

How Visual Aids can Help in EFL Classrooms – A Case Study at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration

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Abstract:

Visual aids studies, especially in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), have recently been largely conducted and widely discussed. In fact, the positive attainments in education settings where visual aids are used prove the terrific potentials of this tool in promoting not only the learning process but also academic performance of the language learners. Visual aids have firmly been deemed a crucial means during the teaching and learning of language. On the one hand, it is commonly assumed that employing visual aids in language classrooms serves as advanced organisers which helps inspire and facilitate language students's learning. In return, the application of these organisers would bring a positive outcome compared to the traditional teaching method. The paper depicts the situation of how and to what extent visual aids have been exploited at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA). Accordingly, insights for a more effective application of this special tool to head for the flourish of English teaching and learning at TUEBA are proposed.

Key words: *EFL classroom; language learning; visual aids*

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I. Introduction

Visual aids studies, especially in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), have recently been largely conducted and widely discussed. In fact, visual aids have firmly been deemed a crucial means during the teaching and learning of language, which is believed to produce a higher level of engagement and interaction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. In the meanwhile, language practitioners' awareness regarding the role of visual aids in language classrooms is supposed to mount. This paper attempts to explore the current situation of using visual aids as well as teachers' and learners' attitudes toward the application of this genre of teaching aid at TUEBA. This study, which was conducted during a semester at TUEBA, involves the participation of 15 lecturers from the ELT Department and 200 students from 3 faculties. Primary data, mostly derived from survey questionnaires and observation, are the main source for analysis and discussions. Accordingly, the paper suggests some ideas for selecting and designing appropriate visual aids for language teaching and learning.

II. Literature Review

Acting as an intriguing and efficient means that hugely assists the presentation and absorption of information, understandably, visual aids have perennially attracted intensive interest and concerns of researchers. Therefore, there have been a number of related studies and conceptions regarding this type of education aid. Normally, visual aids are perceived as any items in form of audio or visual manners (Lester, 2006; Leisher, 2009) which facilitate the process of delivering and attaining particular content. Thus, it is easy to encounter visual aids in educational settings in a great variety of forms, ranging from slides, map, model, images or photos to video clips, films, recordings, etc. It can be said that visual aids help enable the understanding as well as memorization (Yi-Hsun Lai, 2011) of even complex disciplinary knowledge thanks to their illustrative function. For the same token, this visual device is proved to efficaciously boost the cognitive attainment while embedding the visible experience (Wileman, 1993) into learners' minds.

Recent linguists, including Gistituati (2019), Mohammadi (2010) further developed this concept, according to which visual aids are defined as an amazing educational material not only promoting students' performance on productive skills i.e. speaking but reducing strains and anxiety during lesson time. Depending on the main purposes as well as target objectives of each education program and lesson, different types of visual aids may be relevantly employed. In general, visual aids are often classified as follows:

- Non-projected 2D/3D and projected 2D/3D (Jesse, 2008)
- Seen or Watched (Hoferlin B. et al, 2012)
- Any kinds of educational media supporting teaching and learning (Babalola, 2013)

Since the middle of previous century, the exploitation of visual aids in EFL settings have dramatically evolved, i.e. from Oral-Situational Approach (1950s) to Natural Approach (1983) and then Communicative Language Teaching Model (late 1990s). Research results reported in recent studies by Konomi (2014), Maria (2012) and Pamela Carrasco (2013) are in strong favor of the ample benefits obtained in language classrooms thanks to visual devices. Specifically, both teachers and students presented positive feedback towards the application of visual aids, particularly for motivation-provoking, thought-illustrating and idea-brainstorming. Interviewed teachers highly appreciated these visual items in terms of making vocabulary lessons more contextualized and grammar presentation more communicative. However, more time and efforts in addition to technical literacy required for designing lessons with visual integration were obvious challenges associated with this teaching approach.

III. Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative information was employed which enabled a detailed and scientific analysis in this study. Specifically, pre- and post-survey together in addition to class observations were conducted during a 10-week course of English at TUEBA. 200 experiment students were sophomores of 4 classes from 3 faculties (about 50 students/class and 2 classes/faculty). Lessons of integrated English skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar were carefully observed and reported on a weekly basis (2 skill lessons/class/week). Data collected from survey questionnaires and focus interviews were first synthesized using excel spreadsheets, then was compared and contrasted with observation figures to produce the final result. These techniques together helped reveal the current situation of using visual aids as well as teachers and learners' attitudes towards this education tool at TUEBA. Based on this, appropriate measures for improvement were proposed.

IV. Research Findings

TUEBA is a young English non-majored university in a mountainous province with quite poor facilities and access to modern educational resources. In fact, English proficiency of the majority of students at TUEBA is modest, just around A1-B1, however, both lecturers and students at TUEBA have proved passionate and excited about applying visual aids in general, multimedia in particular in classrooms wherever possible. Below are major findings of the study:

Frequency of Commonly used Visual aids:

Table 4.1 Frequency of visual aids commonly used

No.	Visual aids	Number of observed lessons	Number of lessons using visual aids	Percentages (%)
1	PowerPoint Slide	80	76	95
2	Pictures & Posters	80	15	18.8
3	Handouts	80	18	22.5
4	Board and chalk	80	53	66.3
5	Itunes (videos & audio)	80	60	75
6	Internet (Edu apps)	80	46	57.5

(Source: Authors' calculation based on collected information, 2020)

As can be seen from the table above, out of 80 observed lessons, PowerPoint slides and Itunes were the most frequently used, with 95% and 75% respectively. In the meanwhile, other supportive items like objectives, pictures and posters were present occasionally, namely around one fifth of the lessons surveyed. Surprisingly, the traditional tool – board and chalk and the modern one – internet occupied almost the same frequency ratio, with around 66% for the former and 57% for the latter. This situation somehow reflects the adaptation and integration into modern education trends at TUEBA though the resources for teaching and learning are still modest. Almost all interviewed lecturers of English stated that they always tried to apply at least one means of technology-related visual aids in their lessons to promote their students' attention and participation. In fact, PowerPoint lessons, particularly narrated ones, have become popular and favored in all disciplinary classes, including English, at TUEBA since the outbreak of covid19 pandemic. Similarly, the fact that official textbooks (LIFE – Cengage Learning) with itunes have been in use at TUEBA has greatly assisted lecturers while making the lessons more interactive.

Types of Visual aids by English skills

In addition to frequency variation, another important set of information on both the questionnaires and observation sheets also reveals that lessons of different English skills employ different types of visual items.

Table 4.2: Types of Visual aids by English skills

Skill	Types of Visual aids (X = mostly used; 0 = mostly unused)					
	Slides	Pictures & Posters	Handouts	Board & Chalk	Itunes	Internet
Speaking	X	X	X	0	0	0
Listening	X	0	X	X	X	X
Writing	X	X	0	X	0	0
Reading	X	X	0	0	0	0
Vocabulary	X	X	X	X	X	X
Grammar	X	X	0	0	0	0

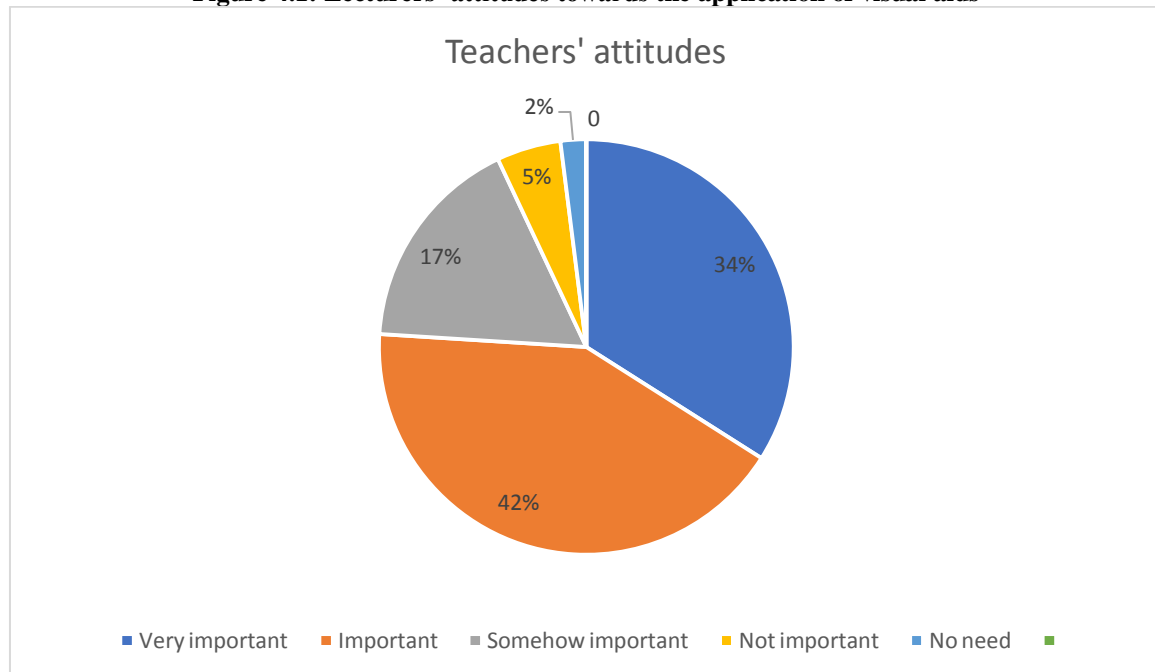
(Source: Authors' calculation based on collected information, 2020)

The figures in Table 4.2 show that visual aids were present in every observed vocabulary lesson, which reflects the immense significance of and concern about this language skill. Next came listening lessons with only the absence of pictures and posters among the six investigated visual tools. On the contrary, reading and grammar lessons seemed to employ visual aids on the least frequent basis, just one third of the aids. Speaking and writing lessons shared the same proportion of visual aids usage, most of which are traditional aids instead of modern ones like Itunes or internet.

Teachers' attitudes towards application of visual aids

A high percentage of surveyed teachers appreciated the advantages and benefits resulted from the application of visual aids in their EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, certain limitations and challenges associated with this practice have caused some lecturers at TUEBA reluctant to conduct such visual lessons.

Figure 4.1: Lecturers' attitudes towards the application of visual aids

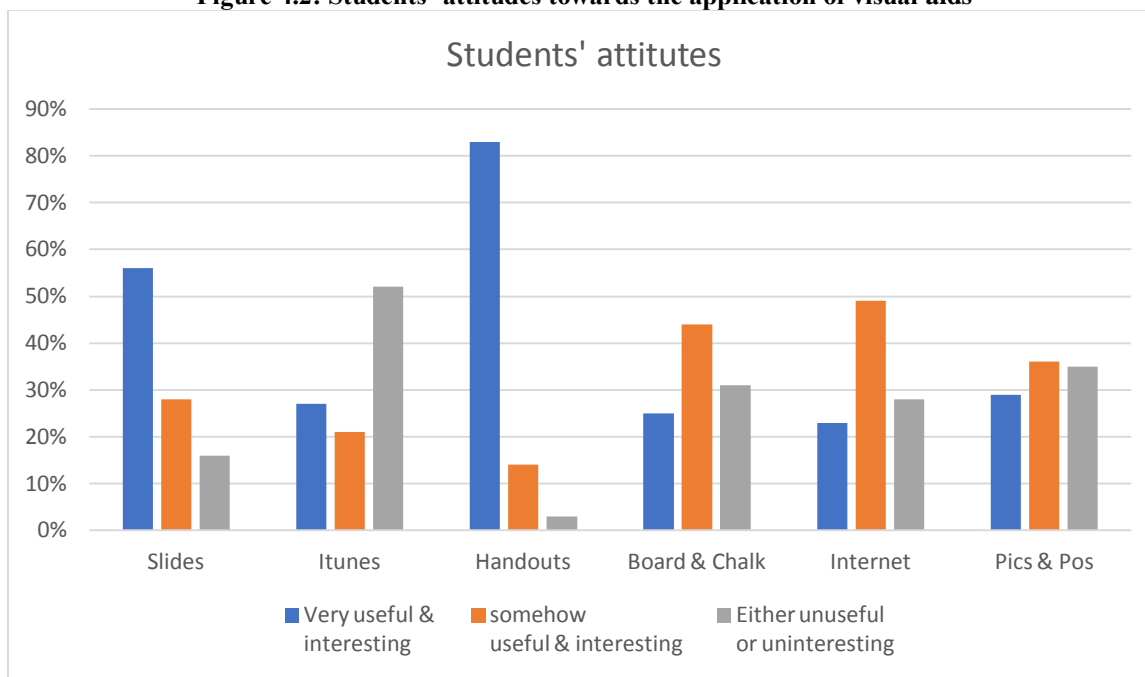


It can be seen from the figure above that most lecturers had positive viewpoint towards using visual tools in EFL classrooms, with over three fourths of surveyed people marking “very important” and “important”. Still, 7% of lecturers stated that it is insignificant or even unnecessary to utilize visual aids in their teaching because lesson content matters more than any supportive items. A deeper analysis reveals that most of the aforementioned 7% are either middle-aged lecturers hesitant to adjust to modern teaching techniques or concurrent lecturers who are too busy with other office duties. From authors’ observation, the poor teaching condition, including unreliable wi-fi, large class, modest class-time & fixed syllabus, low English proficiency of students’ also hinders the fruitful application of visual aids during English lessons at TUEBA.

Learners’ attitudes towards the application of visual aids

The similar positive picture was also seen when surveying how students evaluated the practice of using visual aids during English lessons.

Figure 4.2: Students’ attitudes towards the application of visual aids



Like lecturers, a large number of students agreed that visual aids strongly facilitated their understanding and acquisition of English skills in a more interactive manner. Among the six aids listed, handouts turned out to be the most preferred tool which received over 80% responses of “very useful & interesting”. As expected, the second favorite category belonged to slides, with totally approximately 84% of surveyed students marking this as useful and interesting. While it cost lecturers significant finance and efforts to prepare, a notable proportion of students simply consider Internet-integrated lessons to be more exciting rather than truly useful. Similarly, though Itunes were highly appreciated by lecturers as a great tool, most students had no idea of how Itunes really supported their learning, thus over half of surveyed students marked Itunes as unuseful and uninteresting.

V. Implications

Taking the above findings into consideration, the following suggestions are proposed with the hope of promoting the role of visual aids in EFL classrooms at TUEBA. Accordingly, the recommendations are supposed to help reduce lecturers’ difficulties while enabling students to take better advantage of visual aids in their learning process. The measures are categorized relevant to the two core pillars in the educational system, namely school management, lecturers of English and students. For sure, in nowadays’ learner-centered classrooms, it is essential for students to sharpen their autonomous learning skills while taking advantage of supportive aids and tools within accessibility. For the mentioned stakeholders, suggestions for improvement are as follows:

For school management

For a state school like TUEBA, the approval and facilitation of the school management in any activities, including the application of visual aids, do play a crucial role. Obviously, with the school management, difficulties related to teaching-learning infrastructure as well as classroom facilities (i.e. wi-fi, projector, loudspeaker etc.) will be handled more efficiently. This will certainly motivate lecturers to employ visual aids to a larger extent. Besides, recognition by school management in forms of compliments, certificates or financial grants are believed to inspire lecturers a lot in improving their teaching techniques. Raising concerns and awareness about the importance of visual aids in classrooms through workshop training or professional seminars, particularly for newly joining and middle-aged lecturers, is also deemed to enhance the teaching practice as well as academic performance of EFL students at TUEBA.

For lecturers of English

To reduce workload for lecturers in the process of designing lessons with visual aids, collaboration and share among lecturers is a good idea. Lecturers should gather in groups specialized for particular English skills or categories of visual aids. By this way, lecturers can collaborate with, sharing their ideas as well as learning from other group members. Also, each lecturer may have more profound knowledge and better skill with certain types of visual aids, thus, it will help save time while enhancing the overall quality of the preparation.

In the context of 4.0 generation, lecturers of English should make efficient use of the various ready-made visual aids available on the Internet, particularly the free edu apps and tools. This is not only money- and time-saving but also highly interactive and easier for storage compared to traditional visual aids in forms of prints.

Last but not least, to head for a more fruitful application of visual aids well facilitating students' performance, it is vital for lecturers to further enrich their knowledge and sharpen their skills, including digital literacy. Accordingly, they are supposed to proactively seek for as well as participating in professional development events which now have become highly available and accessible both on-site and online.

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