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## Visual Compositions and Language Development

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a visual literacy approach for improving verbal development. Organized slide stories called visual compositions are shown to be a compelling media tool for visual/verbal interaction in the classroom. A model is presented showing that six levels or stages of literacy development are achieved with the use of each slide story. The initial and final stages indicate the teacher's role: involving students in viewing the same visual experience and then helping them share, edit, and react to each other's written compositions that were written about the visual theme. The four middle levels of the model represent the verbal and nonverbal processing modes achieved by each student through viewing, imagining, composing, and writing. The visual composition approach essentially stimulates language and ideas while providing an organizing strategy for written paragraph development. The strength of the visual involvement is that it provides a procedure for language discovery while achieving cooperation between the visual/spatial, holistic mode of right brain processing and the analytic, sequential mode of left brain processing. The right brain encourages the formation of images, impressions, and feelings about the pictorial story while the left brain consciously works on the words and sentences that capture those meanings. Motivation and stimulation to write and to read are provided by the visual composition approach.

In an earlier edition of **Technology and Mediated Instruction** (Sinatra, 1980), I presented a visual literacy approach to written composition development. Teachers were shown how to use visuals and slide stories to actively engage students in writing and reading activities. In this paper, I would like to discuss why the use of slide stories in particular is a powerful media tool for language development in the classroom.

When a slide story is arranged to communicate meaning, a visual composition has been composed. There is a great deal of similarity between a visual and a written composition; in fact, they have many of the same organizational ingredients. They each have a central meaning or theme, a series of details or related events which develop that theme, and a syntactical arrangement which expresses logic and clarity amongst the details. Moreover, they can each describe very concrete life experiences or can infer meaning through tone, innuendo, or understatement.

Composers of visual compositions can be compared to writers in their roles as transmitters of information. The visual composer combines objects, space, light, angle, and mood to suggest a particular message

or effect. The viewer "reads" the message by mentally coordinating the relationship within the picture design or amongst a series of related shots. Understanding and analyzing the grammar of visual communications involves higher level thought processes (Clayback, Goforth, Spillman, 1980). Furthermore, just as a writer selects words that have objective and emotional connotations, the picture-maker conveys images that work on many levels to suggest humor, irony, or symbolic commentary (Eckhardt, 1977). Thus, an analogous relationship that reading is to writing as viewing is to visual composing may be said to exist for participants in visual/verbal literacies.

### **Aspects of Visual Composing**

Slide compositions can be photographed and prepared by either the teacher or through the efforts of the teacher to train students in the techniques of visual composing. Essentially, students need to be shown how to develop a visual theme or photo essay (Collins, 1980), how to use imagery to plan the parameters of a shot before its actual occurrence (Debes, 1976b), and how to use design and movement to establish visual continuity (Kaplan, 1976). Moreover, the visual composer needs to become aware that the world often looks different through the viewfinder. The most commonplace object can assume a delightful countenance if photographed under the right conditions and if juxtaposed with the right associative features. Those who start squinting at details of their environment are almost always delighted with the exquisite colors, shades, and textures that materialized before them and suddenly begin to look at the world with an entirely fresh and dynamic point of view (Cameron, 1980).

Also, an understanding of how sequence and space, the basic elements of the grammar of visual language, operate is important for composing logical visual compositions. To suggest a visual composition, a sequence of pictures relating to the same common theme is needed. Debes (1976a) feels that as students learn daily to read visuals sequentially in time, we can have them arrange pictures sequentially in space left to right as a precursor to their later arrangement of words from left to right. Many experiments show that those kind of expressions have beneficial consequences for today's children. Since their right hemispheres have been saturated with visual language primarily through television viewing, we need to give children the opportunity to use that hemisphere to express itself so that we can move them closer to the spatial sequential skills we want them to know verbally. Debes concludes that once the visual material is organized, translation from visual languages forms to verbal languaging forms is relatively easy.

### **Hemispheric Cooperation Through Visual/Verbal Interaction**

When students themselves are shown how to prepare slide compositions for use by the rest of the class, they will intellectually benefit from the dual involvement of visual/verbal literacies. Both brain hemispheres will be activated through the visual composing, the imaging, and the anticipated use of certain types of language forms. The right hemisphere

orchestrates the overall themes, integrates the meaning of each separate picture within the theme, recalls images of previously photographed scenes, and visualizes the pictures still needed to complete the coordinated effect. The left hemisphere will sequence all the separate pictures into one consolidated essay, will attach verbal labels to visual images, and will indulge in propositional language to analyze and describe the meaning of the essay. In short, allowing children to write visually by shooting and composing picture sequences using snapshots, slides, slides with tapes, silent movies, and movies with sound promotes the intellectual development of today's visually literate children (Debes, 1975).

Postman (1979) too feels that we should encourage visual/verbal interaction in language learning tasks. He suggested that a "generation gap" exists in the thinking processes of modern youth due to a conflict in hemispheric training. On the one hand, there is the language-centered view of the world championed by the school, and on the other hand, the twentieth century image-centered view of the world dominated by the media, particularly television. To balance the holistic, rapid, emotional approach of the television curriculum, we need the logic and conceptual deliberation of language. Slide stories are a means of providing a cooperative approach to hemispheric interaction and achieve a number of levels of visual/verbal relationships in the classroom.

Figure 1 indicates that six levels or stages of literacy development are achieved with the use of each slide story. The first and last levels show teacher-directed strategies that involve the entire class in the visual composition approach while the middle bands indicate the processing modes achieved by each individual student. The processing modes may overlap during various reading and writing activities, but the hierarchical structure of the figure suggests that each processing level is strengthened through participation in the former level.

### **Concrete Involvement of Class in Visual Experience**

At the first level, the entire class is captured by the same visual experience. As soon as the first slide is shown, curiosity is aroused and attention is directed toward meaning. Motivation to participate in the entire visual experience has already been conditioned by years of image viewing. However, this type of visual story will become the springboard for many imaginative language arts activities.

Teachers are often reminded that lack of experiential background can influence understanding and construction of written discourse. The visual composition, however, provides the entire group with the same experiential base which assists the teacher during the final stage in planning for written literacy growth. Since all students have shared the same experience, they will all have the same concrete referent with which language can be associated and developed.

### **Formation of Holistic Meaning and Imagery**

After the slide story has been shown for the first time, each student begins his/her own private hemispheric interchange and forms a mental

picture of what the overall story means. This global meaning probably occurs without the use of language. Each slide has contributed a segment of meaning to the whole, and this holistic meaning is grasped and understood just as a television show or movie is understood. Of course, explicit meaning would become less obvious as the visual story became less concrete or if the syntax of the visual sequence didn't agree with previous visual knowledge of how the world is put together. Furthermore, as the concreteness of the visual story increases, the more likely that imagery will be available in recall (Paivio, 1979) and the more likely, it would seem, that a central image forms of the overall meaning.

Formation of the central image becomes the key organizational element in the development of the written composition. Bugelski (1977) felt that this central or key image readily functions as a focal associating mechanism for a number of verbal stimuli and verbal responses. It functions to pull together and succinctly represent the informational framework. Based on a number of studies in which information was presented in different ways to readers, Bugelski felt that the central image provided the reader with a way to recall or understand a selection better since the major focus of the selection could be visualized in one prominent image such as that of Columbus standing at the prow of the Santa Maria.

The way, then, to achieve both verbalization and a schemata upon which to string words and sentences is to turn the key image into a topic or thesis sentence. When the visual/verbal translation begins at this central, holistic level, all subsequent statements will be related to the focus of the key image. The central image thus translates to main idea or topic sentence, terminology quite familiar to teachers of reading and writing.

### **Coordinating Language with Visual Meaning**

Each student should be asked to compose and write one sentence which captures his/her impression of the overall meaning. Teachers will find that many different sentences are composed to reflect the many different ways students interpreted the meaning and the many levels they have achieved in written expression. A good strategy at this point is to put a number of these key sentences on the chalkboard to illustrate the various ways that the central meaning of one slide story can be portrayed in language. Convince students that one topic sentence is as good as another if it is mechanically correct. Although some key sentences may be more imaginative and suggest that a full account of the verbal story will follow, teachers should not fault those students who were extremely literal or limited in their expression. The important strategy to impart here is that each student must support and develop his/her own thematic sentence with information provided by the separate slides.

To coordinate visual meaning with verbal fluency, teachers may have to energize some students into literary action. The topic sentence may be casually prompted by the general question, "What was that entire visual story about?" During later story development, teachers could

stimulate writing with the traditional five "w/" questions, such as "who is doing the action?, what is happening?, when, where, or why is something happening?" While some may need coaxing, others may need to be reassured about using their own vocabulary and sentences to describe meaning. The advantage of using "silent" sequences of pictures rather than film with accompanying dialogue is that students don't imitate a language source but compose their own logical stories using their own language. The resultant written composition that each produces will become the reward for mental participation and for struggling with their own language forms.

### **Sentence Development and Transition**

After the topic sentence has been written, I generally show the visual composition again to continue to motivate written language as well as to provide an organizational structure for the forthcoming written composition. The second showing will facilitate sentence writing as students strive to put into words the meaning he/she sees in each individual slide. They must be reminded, however, that as each picture contributed a thread of meaning to the central meaning of the visual composition, so each sentence should relate to the central idea expressed in their own topic sentence. Just as Smith (1978) pointed out that the meaning of a sentence is not equal to all the meanings of the individual words in that sentence, the meaning of a visual composition, expressed by each viewer in the key or topic sentence, is not equal to all the pictorial representation in each slide.

The arrangement of the slides becomes the internal structure of organization, the grammar of the visual composition. As the visual grammar is ordered, the resultant composition will be influenced. For instance, we are all familiar with the picture of snow-capped Kilimanjaro mountain. Usually, the mountain sits majestically in the background while a local animal or village scene is photographed in the foreground. Now, if a visual composition is arranged so that in each slide a different animal appeared against the splendor of the mountain, a different composition would be written than if a sequence of shots showing a caravan of animals steadily approaching the mountain was photographed. The visual grammar of the first composition suggested a spatial motif, while the second indicated a time orientation.

Bower (1972) has suggested that pictures do have a "grammar", in that scenes can be parsed into subpictures, which can be decoded further into objects and contours. He speculates that a common base grammar underlies our verbal production of sentences and pictorial analysis and generation. Gestalt laws of perceptual organization, specifically the principles of spatial proximity and similarity, are the phrase-parsing rules of the picture grammar. There are various perceptual organizations that lead to strong associations; these being, the spatial relations of "is a constituent of, is composed of, is a surface of, is a part of" and these become the basic relational predicates of a picture grammar. Thus, to insure cohesiveness of writing while maintaining unity with the central

theme, the sequential arrangement of the visual composition needs to be carefully planned before student viewing and writing. In the earlier article (Sinatra, 1980) I had suggested seven such possible grammatical and organizational arrangements including event sequence, spatial organization, comparing/contrasting features, enumerating items, theme development, persuasive interaction, and combination of arrangements.

### **Developing the Paragraph**

After the second viewing of the slide story is completed and students have written down ideas and impressions based on each slide, they can begin focusing on the final product, the written composition. The theme has been conceptualized, the details supplied by the individual pictures, and the organizational style suggested through the slide arrangement. All visual/verbal inputs need to be connected in one logical composition. To assist students in connecting ideas, I often provide them at this stage with lists of connector words and transitional phrases which are appropriate to a particular visual/verbal arrangement. The connectives help them organize relationships perceived in the visual presentation and to achieve smooth coordination between sentences. In another source, the most frequent connector words in the written language have been arranged to parallel their use in picture story presentations (Sinatra, 1981).

Undoubtedly, there will be some mechanical problems in the submitted compositions. Mechanical difficulties connected with spelling, punctuation, and syntactic constructions may appear with more frequency in visually prompted compositions than in other types of writing assignments. One reason for this is that the visuals stimulate inner language and ideas, the more creative aspects of composition, without allowing the student to look at other printed sources for information. Secondly, I've often found that spelling errors result from students trying to use vocabulary that best fits the visualized meaning but which the student hasn't tried to write much in the past. However, the correcting process may be easier for teachers and more meaningful for students since each has a clear visual referent in mind.

### **Class Language Interaction**

Finally, the teacher involves the group in the explanation of discourse. The teaching about discourse follows student involvement in its organization and structure. Particular styles of writing will become easier to comprehend since students have been actively involved in the construction of that style. After viewing and writing a theme organized a particular way, students can read each other's papers, edit and advise each other, or single papers can be projected on the overhead for class discussion. Earlier I had outlined at least nine additional strategies for language interaction with groups of students (Sinatra, 1980). Through discussion and the sharing of each other's verbal accounts, students will recognize the organizational structure which underlies visual/verbal discourse. In essence, the six levels of visual/verbal interaction achieved through visual compositions have stressed student involvement, insuring

that the structure of the subject is meshed with the structure of the student (Moffett, 1968).

Once students understand the relationship between a particular organizational structure and their own writing, they can be asked to read selections that are organized in a similar way. The reading selection will be easier to visualize since students can now compare it to a concrete referent in their experience. In much this way Levin (1973) felt that visual imagining aided the poor readers in his study because they unconsciously integrated verbal and visual input.

The strength of the visual composition approach is that it provides a procedure for language discovery while achieving dual cooperation of hemispheric processing. The right brain encourages the formation of images, impressions, and feelings about the pictorial story while the left brain consciously works on the words and sentences that will capture those meanings. Using visual stories overcomes what Glassner (1980) describes as our curriculum's lopsided emphasis on analytic skills specifically the more conscious, left-brained, stages of writing instruction. Language has predominated in the classroom, but it is almost always the language of reporting and not the language of discovery or of learning. The visual composition is essentially a stimulus for writing and allows each student to become involved in process before product can be analyzed. Furthermore, involvement in the process becomes the means to learn the internal structure of discourse, how themes are put together. The impact of the slide story medium is that it reaches even the most recalcitrant eyes and can motivate even the most reluctant writer.

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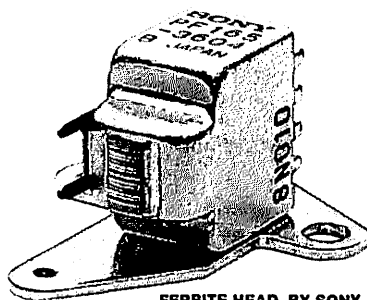
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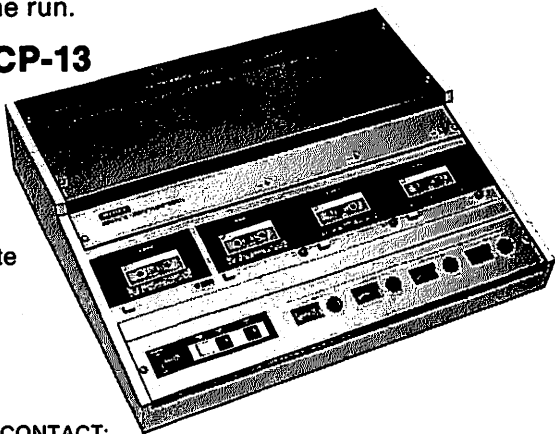
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