



**THE CONTRIBUTION OF REGIONAL PICTURES
TO THE READING AND INTERPRETATION OF
A TEXT IN ENGLISH***

**A Contribuição de Figuras Regionais para a Leitura
e Interpretação de um Texto em Inglês**

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Abstract

This research aimed to answer the question: “How can images of known regional pictures facilitate the understanding of a text in English?” It was intended to deepen the knowledge of facilitators of reading and interpretation of texts in English, in order to develop the habit of reading through texts related to the students’ socio-cultural context. The theoretical framework explored the importance of the reading skill, the teacher’s role, reading techniques, and the use of inference along with the use of memory for vocabulary retention. For data collection the following methods were used: semi-open questionnaire, an audio and video recording of the text interpretation activity, and oral interview. The data under investigation, whose analysis was interpretative, were provided by three third year informant pupils of a Secondary School located in Palmas-TO, Brazil.

Keywords: *image; inference; memory; Applied Linguistics.*

Resumo

Esta pesquisa objetivou responder a questão: “Como imagens de figuras regionais conhecidas podem facilitar a compreensão de um

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texto em Língua Inglesa?”. Pretendeu-se aprofundar o conhecimento de facilitadores da leitura e compreensão de textos em inglês para desenvolver o hábito da leitura por meio de textos inseridos no contexto sociocultural dos estudantes. No referencial teórico trabalhou-se a importância da leitura, o papel do professor, técnicas de leitura, a inferência e a memória para a retenção de vocabulário. Para a coleta de dados utilizou-se: questionário semiaberto, gravação em áudio e vídeo da atividade de compreensão do texto e entrevista oral. Os dados para a investigação, de análise interpretativa, foram fornecidos por três alunos-informantes do terceiro ano do Ensino Médio de uma Escola de Palmas-TO.

Palavras-chave: *imagem; inferência; memória; Linguística Aplicada.*

1. Introduction

During our teaching practice in public Secondary Schools located in Palmas -TO, which started nine years ago, it was noticeable that our students, who usually have beginner and elementary levels, have difficulties with text reading and interpretation in English. We had noticed, through oral and written text interpretation activities, the students do not relate their previous knowledge to the subject under study and they do not notice that a lot of words are in fact cognates of Portuguese.

These difficulties can be due, on one hand, to the deficiency of the teaching methods used, lack or absence of authentic material, and/or difficulty for reproducing it, and, on the other hand, to the students' own indifference to the acquisition of a second language and their dependence on the use of the dictionary.

To deal with this problem, we chose to work with regional images known by the students and a text related to their socio-cultural context. Both the diversity of cultural and informative elements they present and the closer relationship to the student's vision may facilitate pleasant reading and, possibly, a better understanding. In order to accomplish this goal and try to answer to the question “how can the image of known regional pictures facilitate the understanding of a text in English?” we invited students from a Secondary School with elementary level to





take part in some activities. First, we explained our aims. Then, putting them into practice, we used transparent sheets with the images (see appendixes) with well-known pictures representing some words from a text and then proposed to perform an oral activity to check the text comprehension. Those activities intended to facilitate the understanding of the text in English and tried to consolidate the new vocabulary. This work may be important for teachers because the use of images as an instrument in the understanding of texts in the English Language can help students become more autonomous and involved in the teaching and learning process.

2. Review of related literature

According to Fulgêncio and Liberato (2000:14) reading goes far beyond the decoding of graphic signs, it is the result of the interaction between what the reader already knows and what he/she takes from the text. The visual information, any information captured by the eyes, is obviously necessary but it is not enough. Because of this, to ensure that the text is understood, besides the visual information the reader needs to use every kind of knowledge he/she has in memory. The visual information (VI) and the non-visual information (nVI) have an inversely proportional relationship with each other, i.e., the more nVI is available to the reader, the less VI he/she will need to take from the text.

For Totis (1991:75) reading is understood as a reader's action, once the text is completed and modernized through the act of reading. The learner should be aware that reading is an active process of sense construction, which the reader achieves by means of predictions, confirmation, and/or reformulation of hypotheses and not just through the sum of the meaning of all the words in the text.

Brasil (1999:46) maintains that teaching how to read guided through strategies and educational techniques can be at the service of human improvement. For this, it is necessary to penetrate the universe of the beginner reader in order to understand his/her interests and to discover motivations for reading. This is important because motivating an individual is an appropriate way to help him/her acquire the habit





of reading for a lifetime. Through discussions, compositions and observation, teachers can discover each student's interests and the discussion is taken to a point where the will to increase the knowledge on a certain subject emerges automatically.

For Kleiman (1989:47) the competent reader looks for a global meaning of what he/she is reading. In a certain way, he/she creates the meaning based on the knowledge he/she already possesses. However, in the same way this reader may know the meaning of all the words contained in the text and still do not understand it, it is possible that he/she understands the text without knowing the meaning of all its words. That is to say, the reader cannot know the meaning of words contained in the text, but he/she understands it using reading strategies.

Absy (1995:10-11) asserts that some students do not profit from their deductions because they have difficulty in accepting the imprecision of inference, insisting on using the dictionary to find out the meaning of unknown words. Inference is particularly useful for doing exercises and understanding texts because in such situations the available information allows the student to foresee satisfactory alternatives to replace missing items.

In order to build a meaning from the text, the reader must relate simultaneously to his/her basic knowledge on the subject, as well as to make predictions about what he/she can find in certain kinds of text and use the more productive visual strategies contained in them. As an example from Fulgêncio and Liberato (2000:16) we have: "in the product whose label is N♣TURAL, in spite of the letter A not being represented by its conventional symbol, probably everybody reads, by inference, the word natural".

Inference is "the elaboration process activated by knowledge, starting from relationships established among what it is said and what was already known" (Fulgêncio and Liberato, 2000:29). For Kleiman (1989:49) inference is an outline that helps students, both in their mother tongue and in a foreign language, to understand texts.

For Dijk (1992:62) there are two kinds of inference: the elaborate, which increases the non-explanatory links in the text, and





the summarized, which reduces the text in order to reveal what the receiver understood and which would be, ultimately, what the reader would retain in memory.

According to Gairns and Redman (2001:31) verbal learning and the ability to retain information for brief periods, during usually up to thirty seconds, demand a constant repetition of the data when some amusement can cause forgetfulness. The short-term memory has limited capacity, as the long-term memory is seemingly inexhaustible, it can retain any amount of new information. However, some information that enters the short-term memory can stay there effortlessly for plenty of time, until it is incorporated to the long-term memory. That explains why some pupils think repetition is a very good way of transferring information from the short-term memory to the long-term memory.

For Vygotsky (1962) (cited in Kato, 1999: 40) proficient reading is processed in blocks of information contained in agreement with sense in order to obtain the meaning of the whole block. The short-term memory would have the role of inferring the interpretation of a word from the context.

Gairns and Redman (2001:33) claim that lexical items as well as pronunciation, grammatical values, and derivation of words are information stored in the brain and are organized according to a series of associative chains, like a huge file that possesses several compartments defined according to the subject.

Thus, the teacher should present to the students new lexical items starting from an associative chain, classifying words in categories, for example, according to the frequency of the subject, so that they are not forgotten. Due to this presupposition, we chose to work on this research with regional pictures, known by the students and common in their daily life, such as local beaches, waterfalls, a bridge, and some handicrafts. A text about the State of Tocantins was used to develop the oral activity; it presented the names of some buildings and tourist attractions located in the city of Palmas and nearby areas. Assisted by those pictures while reading the students could associate the lexicon of the text to the pictures they already knew, memorizing the new vocabulary and retaining it in the memory.





As language teachers our main concern is to ensure that what is taught will be retained permanently in students' long-term memory. Thus, it is the key to consider these theories when designing activities and try to decrease the forgetfulness and external interferences. Besides, it is important to work with strategies, such as the use of images, which can facilitate the efficient recovery of data they could easily lose. According to Brasil (2002:39) the English teachers' aim should be to help students to use the target language, through the act of communication, once doing so they may be able to acquire the culture related to it. This way, the students would have access to all available information, being able to use it in all areas of their lives.

As it is necessary to store a great number of words in order to acquire fluency in a language, memory strategies allow the learners to store data and to recover it when it is necessary for communication. Besides, according to Oxford (1990:73) these strategies help to move the information from the real level to the ability level where knowledge is more automatic and it could be more easily recoverable and less easily forgotten after a period without using it.

For Oxford (1990:73) memory strategies generally involve different kinds of materials. In learning a language, it is possible to name pictures verbally or to create visual images of words. This union of the verbal with the visual is very useful in learning languages for four reasons: the capacity of mind's storage for visual information exceeds its capacity for verbal material; the main information is transferred to the long-term memory through visual images; pictures can be the most important device to remember the verbal material, and lastly, but not less important, a large number of learners show a preference for learning using pictures.

Gairns and Redman (2001:35) seem to suggest that the frequent use of visual images in the classroom to illustrate meanings allows the teacher to create an additional resource to aid the students' learning. "Visuals are an extremely useful framework for the storage of lexis and they can be used to highlight the relationship between items" (Gairns and Redman, 2001:96). Another obvious thing is that it is easier to remember a mental image of a concrete article than an abstract one. For example,





try to imagine a bottle, a can of Coke, and then truth and life. Probably, the reader will not have any difficulty with the first two items, but it is extremely difficult to imagine a visual image for truth and life.

Kato (1999:25) is convinced that a large part of school failure could be avoided if, instead of the obsession with method, the school tried to be a true observation laboratory of what happens in the learning process, approaching the child as an active subject asset in that process.

3. Research and methodology

To demonstrate that pictures can contribute to the understanding of a regional text, a case study was chosen. A case study is “centered in the description and explanation of an isolated phenomenon and it belongs to a certain group or class” (Teles, 2002:108).

This research, which was interpretative, was carried out with three third year students of a Secondary School located in Palmas, starting from a group of volunteers who were willing to collaborate with the project when the teacher presented it to the class. These students had a similar level of English Language and they intended to improve their reading ability.

First of all, a semi-structured questionnaire was applied in order to check the effectiveness of the use of pictures as a facilitating in the development of reading skills. Then, we used two transparent sheets with regional characters easily recognized by the pupils, since they were part of their daily life. The first sheet presented contained a photo of the Araguaia Palace, which houses the executive branch of the state government and it is located in the center of the city, the Theater at Espaço Cultural, Juscelino Kubitschek Avenue that is one of the most important avenues of the capital, and a Waterfall in Taquaruçu. On the second sheet of paper students could see handicrafts at the Bosque Fair as well as the Graciosa Beach. They could also see some traditional handicrafts made of golden woven straw by Mumbuca artisans in Jalapão Park and The Integration Bridge (see appendixes). Despite the photos





being very well known by students, at the bottom of each picture there were their names in Portuguese and their translation into English.

These illustrations were commented on and the students were asked to focus on the illustrations and their respective names in English. Some of the words presented on the text were “bridge”, “waterfall“, “beach“, “avenue“, “theater“, “golden woven straw“ and “handicrafts“. When it was clear that the names of the pictures had already been understood, a copy of a text² containing information related to the pictures and local touristic advice was handed out, as the extract below writes:

“Taquaruçu is a mountainous region, known for its rich vegetation and pleasant climate, that has become a great center for eco-tourism and attracts tourists to see the waterfalls and local handicrafts. (...) Besides of its great economic potential that enables the construction of huge hydro-electric power Tocantins River is a source for recreational activities and tourism, featuring beautiful beaches such as Graciosa Beach in Palmas. The Integration Bridge links Palmas to other cities.”

After the first reading, the text was analyzed regarding oral comprehension, paragraph by paragraph, seeking to solve vocabulary doubts using inferences and questions that could help students to discover the meaning of new words.

Finally, oral interviews were carried out and the most important data were transcribed. This happened soon after the oral activity and it aimed at eliminating any doubts as well as to test the effectiveness of using the picture as a facilitating tool for the understanding of a text in English.

It is worth pointing out that in the text itself there were no pictures. They were introduced at the beginning of the class so that the students could identify the name of each illustration in English, which would make it easier for them to understand the text during the reading activity. The dictionary was not used, since the aim was to understand

2. (Adapted from “Tocantins: A land of wonder and opportunity” *Sictur Magazine, October 2003 and Secom Magazine, 2003.*





the text as a whole through the pictures shown and inferences from the text.

4. Discussion

The data were analyzed starting from the answers obtained from the semi-structured questionnaire. Then, we added observations of the oral comprehension activity of the text and the answers obtained from the oral interview with the informants soon after the oral understanding activity of the text. Some of the questions presented in the questionnaire will now be discussed.

One of the questions asked during the activity was: “When you look at a text in English for the first time, what does attract your attention the most?” The options were: a) The form of the text, b) The size of the text, c) The size of the letter, d) The pictures, e) The title. The informants chose the options “The pictures” and “The title.” Similar answers were obtained in the oral interview, which echoes Oxford (1990:54) for whom the union of the verbal with the visual is very useful when learning languages and, besides, a large number of students have a preference for learning with the use of pictures.

Question 12 was: “When the teacher works with texts in class, what does facilitate comprehending them?” The options were: a) Answer to the questions before/while reading the text, b) Reading the text, c) Answer to the questions after reading the text for the first time, d) The written activities for understanding the text. The informants chose the options concerned with answering to the questions before or during the reading. However, informants A and C also chose “Answer to the questions before reading the text” and informants A and B chose: “Reading the text” and “The written activities for understanding the text.” Justifying the answer, informant A answered: “*Because all this is enough to understand the reading and the writing*”³. Informant B explained: “*Because when the teacher is reading the text we can have an idea of the words that help us in activities, and understanding the*

3. ² “Porque com tudo isso é suficiente para compreender a leitura e as escritas (*sic*)”.





*text is the most important thing*⁴. Informant C answered: “*It is always good to comment before the reading to socialize the text and after the reading to start a debate on it in class*”⁵. This aspect could be observed in several stages during the oral comprehension activity of the text. When the informants saw the expression “golden woven straw” (In Jalapão Park there is the golden woven straw that is used for handicraft bags, hats, jewelry and other stuff which are sold in Brazil and abroad.) they did not understand its meaning, so they were asked: “*What is the artifact shown in the picture made of?*” Then, the answer came quickly from everybody: “*de capim dourado.*” According to Cabral (1991:52) the inference process is the key for the understanding of texts, whether oral or written, once the readers have become aware of the cohesive marks left by the author in order to build or to reconstruct sense from the text.

Question 13 was: “What is your preference regarding the understanding of texts?”, and the options were: a) Through exercises, alone, b) Through exercises in a group, c) Reading the text alone and answering to the questions, d) Hearing the teacher or the CD with the text, e) Looking for the words that I do not know in the dictionary, f) Answering to the teacher’s questions about the text. The three informants chose the option “Hearing the teacher or the CD with the text” and informants A and B also chose the option “Looking for the words that we do not know in the dictionary.” Informants A and C also chose the alternative: “Answering to the teacher’s questions about the text.” Justifying this answer informant A added: “*Doing the exercise, answering the questions, hearing the teacher, and using the dictionary you have more possibilities to understand a text*”⁶. Informant B justified his answer: “*Because when the teacher is reading the text, she helps the students with the pronunciation and when we do not know some word it is always good to look for it in the dictionary, but it is always important*

4. “Por que quando a professora está fazendo a leitura a gente já vai conhecendo as palavras e isso ajuda nas atividades e na compreensão do texto, que é o mais importante”.

5. “É bom sempre um comentário antes da leitura para socializar o texto e depois da leitura para aplicação de debates em sala”.

6. “Por meio de exercícios e perguntas e ouvindo o professor e o dicionário você tem mais possibilidade para entender o texto.”





*to be careful with the translation of the word and check if it fits in the text and in the understanding*⁷.” However, a controversy was observed during the oral interview when they were asked about the words they did not know the meaning of and they looked up in the dictionary. All informants answered that when they needed the same word later they had to look it up again. This aspect is confirmed by Totis (1991:56) for whom the use of the dictionary should be avoided so that the student can take maximum advantage of all other available resources. Words that students look up in the dictionary enter the short-term memory but are not transferred to the long-term memory and the next time the same word appears in another text they will not recognize it.

Question 15 was: “What kinds of texts do you like the teacher work on in class?” and the options were: a) Text with images, b) Texts from magazines, c) Texts about music. The informants were unanimous in choosing “Texts with images”. Informant C justified: “*It is better to understand the subject*”⁸. That is, according to Gairns and Redman (2001:57) the selection of material should be useful and must take into account the situation and the context. In this case the teacher mentioned by the students has previously done a research in order to know the group’s preferences. So, in order to help students, a foreign language teacher needs to facilitate their acquisition of all language strategies related to reading so that they can take advantage from the chosen texts.

Question 17 was: “What do you do to facilitate memorization of the new vocabulary?” and the options were: a) Associate with images or pictures, b) Relate to other words you already know on the subject, c) Look it up in the dictionary whenever necessary. Only informant A chose the alternative “Associate with images and pictures” and all informants chose “Look it up in the dictionary whenever necessary.” Informants A and C also chose: “Associate it with other words that you already know on the subject.” To justify his answer informant A added: “*Everything you get is through researches and memorization you do*

7. “Por que quando a professora está lendo o texto ajuda os alunos na pronúncia das palavras, depois é quando a gente não conhece uma palavra é bom sempre dar uma olhadinha no dicionário, mas (*sic*) sempre é bom ter atenção com a tradução da palavra se encaixa no texto e na compreensão.”

8. “É melhor para compreender o assunto abordado.”





*with these associations*⁹.” However, for the answers obtained in the oral interview, another controversy was noticed. When reflecting on the memorization of new words informant B answered: *“It is easier to memorize new words with illustrations*¹⁰.” Informant C, in her turn, answered: *“I think it is easier to associate the words looking for them and relate them to the others I have already known*¹¹.” In the oral interview the same informant answered: *“I memorize the new words because of the pictures and the teacher’s comments. For example, when we started the class we made comments about the illustrations. Then, when we took the text and read it, we inserted the illustration on it and joined this with our knowledge, so we developed the understanding of the sentences and we set up the text in our head*¹².” The memorization of new words with the use of pictures could be observed during the oral comprehension activity on the text with the word “handicrafts” whose meaning informants understood after they observed an illustration of an artisan at work. This was confirmed in the oral interview when they wondered how they understood that “handicrafts” is craft and informant B answered: *“Because we had an illustration and that is the same word we had in the text*¹³.” Informant C added: *“It is also because joining what we already knew with the illustrations and the comments about the pictures it was easy to understand it*¹⁴.”

The word “waterfalls” which was used in the text as well as in the picture of the Waterfall in Taquarucu, was an example that can confirm the relationship already established between the well-known words, the knowledge on the subject and the comments about the subject

9. “Tudo o que você consegue é através de pesquisas e memorização que você faz com suas associações.”

10. “É mais fácil memorizar palavras novas através de figuras.”

11. “Acho mais fácil dessa forma associar as palavras procurando-as e socializando-as com as demais que já conheço.”

12. “Através de figuras e dos comentários da professora. Por exemplo, professora, sobre cada figura nós fazemos um comentário. Então, quando nós pegamos o texto, lemos o texto, nós encaixamos a figura e, através dos nossos conhecimentos, desenvolvemos o entendimento das frases e montamos o texto na nossa cabeça.”

13. “Porque tinha uma figura e na figura aparecia a mesma palavra que tem no texto.”

14. “É também porque juntando o que a gente já sabe com as figuras e os comentários sobre as imagens, foi fácil entender.”





before reading the text. According to the answer obtained in the oral interview, the informants understood the meaning of the word when they remembered the pictures with Waterfall in Taquaruçu. Informant B answered: *“Teacher, I remembered the picture, and it helped me because I remembered the meaning of water and I know that there are waterfalls in Taquaruçu. Then, I joined the two things and I understood that it was waterfall¹⁵.”* This relates to Fulgêncio and Liberato (2000:41). According to those authors, in order to have a real understanding of the text the reader also needs to use the knowledge in his/her memory besides the visual information.

Another kind of association identified during the activity relates to the word “links” that was used in the text (The Integration Bridge links Palmas to other cities.). When questioned about its meaning, informant C answered immediately *“liga”* and when she was questioned why she understood it this way, she answered: *“I remembered that this word appears in sites on the Internet, then, I made a relationship, and I understood its meaning¹⁶.”* For Oxford (1990:38) a good way to use the image to recall what one sees or reads in a new language is to create a mental image regarding the new word. This image can be associated to the other ones whose meaning is similar; it can be used for the connection with other words related to the subject or a certain situation.

At the end of the oral interview the informant-students were asked if pictures really helped them for understanding the text and informant A answered: *“The images helped because it was easier for us to understand what was written in the text¹⁷.”* Regarding the connection she had made between the pictures and the text the same informant added: *“Starting from the moment we saw the picture and read the text, it helped, although the text did not show any illustration, but it is because we saw the illustrations before reading the text¹⁸.”* Referring

15. “Professora, eu lembrei da gravura, e o que ajudou também foi que lembrei o significado de água e que em Taquaruçu tem cachoeiras. Então, juntei as duas coisas e entendi que era cachoeira.”

16. “Eu lembrei que esta palavra aparece nos sites da internet, então, fiz a relação e entendi o significado.”

17. “As imagens ajudaram porque ficou mais fácil prá (sic) gente entender o que está escrito no texto.”

18. “A partir do momento que a gente viu a imagem e a senhora leu o texto facilitou, apesar dele (sic) não mostrar nenhuma figura, mas é porque a gente viu as figuras antes.”





to the two questions above, informant B answered: “*They helped so much (...) many words are very different from Portuguese and by looking at the illustration before reading the text you can have an idea about their meaning*¹⁹.” Regarding the same subject, informant C answered: “*Without the pictures it would have been much more difficult, but by reading the text and the presentation of the pictures we could relate one thing to the other*²⁰.” This is confirmed by Gairns and Redman (2001:36) for whom making frequent use of visual images in classroom to illustrate meanings the teacher is using an additional advantage to assist learning. The memory for visual images is extremely trustworthy and it “gives margin” to few doubts when objects and/or pictures are presented to facilitate the storage of data.

5. Conclusion

Regarding the question “how can images of known regional pictures facilitate the understanding of a text in English?” we could notice during the development of the activity that the pictures contributed positively to the students’ understanding of several unknown words because it happened when the students related the pictures to the word in the text along with the previous knowledge they had about the subject, in this case the State of Tocantins.

During the teaching practice and observations in the classroom, it was noticed that some students do not show much confidence in their predictions/inferences. Some of them prefer not to answer to the teacher’s questions about the meaning of words they are not sure to know; at other times they prefer to use the dictionary to check their hypotheses. However, it was also noticed that students who have studied with the same colleagues and the same teacher for a long time feel more confident, that is to say, even if they are not sure of knowing the meaning of the word, they are willing to give their opinions and answers.

19. “Ajudaram bastante porque muitas palavras têm muita diferença do português e olhando antes a figura você tem uma noção do que ela significa.”

20. “Sem as imagens teria sido muito mais difícil, porque através da leitura do texto e da apresentação das imagens dá prá (*sic*) socializar uma coisa com a outra.”





Regarding affectivity, a good relationship between student and teacher is vital for them meet their goals together and students can not only improve their learning level but also feel motivated to search for more information outside the classroom. When planning classes, it is suggested that teachers pay attention to the texts which will be studied, pointing out the importance of the use of more pictures as an instrument to facilitate understanding. Besides, it is important that the subject is related to the students' interest, and also that those texts are worked with reading strategies which can help students learn on their own.

It is also worth noting that in spite of the availability of textbooks for teacher's use in the classroom, the students do not have books. There is then the difficulty of reproducing/copying the activities, something which is illegal due to copyright reasons, as well as subject to financial limitations inside the school and also on the part of the students.

It is important to point out that the use of regional images contributed positively to the understanding of the text under study, which did not come from a traditional course book, it was adapted by the teacher/researcher from magazines. During the activity, enthusiasm was noticed on students when they made the associations between the well-known pictures and the words of the text in English.

Although the students insist on using the dictionary in the classroom, during the activity carried out in the experimental class, there was no need to use it. In fact, that should be considered by teachers in their pedagogical practice because if pictures are used intelligently there will be less need to consult dictionaries.

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APPENDIXES



Image 1



Image 2

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