Seeing is natural, but viewing is not: designing advertisements in a rural classroom.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a collaborative action research case study into Grade 10 teaching and learning of visual literacy in a rural high school in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Visual literacy is a new aspect that has been incorporated in English First Additional Language National Curriculum Statement (Grade 10-12), which has been implemented in Grade 10 from 2006. With the aim of gaining knowledge and improving performance in visual literacy, I designed a unit of lessons, which exposed learners to visual grammar and visual texts. The data revealed that visual literacy could be taught meaningfully in a rural high school as the learners could identify, cut, paste and critically discuss elements of visual language and they finally designed their own advertisements in groups. However, the following factors emerged as hindrances to the successful teaching of visual literacy in a rural high school: lack of resources; learners’ lack of a foundation in visual literacy from Grades 7-9; and problems revolving around time management and pacing.

Keywords: Visual literacy, visual grammar, advertisements, reading and viewing, critical language awareness, feedback

Introduction

Even though the ability to see is a natural human condition, the ability to encode and decode meaning of a particular visual image, is a skill that needs to be explicitly taught (Moore & Dwyer, 1994:7). Literacy extends beyond reading and writing to include viewing and designing, and being critically aware of language as a human construct. John Debes first used the term “visual literacy” in 1968, in relation to the use of visual images as educational aids for teachers, librarians and media experts. Visual literacy refers to:

The ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st century media in ways that advance thinking, decision-making communication, and learning (21st Century Skills, 2005: 1)

The need for visual literacy came with the invention of the camera, and “most of what we know and learn, what we buy and believe, what we recognise and desire, is determined by the domination of the human psyche by the photograph” (Dondis, 1973: 7). Kress (2002: 1) pointed out that modern life is more about “the world shown than the world told”.

This paper focuses on advertisements because they “are everywhere” (Prinsloo & Criticos, 1991: 295), and even in a rural area such as the one where this research was conducted. The visual images in advertising include:
Fridge magnets, promotional messages on morning cereal box, the neon and awning signs of local stores, posters on telephone poles, outdoor billboards, bumper stickers, advertisements on buses [and minibus taxis in the South African situation], photos on pop machines, posters in the school hallways, logos on friends’ clothing, blurbs on internet sites, advertisements in magazines and commercials on television (Graydon, 2003: 9).

There is a long list of such images one can think of and which have existed because of advertising. The main focus in producing advertisements is to make profits by selling more, which is done by persuading people to buy more or persuading more people to buy or to engage both strategies, which is the primary purpose of advertising (Balzagette, n.d. : 12).

As the advertising agencies carefully design advertisements, our environment becomes full of images. Lance (2005: 1) viewed “the use of visual texts as spreading throughout modern cultures and saw schools as compelled to change their instructional practices by encouraging visual literacy” because all media productions, including advertisements, embody “points of view” about the world. Whether these viewpoints are consciously intended or not, they manifest themselves through a variety of choices by the people who make them (Critical Media Literacy, 1994: 3). Visual literacy, therefore, calls for an awareness that language is not free or neutral but language is bound by society or depends on those who design such texts. Ivanic (1990: 125-126) wrote that:

Language is shaped by social forces. Powerful social groups determine how, particularly people, should be described. Power relations affect how people speak to each other. Historically, the communicative practices of the dominant group have come to be accepted as correct, appropriate, the norm; this has effectively excluded most people from many realms of action.

Language, and in this case visual forms of communication, are “powerful means of maintaining and reproducing relations of domination” used by “men and women to fight out their social and political battles at the level of signs, meanings and representations” (Janks, 2000: 176).

One part of this research was to make my learners “aware of how language can be patronising, demeaning, disrespectful, offensive, exclusive or the opposite” and if they chose to conform to the advertisements presented, it sought to help them to do so “with open eyes, to recognise the compromise they are making, to identify their feelings about it, and to maintain an independent self-image” (Ivanic, 1990: 129-131).
Visual literacy is not new in the history of education in South Africa. In the 1970’s many countries including the Republic of South Africa took an initiative to include visual literacy as one of the components in the syllabus. However, due to the political setting of that time in South Africa, visual literacy was included in the English First language syllabus, intended mainly for white children, but not in the English Second language syllabus intended mainly for black learners (Prinsloo & Criticos, 1991: 32-33). As the new curriculum is based on the principle of redressing the imbalances of the past (Republic of South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996 as quoted in South Africa, Department of Education, 2003: 1), the introduction of visual literacy in English First Additional Language (the equivalent of the old English second language) curriculum statement marked the beginning of the study of visual literacy for everybody in South Africa.

Visual literacy is woven into the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades 10-12 (General) and is spread across the four Learning Outcomes (LO’s) together with their Assessment Standards (AS’s). As an illustration, in Listening and Speaking (LO):

Learners collect and synthesise information, construct knowledge, solve problems, and express ideas and opinions. Critical listening skills enable learners to recognise values and attitudes embedded in texts and to challenge biased and manipulative language (South Africa, Department of Education, 2003: 12).

In Reading and Viewing (LO2), “learners develop proficiency in reading and viewing a wide range of literal and non-literal texts, including visual texts, for information” (South Africa, Department of Education, 2003: 13). Writing and Presenting (LO3) aims “to produce competent, versatile writers who will be able to use their skills to develop appropriate written, visual and multi-media texts for a variety of purposes” (South Africa, Department of Education, 2003: 13). In Language (LO4), learners should “develop critical awareness of how values and power relations are embedded in language and how language may influence others” (South Africa, Department of Education, 2003: 13).

One of the shortcomings of the new curriculum was its failure to make sure those teachers at school level, including myself, were visually literate enough to unpack visual literacy with their students and make the curriculum a resounding success. That was my motivation to conduct this research with a view to improve my practice and to empower my students and myself by designing and implementing a lesson unit on visual literacy.
Methodology

My research site was carried out at the high school in which I taught from 1993 to February 2007, which is located in a rural village in the Butterworth District of the Eastern Cape. The school is three kilometres from the nearest small town and is at the centre of many poverty stricken villages.

At the time of the research project, the school had enrolled 451 learners who all spoke Xhosa as their home language. Many learners at the school come from the surrounding villages whilst a few are from the small town nearby. Many learners come from extremely poor families where the main source of income is a government grant for old age or disability. A few parents hawk in the village to make a living and children from this background struggle to pay the R150.00 per annum school fee, although all are required to dress in the prescribed school uniform. A few students are from families whose parents are teachers, nurses, policemen and business people and are exposed to viewing television, reading magazines, newspapers and novels, and travel on vacation.

My research aimed to improve my practice by striving for a balance between gaining knowledge and improving my practical teaching expertise on visual literacy. To this end action research was ideal for my situation; as McNiff (1996: 10) put it:

"The linking of the terms action and research highlights the essential feature of the method trying out new ideas in practice as means of improving and as means of increasing knowledge."

O’Leary (2004:139) saw the combination of knowledge and change as characteristic of action research, and I chose action research because I wanted to be part of what was going on; hence this study became “insider” research. The implementation of the lesson unit on visual literacy was part of my day-to-day teaching and not something from outside; it was what I was supposed to teach and what the learners were supposed to learn.

I designed a visual literacy lesson unit on advertisements, which consisted of 7 lesson plans running over 10 school periods in 10 school days. The aim of the unit was to expose the learners to the elements of visual grammar and to apply that knowledge in designing their own advertisements. The first lesson was on camera shots and camera angles. Apart from grabbing the attention and interest of the learners, I wanted to show the learners that
photography is subjective, that is photographs are constructed from the viewpoint of the photographer. The second one was on facial, hand and body signs as the key components of non-verbal communication, in which learners had to recognise that communication is not only in words but also in signs. The third lesson was on composition features that included colour, focus, lighting, juxtaposition, backgrounding and foregrounding. I showed the learners that the advertised product will come with other aspects which would make it appear real and the best in the market, whereas in reality it may not be so.

The fourth lesson was on the use of emotive and manipulative language in advertisements, which is done through the use of: a unique slogan/motto, adjectives, ambiguity, figures of speech and/or rhyme. The lesson promoted critical language awareness that language is not neutral or free but is coloured by the views of the speaker, writer or advertiser, as already stated above. The fifth lesson was on the stereotyping that is used by advertisers to promote a specific product for a specific category of people in the society on one hand, whereas on the other it promotes discriminatory practices. For example, advertisements will assign certain roles of the society to boys or men, on one hand, and to girls and women on the other.

The sixth lesson was on designing a school advertisement. In this lesson the learners applied all the knowledge they had acquired in the lesson unit to designing a school advertisement in groups. The purpose of the last lesson was to assess whether the learners could critically analyse a given advertisement in a given time without the assistance of peers in their group.

I used learners’ daily activities, journals and individual and focus group interviews to collect data around the implementation of the lesson unit on visual literacy. After gathering data from various sources, I analysed and discussed it in a descriptive way. I looked at the data I had collected from several sources and related them to my original and expected outcomes. I also looked out for unexpected outcomes that were of significance and reported them (Koshy, 2005: 109). I developed a set pattern of the following three questions that I applied to each lesson of the research unit:

1. What went well?
2. What did not go well?
3. What needed to be improved if the same lesson were to be taught in future?
These questions gave me “the ability to step back and critically analyse situations, to recognise and avoid bias to obtain valid and reliable data and to think abstractly” (Koshy, 2005: 114). The process of analysis gave me the opportunity to construct personal theories as I listed successful strategies and what did not work effectively.

I used verbatim extracts from the students’ journals, focus group interviews, and produced activities; non-participant observations; discussion with a critical friend and a research diary to illustrate the claims made in the analysis.

The successes of the research project

In the first cycle of action research that set out to find meaningful ways in which visual literacy could be taught and learned in a rural high school, the conclusion can be drawn that the implementation of the lesson unit was on the whole successful as shown below.

Firstly, the implementation of this lesson unit empowered the learners to identify and interpret the visual elements used in composing an advertisement that included colour, background, foreground, focus, camera angles and shots, texture and lighting as shown in figure 1, an activity where they cut out photographs and labelled camera angles. In another activity, they were able to write the symbolic meaning attached to the use of particular colours in a visual image and the feelings or moods those colours represented (Giorgis, Johnson, Bonomo & Colbert, 1999: 148) as shown by the following examples: “Green-health; Orange-Warmth; White-Purity”.

Secondly, learners designed their own school advertisements including the elements of visual grammar in a way that would attract Grade 9 learners to desire to do Grade 10 in their school (see appendices 1 & 2). In all the advertisements, learners incorporated different photographs (cut out of magazines) showing learners engaged in sport, dance, modelling, the computer laboratory and classrooms. They also included the school’s “brand name” together with the school logo. Some learners drew sections of the school buildings showing the school at an angle in a similar way to that in which a photographer would take a shot, and with a colourful foreground and background. During the presentation of the advertisements,
learners justified the inclusion of each item in the advertisement frame. All in all, learners applied the elements of visual grammar they had been taught in the lesson unit.

Thirdly, learners acquired critical language awareness. Learners developed skills to analyse a constructed text. They could deconstruct and reconstruct visual texts such as an advertisement to identify stereotyping. In the school advertisements they designed, learners avoided stereotyping by including boys and girls, black and white, and rural and urban settings (see appendices 1 & 2).

Finally, the teacher’s role facilitated meaningful learning. Throughout the presentation of the lesson unit, the teacher ‘scaffolded’ the learning of visual literacy. This refers to:

… a process where the knowledgeable person gives more assistance to learners when exposed to new or difficult tasks, and the teacher continuously withdraws his support as the learners master the task and are able to interact independently (Larkin, 2002: 1).

In all the lessons, I would assist the learners to understand what the activity required and thereafter leave them to work on their own. I used instructions with routine, consistent and familiar language that recycled recently introduced terminology of visual grammar, which included: colour, background, foreground, lighting, focus, texture, camera angles and shots, juxtaposition, slogan, logo, target group and the name of the product. Routine, consistency and familiarity ensured that learners would encounter fewer problems communicating in English as an additional language (Wong-Fillmore, 1985: 29). I also utilised those learners who understood earlier than others to scaffold the learning of their peers and that sped up the process of learning and teaching. This is one of the new responsibilities facing teachers as they should not make meaning for the learners but should help learners make their own meaning as envisaged in the new curriculum.

**Shortcomings of the research**

Even though the lesson unit was successful as shown above, it emerged that there were issues that made the teaching and learning of visual literacy difficult.

First of all, time allocation for English lessons was not sufficient for a project of this nature. The school timetable allocated only thirty minutes for a single and sixty minutes for a double lesson, making it difficult to manage time efficiently in very short, single periods. At times I waited outside the classroom to allow the teacher of the previous lesson to collect learners’
books or finish a point before I entered the classroom. Sometimes I had been in another classroom when the bell rang and I would spend three or four minutes before I started in Grade 10 A. In short, my periods were less by three to five minutes instead of the thirty (or sixty) minutes that appeared in the timetable.

Secondly, lack of resources was found to be a hindrance in successful teaching and learning of visual literacy. Resources in this case refer to magazines, scissors, coloured pens and paper, and glue that the learners used in the course of this lesson unit. Even though I tried to bring as many magazines and newspapers as I could and requested learners to bring other materials, it turned out there were not enough resources. The majority of learners did not come with the requested items and the whole class depended on those that were available. Learners waited for one another to finish before they could start working. As a result, valuable time was wasted time during tuition (Reeves, 2000: 69). Had each learner easily accessed the required resources, it would have taken a shorter period to do some of the activities than what actually happened.

Thirdly, group work was not used judiciously. Precious time was wasted in discussion during group work because some activities in the lesson unit were designed to promote discussion and group work. For example, in Lesson 1 six learners were given two minutes to decide what had been omitted in a given camera shot. Two minutes was too short a time for each of the six learners to express his or her views and there was an extension of time to allow for discussion. Also, there were differences of interpretation relating to certain images and the lesson did not proceed until such differences were resolved, which should not have been allowed to drag the lesson out especially as the interpretation of the image was not the core part of lesson 1.

Fourthly, there were constant interruptions to teaching and learning, which had an effect on time management and pacing of the lessons. On one occasion, the flow of the lesson unit was disturbed by a sports meeting. Learners wrote in their journals:

Nothing much we did because we were interrupted by the sports. I was bad to be disturbed because we were so deep interested on the lesson.

I never met with it before. But at the time the sports captain come at our classroom and tell us lets goin to the fields to play our games that were disappoint us.
On another occasion, the teacher who was teaching the class prior to mine took longer than expected and extended into my period. I wrote in my journal, “learners could not finish their Life Science test and overlapped to my single period”.

Fifthly, learners did not have basic training in visual literacy before the implementation of the lesson unit and that slowed down the pace of my teaching. Evidence of this was shown in the learners’ focus group interviews as the learners claimed that they had never been taught about interpreting visual images. Also, learners wrote in their journals:

Yes I know the lesson before but it is not sem lesson. That I do before is about hobies.

I did not see this lesson before.

Even though this action research project was concerned with one teacher (myself) it emerged in the analysis and discussion of data that other teachers who had taught my Grade 10 A learners in Grades 7-9 did not have the visual language necessary to teach the learners visual literacy because the teachers did not experience visual literacy either as learners or as teacher trainees. As an illustration, both non-participant observers in the researcher’s school acknowledged that they had not been taught visual literacy at any time in their own education:

I don’t remember anything of the kind…visual literacy …maybe it’s the term that is missing here.

In my teacher training years I received no training on visual literacy.

In this Grade 10 class I was obliged to return to teaching elements of visual literacy that normally should have been already taught in Grade 9 and earlier grades, because these learners had not had any prior visual literacy training. For example, in figure 1 above, cutting of the right side of the image is not straight, something the learners should have acquired earlier in their school journey. The effect of this was to delay me in starting with the Grade 10 visual literacy curriculum.

Worst of all, learners’ language fell below the curriculum expectations because they had had such limited exposure to English in the past. In the course of the lesson unit the learners struggled to express themselves in English. I waited for them to finish what they said in English and that took a lot of time. Non participant Observer B said in the interview,
I didn’t see anything which was not properly done except that now what is the most important thing is that now with our kids it is not easy to express themselves. That is the thing I found out. That, it’s not easy for them to express themselves otherwise it was wonderful for me.

Some learners wrongly used words, like “short for shot” or would spell words in a way that was influenced by their mother tongue, Xhosa, where they would spell “because” as “becouse” or ‘choose’ as “tshuz”. Other learners appeared to mishear words; as one learner wrote in his journal, “I feel happy because I want this car ting.” The learner wrote “car ting” instead of “cutting”. I also spent time explaining instructions so that learners could understand exactly what was expected of them. Generally, their language was far below the level described in the Grade 10 learning outcomes, and I had to slow down the pace of the lesson to accommodate their language level.

To conclude, all the above aspects contributed to the slow pace of teaching and learning of the lesson unit on visual literacy. Even though the lesson unit was expected to be completed in 10 school days, it took 15 days and some lesson activities were not accomplished. For example, in figure signs, only the facial signs were dealt with whilst the hand signs and body posture were not tackled due to time limits.

**Improvement plan**

This sub-section will give general recommendations on how to improve the teaching of the visual literacy lesson unit in future.

First, the school timetable should be adjusted. The shortness of the school periods at 30 minutes each does not allow adequate time for many in-class activities. To mention just one of many possible examples: when getting students to design an advertisement, be it individually or in groups, it cannot be done adequately in a lesson of only 30 minutes, even if minimal time is allocated to introducing the task. Debriefing the task in the same lesson is impossible given the limited time.

I would recommend that the school review its lesson scheduling to aim towards more lessons that are longer. The emphasis today in many subjects is on greater student participation and most especially much richer in-class activities and tasks, which require longer lesson periods in order to reap the full benefits of the Outcomes-Based-
Education. There are of course a variety of options which might include more double lesson periods or reducing the total number of scheduled lessons but making them longer. The latter might well be a medium-term goal.

Second, school policy should be revised to minimise regular interruptions. The evidence points to frequent unscheduled interruptions of the tuition programme for extramural activities, such as soccer activities, etc. This was very disruptive of the lessons. The recommendation is that the school should have a firm and practical policy that would ensure a good balance between tuition and extra-curricular activities, but also that each be properly scheduled well in advance so that teaching is not randomly interrupted.

In addition, district sports events need to be scheduled well in advance and with due regard for the tuition schedules of the schools so as to avoid disruptions of teaching. Students need well scheduled teaching and extramural activities that fit together smoothly and not an environment of random interruptions of either.

Third, provision of resources for visual literacy lessons and activities should be made. To teach visual literacy requires some additional resources such as scissors, coloured pens and paper glue, in addition to the textbook. Because the majority of learners come from families that are not well off we cannot expect them to provide these essential learning resources. So it is recommended that the school management team (SMT) provides funds to buy pairs of scissors, coloured pens and paper glue that would be kept centrally and be circulated in all classes for visual literacy activities when needed.

In addition, I would recommend that the school budget for a subscription to a daily or weekly newspaper and a variety of weekly or monthly magazines, which would also be made available to learners during break times to promote free reading and viewing.

Non-participant Observer A said,

I think within the school budget there is a need that each subject should be allocated its own funding but not only relying on that but each department, they should also embark on a sort of fundraising especially that they know that they will have some programs that will need some minor resources here and there and try doing even once trying to complement those who are having problems.

As the school has three television sets with either a video player or a DVD player, two of these should be placed in two separate classrooms for viewing by learners during
break times. The learners’ exposure to these media forms would provide additional opportunities for them to acquire language and to view advertisements that include sound and moving images.

Most important is the provision of feedback. In light of the experience of this research project, in future – in similar lessons, I would provide learners with both positive and negative feedback after each activity they engage with advertisements. Feedback is defined as a “means of providing information how and why the child understands and misunderstands, and what directions the student must take to improve” (Hattie, 1999: 9). In his research Hattie (as quoted in Mason, 2005:5) found that “the single most powerful factor that enhances achievement is feedback on their learning provided to students.” The importance of feedback is vital in language learning as learners need to know “when they are communicating well and when they are making errors or fail to communicate” (Murray, 2006: 1). For example, even though the learners’ own advertisements were good, there are areas of improvement. For example, in all the school advertisements, learners left the exercise lined white paper as it were without creating a good background and foreground (see appendices 1 & 2)

**Conclusion**

My engagement in this research helped my learners and me to gain an understanding and interpretation of the elements of visual grammar, including use of colour, camera angles and shots, focus, lighting, juxtaposition, backgroundering and foregrounding, and which are the key elements of visual literacy in the new curriculum. The project helped the learners to design a school advertisement in groups applying all the knowledge and expertise they gathered in the lesson unit. During the implementation of this lesson unit, it appeared that time management and pacing had a negative impact in teaching and learning. Time and pacing is currently a central concern in South Africa that hinders meaningful teaching and learning as shown in various studies that have been conducted throughout the country (Reeves, 2000). Had this learning outcome been achieved in Grade 9, the teaching and learning pace of the lesson unit on visual literacy in Grade 10 would have been faster and more work could have been covered. Visual literacy is an exciting new aspect of the transformation in South African education, but it needs to be better understood, better resourced, and more carefully integrated into the practical management of our rural schools.
List of references


Appendix 1 (Advertisement produced by learners)

Appendix 2 (Advertisement produced by learners)