

Visualisation : A Decisive Skill

Tom Maguire.

Published: (May 1995) in APAC of News, N° 24. Barcelona.

I invite you to relax and read through the following short story:

One stormy winter night a young farmer was trudging home from work. Suddenly he heard faint cries of help that he finally found were coming from the bottom of a deep well.

"Who's there? " he shouted down over the side of the well.

"It's me! " replied a teacher who had accidentally tumbled headfirst over the edge three hours before.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out, " called back the farmer cheerfully.

"Follow the rescue instructions on the board beside the well. Be quick about it because the water in here is rising," bellowed up the teacher.

"I can't read," moaned the farmer, "but don't fret I'll soon have you out."

"For God's sake hurry up, the water is around my waist. But don't you dare try to get me out without following those instructions - to the letter!" yelled the teacher irritably.

"Well, you'll have to teach me to read, won't you then," responded the youth.

"I've been down here for three hours," said the teacher, "I'm freezing and the water is now up to my neck. Just look at the words on board, spell out the letters to yourself one by one and do what they say. You'll soon get the hang of it. Hurry up now! "

Now take good note of your answers to the following questions without referring back to the story.

Q1. What time of day was it?

Q2. What about the weather?

Q3. How old was the teacher? ... The farmer?

Q4. How was the teacher dressed? ... The farmer?

Q5. Can you describe the background area?

Q6. Describe any noises you heard.

Q7. Did you feel any emotions while reading?

Q8. Were there any smells in the story?

Look back at your answers to questions 3 to 8. There was no textual information about these questions. If you have answered them you were filling in the picture for yourself. Congratulations on your visualising powers.

As Reading, try the above story on your students. Remember to tell them to picture the scene while reading and congratulate them on their visualisation powers after debriefing. Inform students that visualisation is important because,

‘...having the student recall the individual pictures he had;... that, basically, is what comprehension is.’ (M.Grinder)

Grinder bases his visualising activities on two different models :
Hemisphereology and Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

In the 1960's Dr. Roger Sperry devised a way to alleviate epileptic seizures in selected patients by severing the 200 million nerve fibres connecting the left and

right brain hemispheres. Through a small number of cases observed it was generalised that the two hemispheres worked in specifically different ways : the left hemisphere was said to be linear, sequential and verbal ... ; the right hemisphere to be visual, spatial and intuitive ... This model of brain functioning has been challenged. One different model is that not just the brain but every neuron has a right and left part. However for our purposes it is practical to use the right/left brain model.

Working from that model Grinder states that the predominantly right-brained students have problems at school not because they are less capable than left-brained students but because they can't picture words with equal ease. In educational terms they have a hard time decoding symbols. As the largest percentage of students are predominantly right-brained (B. McCarthy, The 4Mat System) the problem is probably widespread. One solution to this problem is to teach decoding.

How then do we teach this decisive skill?

`...learning to "see content in their minds." This is the key to high school graduation and the ticket to "doing college." ´ says Michael Grinder.

Grinder, the Neuro-linguistic Programming(NLP) education specialist, states baldly that the key to success in high schools lies in the student's ability to visualise, that is, make pictures in the mind's eye.

This idea has been independently confirmed by another researcher, Brian Tomlinson, who has conducted studies in Japan on the correlation between reading skills and visualisation. Tomlinson found that people who created pictures in their head while they were reading a book had the least difficulty when asked to recall the story. He also found that it was easy to boost recall in other students simply by reminding them to visualise while reading.

If this is true then it might be worthwhile to understand and exploit the skill of visualisation with our students in ELT.

How then can we enable our students to apply clearer mental pictures to all four language skills?

I described Reading as making pictures from the written word. Similarly I would describe Listening as making sense of sounds.

Start your practice of Listening through visualisation by doing this little experiment on yourself when you have some free time on your hands.

Choose a dialogue or short narrative piece from the course cassette you are presently using.

Get into a relaxed position and listen carefully, making pictures of what you hear. Be aware of any background noises you hear and the feelings you may sense.

You have now experienced a Listening visualisation - my compliments. Now try to recall the passage. The more vivid it is the more complete your visualisation was.

Try it out with your students, giving them the same instructions. Debrief some students on their experience. Be prepared, this is an experience in itself!

To assess class recall have them write out from memory the answers to these questions: Who is in the text? Where is it situated? What happens? What is the end?

Now I'd like you to scan your memory and think of a time when you had a great idea but, although it was on the tip of your tongue, you just could not put it into words. Have you got it? What exactly were you trying to do? I would guess that you were probably making a great effort to explain something or draft it on paper, that is, you were either speaking or writing. I didn't have much trouble

guessing because the fundamental characteristic of the Writing and Speaking skills is precisely that: putting pictures, sounds, feelings, into words.

Let's take two practical examples of Writing.

I invite you in the first example to listen to a recording of your favourite instrumental music. Close your eyes and sit back comfortably to watch the interior film which will appear, stimulated by the music. Now take your player into the classroom. Announce to your students that today you'll be asking them to do some writing. Tell them that to help out you'll be playing some music as input instead of just giving a title. Invite your students to relax and make clear pictures during the music session. All they have to do after that is describe their internal pictures in writing. By the way, ignore the giggling you'll hear from adolescents while listening to the music - they're just coming to terms with their inner virtual reality. I can guarantee that you will be pleasantly surprised at the quality of writing your pupils will produce.

In the second example you may need some help from a friend. Read the following lines or better still get a friend to read them out slowly while you relax and try it out:

Think of a place you like a lot and you know very well...
Look round and take note of the colours you see... Can you describe what you see in the foreground? ...in the background?... Look up. What do you see?.. Now look down and describe your vision... Listen carefully... Can you hear any sounds?.. Voices?.. Music?.. Are the sounds LOUD/soft?.. far/near?.. Listen to them... Describe them... Step out of your picture... Move it back... What do you feel about the place you have visited?.. Come back out of your reverie gradually, feeling relaxed and ready to try out this positive experience with your students.

I have found that teenagers easily visualise their bedroom which is usually a special place for them. So that's a good place to begin writing visualisation. Have them write out their pictures, sounds and feelings as a composition.

Speaking is very much like writing except that you have to be able to put your images into sound bytes at a much faster pace. So before actually launching into the torrent you obviously require more preparation. The first thing to do then is get clear pictures... Imagine... the town where you live... Place yourself in a part you frequent... Have a good look around... go inside the buildings you see and visit them thoroughly... Observe the people in the streets and watch what they're doing... Go ahead and stare, nobody will mind... Listen to all the sounds you hear round about... describe them... Say what you feel about your hometown...

Once you have practised this on yourself you are ready to give it a go with your pupils. Put them in the mood by giving a volunteer a guided visualisation similar to the above. Demonstrate how to take brief notes about the pictures, sounds and feelings so as to be able to recreate the scenes in words. Instruct your students to talk in pairs about their representation of the town where they live. Don't rush things - once they cotton on to the idea they are quite capable of spinning quite a yarn about their hometown.

Happy visions!

Bibliography

Cleveland,B 1987 Master Teaching Techniques, The Connecting Link Press

Dortu, J-C 1986 Une classe de rêve, CLE International

Grinder,M 1991 Righting the Educational Conveyor Belt, Metamorphous Press

Lloyd, L, 1990, Classroom Magic Metamorphous Press

Tomlinson,B, 1996, Openings, Lingua House

Verlee Williams,L 1983 Teaching for the two-sided Mind, Prentice-Hall