

Images in ELT Textbooks: Are They Just Decoration?

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Three English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks produced by major English Language Teaching (ELT) publishers were surveyed to determine the possible learning functions images play in the texts. Building on the work of previous studies (Hill, 2003; Romney & Bell, 2012) and using a typology by Levin (1981), the study considered six functions including five learning functions in addition to one noneducational, decorative function. The study was able to identify images for five of the six functions considered and concluded that while many images in ELT textbooks do not have active learning tasks for students, the majority of images still had a passive learning function.

教科書に描かれた画像が学習の場面で果たす役割の可能性を確定するため、大手英語教授法 (ELT) 出版社3社の作成した外国語としての英語 (EFL) に関する教科書3冊について調査を行った。前回の研究 (D. A. Hill, 2003, C. Romney and L. Bell, 2012) 成果を受け、J. Levin (1981) の類型学を使用して、5つの学習機能と1つの装飾機能の合計6つの機能について検証を行った。その結果、6つの機能のうち5つに対して、EFL教科書に使われている画像の多くは学生に対して能動的な役割を持たないものの、大多数は受動的役割を備えていることが判明した。

THE IMPRESSION that many images used in ELT course books do not seem to have a learning purpose but are simply a decorative afterthought has been put forward by many teachers and researchers in the ELT field (Bell & Gower, 1998; Goldstein, 2008; Hill, 2003; Prowse, 1998; Romney & Bell, 2011; Viney, 2006). This idea is often framed as a tension between what Prowse (1998) identifies as images that are “aesthetically pleasing” and images that are “pedagogically effective” (p. 140). It has also been noted that images are included in commercially available course books only for the “flick test” (Bell & Gower, 1998, p. 125) or the “30-second evaluation” (Byrd, 2001, p. 422). In other words, it appears that publishers feel that teachers are making decisions about adopting a book for use in class, at least initially, on the textbook’s attractiveness. Therefore, the publishers include a large number of images to increase the text’s attractiveness. This has led one commentator to criticize the need for course books that use a “modern magazine format” (Renshaw, 2011) full of images. This paper hopes to contribute to the discussion by seeking to answer the question: Are the majority of images in ELT textbooks decorative or do they have a learning purpose?



Images in Textbooks

The first study on the learning purpose of images in ELT materials was conducted by Hill (2003). Hill analyzed images in two ELT course books and categorized them as either “useful” or “decorative” (p. 176). He claimed that 55% of all images in the texts were “purely decorative because the students were not “asked to use them in any way” (p. 176). The remaining 45% of images were useful.

Romney and Bell (2012) did a similar study with Business English (BE) textbooks, again categorizing graphics as either “instructional” or “decorative.” In this study they defined images as instructional if there were written instructions included in the text for either the students or the teacher to do something with the image, i.e., perform a task. Their research revealed that 73% of the images in the texts reviewed were decorative, with only 27% being instructional.

However, they noted that their simple binary definition of “instructional” versus “decorative” does not fully represent all the possible purposes for including an image in ELT materials and felt that some images categorized as decorative might in fact contribute to learning although not directly.

Before much of this discussion of images in ELT textbooks began, Levin (1981) devised a typology that identified functions of pictures in instructional texts for L1 learners. He established eight possible roles for visuals: five pedagogical functions and three non-pedagogical, i.e., decorative reasons, for including images. Levin’s eight functions are: (1) decoration, (2) remuneration, (3) motivation, (4) reiteration, (5) representation, (6) organization, (7) interpretation, and (8) transformation. The first three functions are nonpedagogical and the last five are pedagogical.

Levin describes decorative images as increasing the “attractiveness” (p. 211) of the text, while remunerative images are intended to increase the sales of the book. Motivational images should increase a student’s interest in the text. The next two

functions, reiterative and representational, are quite similar, but Levin does make a distinction between the two. Reiterative images repeat what is in the text. In ELT materials this would be something similar to a picture dictionary. Students see a picture and a word of the same thing. Representational images make an idea more concrete. For example, in ELT materials, a student might be asked to read a short article about an actual person. Included with the passage is a photograph of that person. Reiterative images show people, places, things, actions, etc. in a generic way. Representational images show people, places, things, events, etc. in a specific way.

According to Levin, organizational images organize the information presented to make it easier to understand. An example might be using a family tree to show the relationships between the family members so students can easily understand the difference between grandparents and parents. The interpretation function helps clarify difficult concepts or ideas. An example in ELT materials might be using a watch or clock to illustrate the concept of telling time. Finally, the transformational function is an image that creates a mnemonic device that, according to Levin, helps the students to memorize things that are “difficult to remember” (p. 216).

Methodology

Building on the work of Hill (2003), Romney and Bell (2012) and Levin (1981), a survey was conducted of three ELT course books commonly used in Japan to determine if the images in these texts were decorative or if they had a pedagogical function, and if so what.

Although it was not designed specifically for ELT materials, Levin’s typology (1981) was used as a guide for this study. From his work, eight questions, one corresponding to each function, were devised based on his descriptions. The questions are listed in table 1.

Table 1. Functions and Questions

| Function | | Question |
|----------|------------------|---|
| 1. | Decoration | Does the image increase the visual appeal? |
| 2. | Remuneration | Does the image increase the sales of the text? |
| 3. | Motivation | Does the image increase interest in the material? |
| 4. | Reiteration | Does the image repeat the text material? |
| 5. | Representational | Does the image make the text material more concrete? |
| 6. | Organization | Does the image provide an organizational framework? |
| 7. | Interpretation | Does the image clarify difficult to understand concepts or ideas? |
| 8. | Transformation | Does the image mnemonically illustrate the material? |

These questions were then applied to the images in three ELT course books commonly used in Japan. (See Appendix A for a list of titles.) If the answer to the question, based on the context, task, theme, etc. of the material in which the image was found, was *yes*, then it was determined that served that function.

The analysis was conducted by looking at the image and asking questions 4 through 8 as listed in table 1 in numerical order. The *yes* or *no* answer was recorded in a spreadsheet. All of the five questions were asked of each image and all answers were recorded. It was possible that a single image could serve more than one function, although this was a rare finding. The images in the surveyed textbooks were systematically analyzed, one by one, page by page, starting with the top-left corner moving to the bottom right corner.

Questions Excluded From the Survey

Ideally all eight questions would have been used to analyze the images, but this was not possible. For example, question number two, “Does the image increase the sales of the text?” is not a question that could be answered by looking at the image in the context of the text and how it related to the teaching/learning activities. It is a question that can only be answered by the text’s publisher, if at all. Therefore, this study did not use the question related to the remunerative function.

The question relating to the motivation function was also not used. Levin (1981), while including motivation as a possible function for an image in teaching materials, did not feel that the data supporting this assertion was conclusive and, in later revisions to his typology, he dropped the motivation function altogether (Levin, Anglin, & Carney, 1987).

However, motivation, or engagement, is often attributed as a reason for using images in language teaching (Wright, 1989; Keddie, 2009; Maley, 2009). Nevertheless, as with the question relating to remuneration, it is not answerable by simply looking at the image in context. The image might increase interest for some users, but for others it might not. It is not possible to determine this from the image and/or text itself. The users of the text would have to be surveyed.

Even if an image were not necessarily motivating, it may have been included in the text by the graphic designer/author/publisher because he or she hoped that it would increase the student’s interest in the material. Again, determining the intentions of the materials’ creators would require surveying them, not the text, and it is beyond the scope of this study to guess at the intentions of the materials’ creators.

The question relating to the decorative function was not excluded but neither was it directly applied to an image. To some extent, all images used in teaching materials are decorative

(Misanchuck, 1992) and therefore the answer to this question would be *yes* for all images analyzed. Levin felt that the first three functions--decoration, remuneration and motivation--had no educational value but the last five--reiteration, representation, organization, interpretation and transformation--did have a learning function. This study was seeking to separate images whose sole function was decoration from those with an additional learning function. Therefore, questions 4 through 8 were asked of each image in the course book and if the answer was *no* to all five questions, than the conclusion was that the images did not have a learning function and served only a decorative function.

Items Excluded From the Survey

Winn (1987) made a distinction between pictorial representations, including photographs, illustrations, etc. and figural representations which are image like items but they contain text, for example pie charts, line graphs, etc. This study was concerned with images, as defined by Winn (1987), i.e., pictorial representations. The study did not analyze graphics that are primarily text, i.e., figural representations.

Furthermore, icons were excluded from the survey. Misanchuck (1992) does not consider icons to be part of the content of the text; instead they are part of the access structure of the text (Waller, 1982). Using Misanchuck's (1992) idea that icons are "sign-posts indicating the location of certain materials" (p. 115), any image that was repeated through out the book used to indicate a type of activity was excluded. Common icon examples include an image of a CD to indicate a listening activity, an image of a light bulb to indicate that students should use their own information, and an image of a pen to indicate a writing activity.

Results

The three texts surveyed for this study included a total of 1,640 non-icon, pictorial representational images. Of these images, the majority, 1,337 images or 82%, served at least one of Levin's (1981) learning functions, with 308, or 18%, having only a decorative function. The most common function identified was number five, representational, with 764 images, or 47%, fulfilling this function. The least common functions were number six and seven, organizational and interpretation, with 100 and 101 images respectively, or approximately 6% each. No transformational images were found. Table 2 shows a detailed breakdown of the findings and examples.

Table 2. Functions, Image Counts, and Examples

| Function | Images | Percent | Example |
|----------------|--------|---------|--|
| Decoration | 308 | 18% | Pictures of smiling people along the page header (Helgesen, Brown and Wiltshier, 2010, p. 8) |
| Reiteration | 372 | 23% | Pictures of everyday items with English names below (Richards, 2005, p. 8) |
| Representation | 764 | 47% | Picture of Leonardo DiCaprio alongside a passage about him (Wilson, 2007, p. 8) |
| Organization | 100 | 6% | The food pyramid (Richards, 2005, p. 58) |
| Interpretation | 101 | 6% | Map-like diagram showing the relationships of buildings, e.g., "next to" (Richards, 2005, p. 88) |
| Transformation | 0 | 0% | None |
| Total | 1,640 | 100% | |

Discussion

The study was unable to find any images for the transformational function. Levin envisioned this function as images being used as mnemonic devices to help students remember difficult material. At first glance, this seems to be something that would be attractive to second/foreign language educators, but as Clark and Lyons (2011) point out, mnemonic devices are limited in their usefulness by their “cultural or linguistic specificity” (p. 18). As global ELT publishers are creating course books for use around the world by students with varying first languages and cultures (Bell and Gower, 1998), images to be used as mnemonic devices may be impossible to create.

The majority of images in this study were found to have a representational function (47%). Levin (1981) defines this function as images that make the content of the text more concrete. A good example can be found on page 16 of *Interchange Intro* (Richards, 2005). Here the students are practicing three short, scripted conversations about the hometowns of three fictional characters in the text. Included with the scripts are three pictures of places mentioned in the dialogues: Kyoto, Japan, London and Lima, Peru. These images make the scripted conversations more concrete by showing the students the actual places the characters are from and therefore fulfill the representational function.

Another example can be found on page 60 of *Smart Choice 1* (Wilson, 2007). Here the students are reading about visiting Rome. Included with the passage are three images of locations mentioned in the text: the Coliseum, the Vatican and the Forum. Again, these images make the reading passage more concrete by showing the students the actual places mentioned. Like the images in *Interchange Intro* (Richards, 2005), these images are identified as serving the representational function. However, unlike the images in *Interchange Intro* (Richards, 2005) the students are asked to first look at the images and discuss what they know, if anything, about the places.

This difference of having instructions or not is significant for Hill (2003) and Romney and Bell (2012), but not for this study. In the case of the images on page 16 of *Interchange Intro* (Richards, 2005), the students are not instructed to do anything with the images, not even look at them. Thus, according to the criteria used by both Hill (2003) and Romney and Bell (2012) these images would be classified as decorative. In the *Smart Choice 1* example, the students are given a task to perform and therefore would be classified by both Hill (2003) and Romney and Bell (2012) as useful. However, according to Levin (1981), both examples serve the representational learning function. He does not make the distinction of active, having instructions, or passive, not having instructions.

The current study, following Levin (1981), did not make the distinction between active and passive. If the current study had made this distinction, then it is possible that a large number of images classified as having a learning function would have instead been classified as decorative, i.e., not having a learning function, and the results would be similar to the previous studies of Hill (2003) and Romney and Bell (2012).

Conclusion

Contrary to the previous work of Hill (2003) and Romney and Bell (2012), 82% of the images in the course books surveyed in this study fulfilled at least one of the learning functions proposed by Levin (1981) and therefore are more than just decorative, at least passively.

However, just because the image fulfills one of Levin’s (1981) functions does not mean that it will contribute to learning. Morrison, Ross and Kemp (2006) discuss this issue and note that merely including an image does not mean that the students will even look at it. Similarly, Sless (1981) felt that students would treat any image in the text as decorative, regardless of its func-

tion, unless told otherwise. These passive functions can be “activated” simply by the teacher drawing the student’s attention to these images or, better yet, by preparing tasks for students to complete using the images. Either way, it is up to the instructor to make sure that students notice the image in order to activate its learning function.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the possible ways that an instructor can call the student’s attention to an image or how to create an activity/task that uses an image. A wide-ranging list of teaching ideas for educators can be found in Keddie (2009), Goldstein (2008) and Wright (1989).

Finally, while this study does seem to suggest that the majority of images in course books have, at least potentially, more than a merely decorative function, it also brings forward a number of other questions. A more accurate accounting of the reason for using an image in an ELT course book cannot be done by reviewing the text, but by asking those involved in the creation of the text, i.e., the author(s), the editor(s) and the designer(s), layout artist(s) and typographer(s). Furthermore, how a text is intended to be used and how it is actually used by instructors and students can be different. Addressing this issue would require surveying students and teachers and/or observing how the texts are being used in class. Research using these methods is needed to more completely understand the role that images play in ELT materials.

Bio Data

Cameron Romney first came to Japan in 1998 and has taught in a number of educational contexts since then. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics (CU Denver) and his main area of research is visual communication and L2 learners. In 2011 he was a senior adjunct lecturer in the Center for Foreign Language Education at Momoyama Gakuin University in Osaka, Japan.

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Appendix

List of Course Books Surveyed

- Helgesen, M., Brown, S., & Wiltshier, J. (2010). *English firsthand 2* (2nd ed.). Hong Kong: Pearson-Longman Asia ELT.
- Richards, J. (2005). *Interchange intro* (3rd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
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