Approaching Images from a Cultural Perspective in the Foreign Language Classroom

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It is because pictures say nothing in words that so much can be said in words about them. (Maley, Duff and Grellet qtd. in Goldstein 13)

The following paper is based on research work undertaken during my supervised teaching practice, in 2010 and 2011, as a component of the Master's Course in Teaching English and German in the 3rd Cycle of Basic Education and in Secondary Education of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the New University of Lisbon. This research aimed at exploring how visual material can be applied towards stimulating the learning of foreign languages and cultures, and its results were presented in greater detail in an academic report entitled *A Imagem na Aprendizagem da Língua e da Cultura Estrangeiras*, in 2011. Here, in a more succinct fashion, I will look specifically at how images can become a privileged source of cultural information for foreign language learners. Topics addressed include the definition of the term "image" and the relevance of visuals in the foreign language classroom throughout time as well as suggestions on how language teachers can promote visual literacy and approach images from a cultural perspective.

Images as Language-learning Materials

Martine Joly, a renowned expert in the field of image analysis, has stressed how difficult it is to define the concept of image, due to the myriad of ways in which this term is used and, consequently, understood (13). In fact, in her seminal work *Introduction à l'analyse de l'image*, instead of offering the reader a monolithic definition, the author opts for investigating the meaning of the term in each of the areas in which it is used, making the reader aware of its domain-specific nature. In the field of foreign language learning, Hecke and Surkamp give us a pertinent definition of the term, before enumerating the different kinds of images that can be used in the language classroom (a very broad array of items such as paintings, drawings, sculptures, cartoons, digital images, films, photos, illustrations, "logische Bilder", visual analogies and even performance pieces). For them, images fall under a category Reinfried calls "visuelle Medien" or, in other words, visual materials to be used in the classroom, which convey information and are comprehensible through the sense of sight (10). Many authors also tend to make a distinction between two types of images in the foreign language classroom: still images and moving images. Gangwer is a clear example of this, when he states that teachers can work with "still images, such as documentary or advertising photography, and moving images, such as commercials, newscasts, and dramatic or comic television programs and films" (5).

Images and language learning have, in fact, gone hand in hand across the educational landscape for centuries. Marcus Reinfried tells us that the benefits of using images in the language learning process have been praised since at least the 15th century (25). Two centuries later, in 1658, Czech pedagogue Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670) wrote the first language-teaching compendium with xylographs, titled *Orbis Sensualium Pictus,* where he acknowledged the importance of the senses and particularly the sense of sight in the language-learning process, giving a new meaning to the peripatetic axiom, "nihil est in intellectu quod non prius in sensu" ("nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses") (Corder ix). From there on, images became a permanent fixture in the foreign language classroom, and the zenith of their use is said to have taken place with the communicative approach (Macaire and Hosch 12). More recently, there has been a rise in the number of publications dealing with the use of

images in the language classroom, which we assume is a result, on the one hand, of the advent of the Digital Era (tools such as Google Images[TM] and Photoshop[TM] have, as we know, become household names and have given the teachers endless possibilities in terms of how they can collect and manipulate images for pedagogic purposes) and, on the other hand, the need to respond to the tastes and needs of a new kind of public which has been dubbed by some the "visual generation". In 1982, UNESCO had already called for particular attention to be given to the need of preparing students to deal with new communicational phenomena, in the *Grunwald Declaration on Media Education:*

> Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's world. The role of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor the function of media as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society. Political and educational systems need to recognize their obligations to promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communication.

The responsible organisations around the world were urged to respond and they did, some more promptly than others. In Portugal, for instance, it was not until 2007 that the Ministry of Education published a work to support teachers and students in this task, in the form of a CD-ROM called *Vamos Ler Imagens* (Torres).

Despite this renewed interest in using images for language learning, it has been noted by experts that many teachers still don't quite know how to take full advantage of them (Macaire and Hosch 6) and that they are generally used for a very limited number of purposes, mostly related to language (Corbett 140). If we turn the spotlight on cultural aspects of language teaching, images are in most cases given a mere illustrative function, and, as a result, their informative richness is ignored. In order to reverse this trend, some authors are coming up with new and eclectic approaches, based on the teachings of such subjects as image analysis, semiotics, history and art history, inter alia. These approaches, on the one hand, aim at helping

students to investigate cultural meanings of images and, on the other hand, prepare them for a new reality in terms of communicational practices which, due to the profound technological advances of recent times, have made visual literacy an indispensable skill. According to Kress and Leeuwen:

> . . . most texts now involve a complex interplay of written text, images and other graphic or sound elements . . . . But the skill of producing multimodal texts of this kind, however central its role in contemporary society, is not taught in schools. . . . In terms of this essential new communication ability, this new 'visual literacy', institutional education . . . produces illiterates. (17)

Approaching Images from a Cultural Point of View

On the basis of the foregone considerations, we will now look at some of the ways in which the culturally-oriented teacher can use images in the language classroom. It is needless to say that, when applying the following suggestions, one must always take into account not only the syllabus, but also the profile of those students with whom one is working.

It has already been said that still and moving images can be used to stimulate the development of the four basic language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) and it is on this practice that many of the available publications on this topic focus (Wright or Goldstein, for instance). Corbett states that, within the foreign language classroom, images are mostly used for language-focused purposes and offers the reader some examples: images can aim at bringing vocabulary to life, act as input into information-transfer activities, work as prompts for language production and contextualise and clarify language (140). The author states that:

> There is, of course, a long-established history of using images, or 'visual aids', in the ELT classroom. . . . Visual aids, then, are widely acknowledged as a rich resource in ELT, but what all the activities . . . share is a primary focus on *content* in order to promote language learning. Images tend to be exploited in diverse ways for their language-learning potential, but their cultural significance is comparatively neglected. (140)

So how can teachers start to redress the balance? Obviously, when they use images, they must go beyond language-related matters and explore their underlying cultural significance. To achieve this goal, teachers must first help students acquire basic knowledge about image interpretation and analysis, in order for them to become capable of, initially in a guided manner and later on autonomously, identifying and processing the cultural information conveyed by images and multimodal texts (that is, texts that are made up of both words and images), built according to culturally-specific conventions. By implementing this practice, the teacher will be contributing towards the development of the visual literacy of students, which, as we have seen, is crucial for their understanding of and adaption to the current global communication patterns. Furthermore, by exploring the assortment of cultural aspects conveyed by images (which does not need to happen in an isolated manner, but can be done apropos a language-focused activity, such as using a picture as the object of a pre-reading discussion), the teacher will enrich the students' knowledge of different realities that pertain to the culture of a foreign country and, simultaneously, contribute towards the development of their intercultural competence (especially if the student is invited to contrast newly learned data with data from his own reality through pictures selected by the teacher for that effect), thereby stimulating their cultural awareness and demystifying stereotypes and prejudices about the cultural realities involved.

Yet another question arises. How do teachers give students the aforementioned means to access the information contained in the images they wish to explore from a cultural standpoint? It is, after all, a complex subject, and the idea of teaching it, especially to younger students, might seem intimidating, especially because, even though there are many publications devoted to semiotics in general and image analysis in particular, such as Kress and Leeuwen's *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design* (which should be read by all those who truly wish to develop their visual literacy and ability to interpret images), there aren't many works which specifically cater to the language teacher's needs. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, one realises that some authors have begun to cover this topic, making it easier for both the teacher and the student to approach it, through publications that can work as a good starting

point for the investigative work a topic like this requires. Now we will move on to brief selection of these publications and explain how they can aid the work of teachers.

As far as still images are concerned, we consider Corbett's cited work to be indispensable. Apart from clarifying the importance of images for culturally-oriented lessons and some of the materials the teacher can turn to, it gives us, most importantly, clear and concise information on which aspects of images we should focus, namely composition — looking at aspects like positioning, framing and salience — and visual grammar and vocabulary — which direct our attention to the portrayal of people (with their gaze, the perspective and distance, fashion and style) — as well as objects and settings, among other equally important topics, all the while presenting examples from several cultural sources. An 18th-century tobacco ad featuring a Highland soldier and a slave, for instance, is used to show us a number of possible interpretations: in this case, the absence of eye contact between the two reveals a separation (they are only linked by the use of the tobacco), their states of dress and undress, respectively, are meant to represent the "exotic", particularly well-liked at the time (the author explains that, then, due to the destruction of the clan system in the middle of the century, the kilt worn by the soldier had become a symbol of "romance and the fashionable concept of the 'noble savage'") and that their out-of-frame gaze, staring blankly at middle distance induces a feeling of empathy in the viewer and suggests that they are mentally withdrawn from their surroundings, "presumably under the influence of the narcotic" (Corbett 149-150). It is this kind of interpretation work that we wish to promote, making learners become aware that the positioning of a figure, the way he/she looks at us, the way they are dressed or the setting in which they are in, amongst many other visual conventions, interfere with the message conveyed and denote cultural specifics. Thinking about the work of teachers, the author also includes a highly recommendable checklist of questions designed to help learners probe the cultural meaning of visual texts (it can be reformulated according to one's public and learning objectives). Also useful is Macaire and Hosch's *Bilder in der Landeskunde*, in that it gives us a comprehensive view on the use of images (in language-oriented lessons in general and culturally-oriented lessons in particular) and features a selection of useful activity models designed to help

implement the interpretation of images. In general, we believe it is important to guide students in the beginning (with closed-ended questions, to be used in questionnaires or tables) and gradually progress from there, until they eventually start to feel the confidence to do it more freely.

Before I close, attention must still be paid to moving images, as they are considered to be as culturally revealing as still images, if not more, for some experts. Therefore, they should also become a valued material for the culturally-oriented language teacher. Altman states:

> The amount of cultural information carried by a video makes it an especially rich cultural vehicle. . . . The inhabitant of the culture takes these for granted, but for the foreign language learner, video's images and sounds become an open book made up of chapter upon chapter of cultural information. Even the videos themselves — their construction, scripting and cinematography — provide special insight into a nation's cultural specificity. (19)

We think it is safe to say that it is easier for language teachers to find suggestions on how to work with video, as the amount of publications dealing with the use of video in the foreign language classroom is quite large. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of suggestions on how to make use of it with cultural topics in mind. To promote this, we believe one must follow the same kind of approach we suggested for still images, that is to provide students with basic knowledge about the stylistic and narrative devices used by filmmakers, so as to understand how these help them to convey messages and, simultaneously, denote cultural details, and progressively train them in this practice. To this end, Leeuwen's *Moving English: The Visual Language of Film* can be very useful from a theoretical standpoint, as it covers some of the aspects that the language of still and moving images have in common and presents some distinct features of the latter. Specifically for language-teaching contexts, we consider Marie-Louise Brandi's work *Video im Deutschunterricht* to be extremely useful, as it presents the reader with sharp definitions of important filmmaking strategies (easy for the students to grasp) and offers suggestions of interesting activities to do before, during and after the viewing of a video. Some interesting examples of how some narrative techniques and cinematic devices can

be explained to students in a simple manner are presented by Biechele, in *Genial: Videotrainer A1*, in the form of matching or brainstorming activities, inter alia. It is through these practices that students begin to intellectualise filmmaking and dissect the effect that certain procedures related to camera operations (dealing with aspects like field size, camera movement, size and angle) and editing (which relies on techniques like "fade-in/fade-out", "cross-cutting" or parallel action, etc.) have in the filmic storytelling process and, from there on, develop their ability to decode cultural meanings and details present in moving images. For instance, in terms of the distance between the camera and an object, the learner must be made aware that a close-up is intended to draw the viewer's attention to something important, namely someone's emotions, if it focuses on somebody's face, or that the body language of characters can also function as a narrative technique (the act of patting one's hair might denote vanity or disinterest, whereas stroking one's chin might be seen as a sign of indecisiveness or insecurity, for instance), as this plays an important part in the message(s) conveyed by the film being scrutinised.

Closing Remarks

In the light of the aforementioned, it becomes obvious that the amount of cultural information that can be obtained from pictures should not be ignored. Our personal experience with using images from a cultural point of view has showed us that, if students learn about visual conventions and are progressively assisted in using this knowledge to decode cultural messages underlying images, at first through oriented practices (using questionnaires, checklists and tables, inter alia), they will soon begin to gain autonomy in their interpretations and, more interestingly, contribute with their own ideas, many of which based on knowledge informally acquired, which then becomes useful in the classroom, as suggested by Corbett (141), all the while learning about different aspects of the culture associated with the language they are studying. But this is not all: in the process, students will also become more prepared to deal with the reality outside the classroom, since teachers will be promoting their visual literacy. It is no surprise, then, to see that working with images is an especially motivating experience for the younger generation, whose reality is dominated by visual forms of communication (let us not

forget, after all, that it is widely called the "visual generation"). In short, using images brings the classroom and the realities outside closer together, mitigates the problem of language barriers (as the adage tells us, an image is worth a thousand words) and ultimately increases the amount of engagement and agency not only towards the exploring of foreign cultures, but also of the learner's own cultural reality. It is, therefore, extremely advantageous that images — hand in hand with language and culture — become an integral part of our lessons .

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