interpretations and may be misleading. 21st century learners should therefore be able to interpret and evaluate meanings expressed in multiple modalities and use multiple modalities themselves to create meaning.

Pictures can be used very effectively to engage students at any level in many kinds of learning activities, including higher order thinking, speaking and listening, literary methods such as irony and metaphor, and grammar and vocabulary. They are also a powerful stimulus for speaking, writing and representing. This paper offers a research-based rationale for pedagogies using pictures and other multimodal texts and a set of teaching strategies for the English classroom which are intended to enrich the experience of learning.

Theoretical frameworks

According to cognitive psychology, learning occurs when individuals interact with people, objects and events and then reflect on their interaction. The learner actively constructs understanding by deciding what these experiences mean, thus building a personal set of mental models which in turn determine how new experiences are understood.

About a quarter of the brain is occupied in processing visual information, far more than for any other sense. Arnheim (1969) showed how, from infancy, we learn to recognise and classify all kinds of objects, people, actions and phenomena such as weather, colours or moods. Piaget (1926) showed that we learn from interactions with our physical environment, which comes to include not only its physical aspects but also their representations in images and signs.

Visual literacy includes everything from facial expressions and body language, to drawings, websites and films. It appears, on the basis of research into factors that motivate children to read and write at home, that children write and read as part of their imaginative play (Burnett & Myers, 2002). Eight pupils from Years 3 and 6 were invited to use disposable cameras to capture examples of the reading and writing they did at home. The results showed that the children used shared books and writing as a way of building friendships. They used computers to explore school topics or research areas of personal interest; created displays of pictures, certificates, religious texts, or prayer calendars; wrote notes to themselves or made props for make-believe play situations.

There is also reliable evidence to show that the use of visual images, such as videos, DVDs and photographs, was effective in motivating boys and increased the quantity and quality of their writing (United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2004). Using visual literacy can also develop boys' ability to articulate their understanding of the writing process using

metalanguage. A follow-up research project by the Department of Education and Science (Younger & Worthington, 2005) showed that the boys saw themselves as being more in control of their own writing. In summary, visual literacy can lead to:

- increased quantity of writing
- increased quality of writing
- wider use of vocabulary
- greater use of imagery
- increased fluency
- more adventurous writing
- improved attitude to writing
- greater engagement with writing
- greater commitment to writing
- improved motivation, self-esteem and enthusiasm.

The project also had a significant effect on the boys' reading and speaking.

The dominance of vision in our interactions with the world has huge implications for teaching. Siegel (1995) argues that the gradual shift away from traditional instruction to constructivist models of teaching and learning implies that students need more than words to learn. Siegel argues that transmediation, i.e. the act of translating meanings from one sign system to another, increases students' opportunities to engage in generative and reflective thinking because, where no prior connection exists, learners must invent a connection between the two sign systems. Hence, deeper learning is achieved.

A theory of how individuals develop the ability to construct meaning from visual art was developed by Abigail Housen, the co-founder of Visual Understanding in Education and co-author of the Visual Thinking Strategies Curriculum. She defined five incremental stages of aesthetic development:

1. Accountive

Viewers make simple observations of surface features of the subject usually in the form of a narrative. These are heavily influenced by their own experience and memories.

2. Constructive

Viewers construct a framework for observing art using their knowledge of the world and personal values. They tend to reject works which do not correspond to their world view. Also at this stage viewers show an increased interest in the artist's intentions.

3. Classifying

Viewers begin to analyse works of art, identifying place, period and style by using their knowledge of art history.

4. Interpretive

Viewers infer levels of meaning for example from symbolic elements. They are open to alternative interpretations and changes in their own ideas.

5. Co-creative

Viewers combine "... personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal" (DeSantis & Housen, 2007, pp.12-13).

DeSantis and Housen's theory of staged aesthetic development closely corresponds with the idea of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1934):

The teacher's role is not so much to impart fact, or manage drill and practice, but to facilitate the learner's process of discovery. The teacher enables development by creating and managing a supportive learning environment that encourages learners to discover new ways to find answers to their own questions, to construct meaning, to experience, and to reason about what they see. The act of constructing meaning cannot be something taught; the learner must discover his meaning on his own (DeSantis & Housen, 2007, p 7).

Yenawine, a prominent Museum Educator and one of Housen's collaborators, argued that the two theories – the importance of peer interaction in constructing meaning and the advantage of teaching viewing through articulating responses – should be combined by having peers grouped together to discuss works of art:

In other words, it can be persuasively argued that structured discussion among peers of art that intrigues them will produce observations, insights and exchanges that spur not only thorough, rigorous examinations of works of art but also significant skill development in individuals (Yenawine, 1999, p 5).

Together, Housen and Yenawine developed Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to teach thinking and communication skills, as well as promote aesthetic development. VTS is now used in many schools in the USA and Europe and continues to expand. Briefly, using VTS provides opportunities for students to explore paintings and photographs and to build and share their interpretations. At the same time, the teacher should use positive body language and facial expressions to create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable responding to questions.

The teacher's questions follow a sequence: What do you see? What do you think? What makes you say that? What else do you see? In response to their comments, it is important that the teacher listen carefully to understand accurately what they say and point precisely to what they mention regarding the painting or photograph shown in the slide. The teacher paraphrases each comment, carefully preserving the meaning of what was said. In reformulating the students' comments, the teacher demonstrates proper sentence construction and rich vocabulary to assist students with language.

The strategies are intended to promote a pattern of thinking, rather than eliciting right answers, so the teacher accepts each comment without judgment. Students are learning to make detailed observations, analyse their responses and articulate their thoughts. The teacher explicitly links students' answers that are somehow related, points out how one idea leads to another and emphasises how their thinking changes and deepens during the lesson. The teacher concludes by thanking students for their participation, explaining what s/he particularly enjoyed and encouraging them to think of viewing art as an ongoing, open-ended process. No summary should be offered as this would defeat the point – that exploring a work of art is never completed.

A similar co-constructivist view of learning developed by the New London Group has also been influential in shaping thinking about the teaching of literacy:

> …the human mind is embodied, situated, and social. That is, human knowledge is initially developed not as "general and abstract," but as embedded in social, cultural, and material contexts. Further, human knowledge is initially developed as part and parcel of collaborative interactions with others of diverse skills, backgrounds, and perspectives joined together in a particular epistemic community, that is, a community of learners

engaged in common practices centered around a specific (historically and socially constituted) domain of knowledge (2000, p. 41).

The New London Group's first concern was to reform traditional literacy pedagogy for teaching the standard forms of the national language based on the written word because it was restricted to "formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (2000, p. 20). Their aim was to widen understanding of literacy to include the huge diversity of texts, contexts and cultures which are found in the contemporary globalised world:

> …literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. This includes understanding and competent control of representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word – for instance, visual design in desktop publishing or the interface of visual and linguistic meaning in multimedia (New London Group. 2000, p.20).

Their proposed new pedagogy is a four-stage process which can be summarised as follows:

1. Situated Practice: immersion in a wide range of multimodal texts taking into account the range of cultures students are exposed to in everyday life

2. Overt Instruction: explicit instruction in the design and terminology of multimodal texts

3. Critical Framing: a detached, critical interpretation of the meaning of the text in its social and cultural context

4. Transformed Practice: using the design elements to create new texts for different contexts.

Translating theory into practice

Using pictures to teach critical thinking

All the theories of learning and pedagogy outlined above share certain beliefs about learning which have significant implications for teaching:

- it is a process of co-construction
- it builds on the learner's prior experience

- it requires structured guidance

- it engages the learners affectively as well as cognitively

- it must be interactive

- it must be made relevant to the real world

In my own teaching at secondary level and pre-university level in Singapore, I have found that these beliefs can be incorporated into practice very successfully by using pictures and multimodal texts as stimuli to develop thinking skills, oracy, vocabulary, grammar, writing and representing. I have also used the pedagogies to teach terms concepts and technical terms for English Literature.

To encourage students new to this kind of viewing and thinking, the images should be striking and open to interpretation. Pictures should be grouped around a theme and presented in sequence. For beginning viewers, familiar themes such as family can be used to introduce inferential thinking. As they become more experienced, images which are more complex and subtle encourage speculation, questioning, and divergent interpretations. The following simple sequence of questions derived from Bloom's Taxonomy (1956 as cited in Anderson & Krathwohl, et al., 2001) can be used to develop thinking skills: What do you see? What do you think? What do you feel? What do you wonder? What makes you think/feel/wonder that?

A sequence can be used to raise the issue of definition and ambiguity. Taking the theme of the family, for example, one can move from representations of the conventional nuclear family to those of less conventional families – single parents, fostering, gay couples, street children, a congregation – while continuously questioning the idea of what constitutes a family.

I have often used the painting below, *Allegory of the World Wide Web,* by Vicente Collado Jr., as an introduction to teaching higher order thinking skills. The aim of the activity is to develop students' metacognitive skills by facilitating reflection on their mental processes as they view the picture and co-construct meaning. At first sight, *Allegory of the World Wide Web* (retrieved from http://camearound.blogspot.sg/2011/02/allegory-of-world-wide-web.html) is a realistic still life painting of a room with a desktop filled with a miscellany of objects. It is strangely atmospheric and very appealing. Closer viewing uncovers an

allegorical meaning disguised in a series of visual puns which the casual observer may not notice. Typically, once one student notices an unexpected item and realises it is a visual pun, the others become increasingly curious and motivated to find more puns.

At this stage, one can explain that their curiosity is being caused by the feeling of cognitive dissonance. The human brain has evolved to solve problems and seeks to reduce the discomfort of dissonance by finding an explanation. Learning by solving problems is therefore a very natural way to learn and can be more effective when undertaken in collaboration with others – learning is social.

Also at this stage, the students are engaged in higher order thinking as defined in Bloom's taxonomy, analysing and synthesising to interpret the meaning. As they realise that the visual puns all relate to the Internet in some way they experience the pleasure of solving the problem, with the brain secreting endorphins. The final task of creating names for the painting and deciding on the most appropriate one completes the task. By reviewing their thinking processes with a diagram of the Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking skills, they gain insight into how they arrived at a solution by working together to co-construct a meaning. This is a very memorable experience and one that can be referred to in the future to remind them of how to set about solving a messy problem or interpreting a poem.

Teaching and assessing students' inferential thinking can be achieved by asking them to add speech or thought bubbles to a picture to reflect how each person is reacting to the situation. Stills from film or stage plays are very useful for this as they often feature dramatic situations with diverse and conflicting reactions from characters. Another way to develop thinking skills is to crop a picture which enables the teacher to show one small section at a time as students predict what it might eventually show.

Using pictures to teach 21ˢᵗ century literacy

Pedagogy is always more likely to succeed when it draws on authentic, topical material and relates to big ideas, and the New London Group's pedagogy is a very effective structure for teaching students about the importance of the concepts of purpose, audience, context and culture in effective communication.

Students' interest can first be stimulated by movie posters. Tracing their evolution reveals how consumers of popular culture today are so much more sophisticated, at least in terms of their visual literacy, than they were some decades ago. For example, the posters promoting *Batman* movies have changed strikingly over the years, revealing a great deal about how attitudes to good and evil have changed (see Appendix for links to sample posters). They reflect the transition from the amused scepticism of the 60s, which represented superheroes such as Batman and villains such as the Joker ironically as one-dimensional caricatures, through the darker mood of the 80s and 90s inspired by Tim Burton's more complex vision to the profoundly more conflicted and ambiguous figure of the trilogy directed by Christopher Nolan. Students find viewing the sequence of movie posters for these films from the 60s through to the present a revealing and thought-provoking experience which leads to rich discussion of how much tastes have changed and why.

Advertisements are also rooted in everyday experience, an advantage which teachers have been benefiting from for many years. The advent of classroom projectors can transform teaching and learning about advertising, especially when structured around the pedagogy of the New London Group. The first stage is to immerse the students in examples of print and non-print based advertisements, examples of which are readily available through Google images and YouTube. Using these images and TV commercials is also a very powerful way to develop awareness of changing social norms and values. For example, students are both

amused and intrigued to discover how prevalent attitudes towards such products as cigarettes have transformed over the years. A 1950s advertisement for Camel carries the slogan, 'More doctors smoke Camel than any other cigarette' above a picture of the stereotypical doctor, grey-haired and wise in a white coat, smoking the product with evident satisfaction and no signs of anxiety over the implications for his health. Similarly, students are astonished by the transformation in representations of gender. A 1960s advertisement for Tipalets shows a dominant male blowing cigarette smoke into a young woman's face, behind the slogan, 'Blow in her face and she'll follow you anywhere'. There is a TV commercial for Tipalets available on YouTube which students find almost incredible and which prompts lively discussion: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIL-rd90cGU.

Situated practice is combined with overt instruction to explore the methods of advertising. Advertisements largely rely on arousing emotional or psychological responses in order to persuade consumers or build brand loyalty. The specific emotion targeted by an advertisement is known as its appeal, which may be to glamour, peer approval, natural goodness, celebrity endorsement, etc., or some combination of appeals. The variety of appeals can be demonstrated effectively through immersion supported by explicit instruction and quizzes to consolidate and assess students' ability to identify the nature of the different appeals in a sequence of examples.

Advertisers also make claims which are, of course, often quite spurious. Following the combination of immersion and explicit instruction, the teacher introduces the third element, critical framing. At this stage students apply critical analysis, at first simply to identify misleading phrases. For example, what does the claim that a detergent gets dishes so clean they are 'virtually spotless' really mean? Inviting students to paraphrase – 'virtually' means 'almost' – leads to the realisation that another way to phrase the claim would be that the product actually leaves dishes a little dirty.

Going beyond the verbal elements of the advertisements the teacher guides the students to a critical awareness of the visual elements, features such as colour, lighting, contrast, the degree of realism, character and setting, etc., uncovering the reasons for the choices made and relating these to the cultural assumptions and values underlying them. Finally, they consider how all of these are designed to appeal to the intended consumers.

The fourth and final stage is transformed practice. Now the students apply their new knowledge to the creation of their own persuasive multimodal text. To make this more authentic, they should choose a subject and target audience from within their own situation, for example, to promote a sport or society or the school library to new students. These posters can then be displayed around the classroom so students can get feedback from a real audience.

Using video to teach critical thinking

Greenpeace have produced a series of very striking videos which parody advertisements for popular brands such as Nestle and Dove. One effective way to develop critical listening and viewing skills of students at upper secondary or pre-university level is to compare these parodies with the original TV commercials, adapting the strategy known as Question the Author (QtA). A detailed explanation of how QtA is applied to the analysis of written texts can be found at http://lb2.readingrockets.org/strategies/question_the_author.

To help students identify and evaluate opposing points of view, show them an advertisement for the New Zealand Sealord brand of fish and seafood products. Sealord claims that its fishing is environmentally sustainable. The advertisement features employees in marine settings around the globe delivering sound bites which support the company slogan, 'We live for the sea.'

Students are first provided with a template to focus their attention on key features of the original advertisement as they take notes. Questions based on QtA principles follow this basic sequence:

- Who produced the advertisement?
- What is its key message?
- Who are the intended viewers?
- What is the purpose of the advertisement, i.e. what effects on the viewers' thoughts and feelings are intended?
- What methods are used to achieve these effects?
- How successful are these methods in persuading you of the truth of the claims made in the advertisement?
- What might you change about the advertisement?

Next, the students view the Greenpeace parody which shows the same advertisement but with new sound bites dubbed over the original soundtrack which accuse Sealord of misleading the public. Following up on the viewing, students can be guided towards a deeper appreciation of the effect of tone on an audience by comparing the very different tones used in the original and the parody.

The students complete the same set of QtA questions on the parody, which lays the ground for discussion of the opposing claims and Internet research to discover the impact of the Greenpeace campaign. The Sealord site http://www.sealord.com/nz/environment/issues-and-facts is a good place to start. Another video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rwl_vbuVerMI, features celebrity chef Tom Kime, who has a reputation as an advocate of sustainable fishing, defending Sealord's efforts to adopt more sustainable methods of fishing.

Teachers often report that students find the transition from writing narratives and personal recounts to writing expositions very challenging. One approach is to show how issues and argumentation embedded in narrative form can be uncovered and become the basis for a discussion prior to writing. Another Greenpeace video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q3pZVDHUJU, provides an excellent example of an issues based-narrative. The learning sequence is:

1. Activation of prior knowledge through viewing of the video
2. Co-construction of meaning though comparison of understandings of the video
3. Deepening of knowledge through Internet research
4. Composition of an exposition in the form of an information report outlining the Greenpeace campaign and explaining its success.

Below is an example of a simple template which can be used to scaffold students' understanding of how the various elements of the video combine to persuade the viewer to take action. The number and kind of prompts provided will depend on the students' profile. In this case, I have included quite detailed prompts for lower secondary students with little prior experience of critical viewing. After completing the template, the students should work in groups to compare each other's responses and modify their understanding.

| **Greenpeace video: Facebook Unfriend Coal** |
| As you view the video, make notes on what you understand its message to be and how |

you react to the voice over and the use of visuals. Keep these questions in mind:

- What do you see and hear?
- What do you think and wonder?
- What makes you say that?

The message	The voice over	The visuals
How is Mark Zuckerberg described?	Why do you think a child is used to tell the story?	How are the visuals appropriate to a child story-teller?
What reasons are given for his actions?	What things does the child not understand very well?	What do you find funny in the visuals?
How do you feel about him? Do your feelings change at any point?	What does the child understand very well?	How do the visuals show the difference between coal and wind as energy sources?

Summarise **your own understanding** of the story **in point form,** making clear what Facebook is, what Greenpeace say is wrong with it and what Greenpeace say Zuckerberg should do.

What is Facebook?	

What's bad about Facebook?	
What should Zuckerberg do?	

As a homework assignment, to prepare students for writing an exposition, they should visit http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/climate-change/cool-it/ITs-carbon-footprint/Facebook/. This will reveal the basis of Greenpeace's claim in greater detail using multiple formats and how it affected opinion throughout the world and ultimately changed Facebook's policy on energy use.

I believe the use of these videos offers students invaluable insights into real world issues and the vital importance of effective communication in shaping opinions and policies.

Using pictures to teach literature

Teaching literary terms and concepts through pictures has the advantage of freeing the students to respond to the effects of certain devices without at the same time having to wrestle with unfamiliar language. According to Siegel (1995), there is evidence that articulating the meaning of a picture creates deeper learning:

> The gradual shift to constructivist models of teaching and learning implies that students need more than words to learn. Transmediation, i.e. the act of translating meanings from one sign system to another, increases students' opportunities to engage in generative and reflective thinking because, where no prior connection exists, learners must invent a connection between the two sign systems (Siegel, 1995, p. 455).

Hence, deeper learning is achieved.

It is not very hard to find pictures to illustrate literary concepts. The most direct way is simply to search Google images using the target word, for example, irony. A huge number of images will pop up (not all appropriate, so your judgment will be required). By viewing a sequence of pictures the students can be led to understand the different types of irony and

come to an understanding of how tone can vary from mild to bitter. Other target words which have provided me with useful images are: satire, juxtaposition, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, personification, dramatic irony and exposition.

Another strategy to search for suitable pictures for the literature classroom is to enter a theme into the search engine, such as family, plus the word movie or drama.

The picture above (http://davidbarrie.typepad.com/david_barrie/2007/06/) is from the play, *The Pain and the Itch,* by Bruce Norris (2004). Pictures such as this can be used to teach many concepts in drama. The usual sequence of questions can be used to prompt students' analysis (What do you see? What do you think? What makes you say that?). Questions can be developed to explore such issues as why some characters have radically different reactions to what is happening and thence on to how and why generations have different perspectives, leading to conflict, with comedic or tragic consequences. The discussion can be used to introduce many important dramatic strategies and terms, such as characterisation, point of view, intention, the nature of conflict, comparison and contrast, motive, mood, genre, setting, satire, dramatic irony, mise en scene and theme, etc.

Using pictures to teach grammar

There is a renewed emphasis in the Singapore Ministry of Education's *English Language Syllabus* (2010) on teaching grammar at both primary and secondary levels:

Pupils will learn grammar and vocabulary in explicit, engaging and meaningful ways. They will reinforce such understanding in the course of listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and representing different types of texts (p. 10).

One of the desired outcomes stated in the syllabus is to raise the language competency of every student:

All our pupils will be able to use English to express themselves. All should attain foundational skills, particularly in grammar, spelling and basic pronunciation. They should be able to use English in everyday situations and for functional purposes, such as giving directions, information or instructions and making requests (p. 6).

The most frequent question teachers ask about teaching grammar is how it can be made 'more fun.' Pictures can help to provide some answers. Googling 'children's playground illustrations' will provide many pictures filled with different children engaged in lots of different activities. Googling 'happytown illustrations' will link to particularly good pictures to use at primary level. These illustrations provide the basis for simple question and response activities to focus on word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, etc.) Basically, all the teacher needs to do is ask students to describe actions, positions and the appearance of characters, etc., using details from the picture. Prepositions can be taught by asking a student to give directions from one point in a picture or map to another, or to explain where a person or object is.

Computer games in which the player has to locate objects half-hidden among a plethora of others are another source of useful pictures. Many examples can be found by googling 'games find the hidden objects.' The element of game playing certainly helps to create enjoyment and engagement. The added advantage of all these activities is that students can practise basic oral skills as well, for example, by describing scenes or characters in detail.

Even with older students, pictures can be used to teach more subtle aspects of grammar such as the distinction between different types of noun: common, proper, collective, gerund, abstract and concrete, countable and uncountable. At the same time, the students are developing their inferential skills. Renoir's *The Festival of Slorg* (http://markarayner.com/blog/archives/3559) portrays a lively and diverse group of people in conversation, drinking or

stroking a dog, all displaying various kinds of feelings and attitudes. To take just one example, to teach the distinction between concrete and abstract nouns, the students are invited to name ten objects, each with an adjective describing its appearance. Next, they are asked to infer the feelings of some of the characters and to explain what it is about the appearance of the character that suggests the feelings. One prominent character's posture and the angle of his head suggest he is proud or disdainful. The students speculate why this may be the case. The teacher then points out that they can use adjectives to describe the features of the man's body language which suggest his pride as they did with the common nouns identified earlier, but not to describe the appearance of pride itself. Hence, pride is an abstract noun. In fact, the possibilities for teaching word classes through pictures seem limitless.

Using pictures to teach and assess

Using dramatic or emotive pictures to stimulate speaking and writing is an effective strategy which teachers have used for so long it may be regarded as traditional. There are other ways of using pictures and visuals, however, which are also effective yet do not seem to have the same currency. Pictures which are quite similar, for example, the same kinds of landscape, can be used to prompt descriptive writing, the idea being that the description will be sufficiently accurate and detailed to ensure that other students can pick out the picture being described from a range of possibilities.

Having a student use language to describe a visual, such as the one below, clearly enough for another student, who cannot see the visual, to draw the items accurately, is a good way to surface how explanations should be structured. The exercise raises questions such as: Where to begin? How to orientate the listener? Is it better to give an overview first? Or to give one feature at a time in a sequence, left to right? How to convey relative scale and position? What technical words would help to convey familiar shapes? How do we handle the unfamiliar?
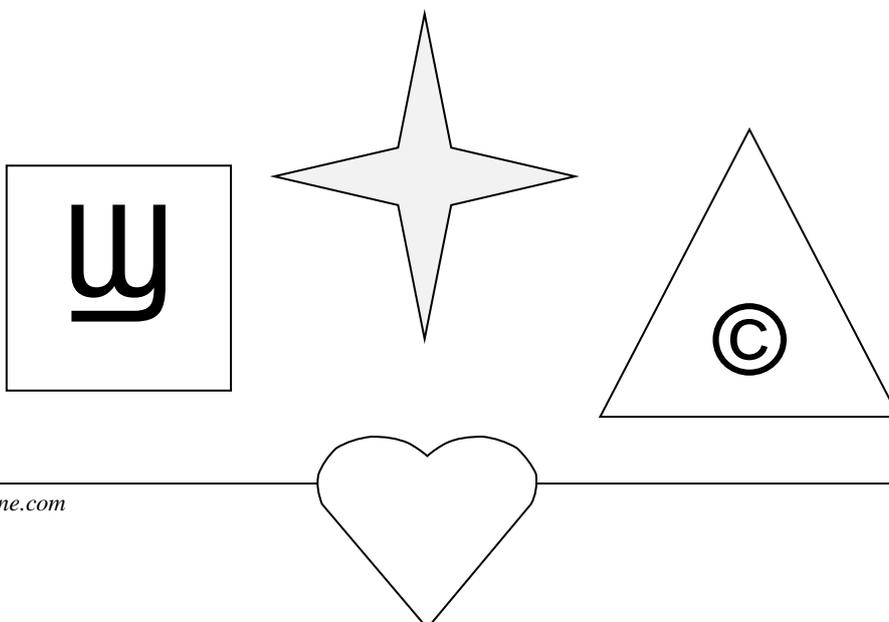
These questions demonstrate very effectively the need to communicate in ways which the audience can understand. Questions of orientation, overview, sequence and use of language can then be applied to teaching writing skills, such as how to write effective introductions, the logical sequencing of points in sentences and paragraphs and the use of appropriate language.

Student presentations are being used increasingly as a means of assessment, both of subject content knowledge and of speaking and representing skills. In the teaching of literature, having students make presentations using visuals can be a more effective way of assessing students' knowledge and skills than the traditional examination style question, in which evidence of their understanding and personal response to a text may be limited by their ability to write essays. In the case of responding to poetry, for example, I find students enjoy the challenge of matching imagery to pictures and find explaining the thinking behind their choices through a PowerPoint presentation more natural and less daunting than writing a critical analysis. This is on-the-spot formative assessment as both teacher and peers can provide immediate feedback and probe for further explanation. Students also appreciate the opportunity to be creative and take great pride in producing striking multimodal texts, even adding music to enhance the impact.

Despite their sophisticated technological skills, when asked to present using PowerPoint, students tend to rely very heavily on cramming slides with text and reading it back to the audience. Thus, they do not establish any rapport with their audience as eye contact is virtually impossible while they are reading. The whole purpose of the task as an assessment of speaking skills is lost. An effective solution is to set a maximum word limit per slide and encourage students to use visuals, including pictures as metaphors for ideas, allowing them to use the slides only as cues. The slides build confidence while enabling the speaker to face the audience and communicate in a more engaging manner. A very amusing and effective video

Death by PowerPoint, available on YouTube, provides a memorable warning against the pitfalls of PowerPoint.

Conclusion

Having the technology to display pictures, show videos and design multimodal presentations for the classroom has facilitated an approach to teaching which integrates traditional literacy with the skills of thinking, viewing and representing in ways which open up possibilities for student-centric, values-driven teaching and learning. This approach can be made more relevant to students' personal experience and the real world. By activating the brain's capacity for visual processing and collaborative problem solving, the learning is also deeper because it is more natural.

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Appendix

Resources

Visual literacy

http://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/xchange-repository/fall-2009/student-commons/critical-media-literacy

http://www.medialit.org/

http://www.swlauriersb.qc.ca/schools/recit/ml/mllinks.htm

http://www.3plearning.com/visual-literacy-teacher-resources-spellodrome/

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About the author

Phil McConnell came to Singapore in 1991 after teaching in the UK for 17 years, where he had served variously as Discipline Master, Head of Department, Head of Faculty and Head of Sixth Form. After three years as acting HOD at Chung Cheng High School (Main), he moved to Anderson Junior College as Subject Head for Literature in 1994, and then, in 1998 to Raffles Junior College, where he was in charge of the Raffles Humanities Scholarship Programme. He was appointed Master Teacher for Literature in 2008, and is currently attached to the English Language Institute of Singapore (ELIS).