



**UNIVERSIDAD
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Faculty of Education
English Department

Classroom-based Research

Using Visual Aids to Teach Vocabulary to Young Learners

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This classroom-based research was carried out to obtain the university degree of English teacher

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TEACHING VOCABULARY USING VISUAL AIDS

Abstract

This classroom-based research aimed to investigate whether visual aids that replaced conventional forms of translation into Spanish could enhance the vocabulary understanding of second-grade EFL students. Thirty second grade students participated in the study. Two vocabulary units were taught differently – the first one using translation into Spanish, and the second one using visual aids. In each unit, one activity to recall the taught vocabulary was carried out to analyse how much vocabulary students could remember after the instruction. The other sources of data for the study included observation of students' attitudes towards both approaches, and two focus groups discussions designed to understand student perceptions. The results indicated that most of students remembered a higher number of words with visual aids in comparison with the words they remembered when recalling from Spanish. Moreover, there was evidence that students' engagement increased, and they expressed their preference to learn vocabulary using visual aids.

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on teaching vocabulary emphasizing its relevance when learning a second language. As stated by Ur (2016) “the importance of vocabulary teaching is generally recognized these days, and there’s been a lot of research on how best to teach it” (p.105). However, there is no strategy that we can refer to as the best one to teach and learn vocabulary in a foreign language. Following Ur (2016), mother-tongue (L1) translation is probably the single most efficient one, however new items may not always be understood correctly. Additionally, translation does not seem to be the most appealing way when it comes to young learners. As noted by Phillips (1993), “it can be assumed that the younger the children are, the more holistic learners they will be” (p. 7). For this reason, she suggests a variety of activities that work well with young learners – being one of them the tasks that involve coloring, cutting and sticking images. Visual aids provide a context which is, following Phillips, a powerful tool with which they can create meaning. Additionally, Cameron (2001) notes that young learners need very concrete vocabulary that connects with objects they can handle or see. For this reason, as argued by Schmitt (1997), pairing target language words with pictures has been shown to be better than pairing them with their native language equivalent. Similarly, Nation (2000) discusses that although translation is quick, simple and easily understood, its use may “encourage other use of the first language that seriously reduces the time available for use of the second language” (p. 126).

In view of these perspectives regarding vocabulary teaching and learning, the aim of this research is to understand to what extent visual aids could contribute to enhance this experience for young learners. The context where this classroom-based research was conducted is Rafael

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Valentín Valdivieso School, which is a public school located in Recoleta neighborhood. This school is a secular institution where students come from a low socio-economic background. The school provides elementary education only, from pre-K to eighth grade. There are two grades per level (A and B) and all grades are gender-mixed. The school receives a significant number of immigrant students – mainly from Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Haiti.

Specifically, the research was conducted in a 2nd grade class composed of 30 students who are only taught two pedagogical hours of English language per week. The English class takes place every Thursday from 11:40am to 1:10pm. The sitting arrangement consists of six groups of five to six students each.

This group of students had been learning vocabulary only through translation into Spanish, which was apparent when observing their copybooks. The application of translation method brought some difficulties, as students consistently requested the teacher to provide them the meaning of the studied vocabulary they had already written on their copybooks. Given that, this situation was hindering students' vocabulary learning. Visual aids were therefore introduced in order to assess whether these could enhance vocabulary instruction and, consequently, students' vocabulary learning. Therefore, the question that underlies this research is: *How can the use of visual aids enhance the vocabulary learning of second grade EFL students?*

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Methodology

The broad methodology of this research was qualitative. As stated by James *et al* (2007), this is an appropriate approach because it helps us to understand people's reactions, beliefs and behavior more clearly. Hence, since the aim of this research is to understand what is happening with this group of students' vocabulary learning, it is relevant to consider a qualitative methodology.

To understand this issue, data was collected during two whole units of vocabulary instruction of 4 classes each (i.e. 8 weeks). The first unit was about parts of the house and the second one about professions. The former was taught through translation into Spanish whereas the latter was taught using visual aids such as flashcards and images to color, cut and paste.

To generate data in order to understand this question, the data collection tools used were as follows. Firstly, observation notes made by the researcher throughout eight weeks using an observation sheet (see appendix E) were used. As noted by Burns (2010), this method is useful to provide descriptions and accounts of what happened in the classroom. Observations aimed to register students' reactions to both methods of vocabulary instruction and how they interacted with the presented vocabulary.

Secondly, a focus group was carried out so as to understand students' perceptions directly from them. This data collection tool was chosen because it is "economical on time, producing a large amount of data in a short period of time" (Cohen *et al*, 2007, p. 376). Two focus groups were carried out (as students are too young to participate in interviews) in order to ensure that the outcome is not unique to the behavior of one group (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

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The focus groups were held after finishing the eight weeks of vocabulary instruction. Students were asked simple questions about both methods. They were shown two images (see appendix B) and were asked to imagine that those images were the classroom whiteboard. From here, they talked about the differences between the two images, their preferences when learning new words and their view on what was more engaging and effective for them.

Six students participated in each group and were selected according to their participation in the English class so they could express an opinion about it. In addition, the fact that they already read and write was considered so they had accomplished the tasks thoughtfully. Finally, a representative sampling of students was selected in terms of their background since “sampling is a major key to the success of focus groups” (Cohen *et al*, 2007, p. 377). Peruvian and Chilean students participated as well as a Haitian student. Participants were guided by the researcher in order to encourage them when they seemed hesitant or did not know how to answer. The conversation was carried out in Spanish and it was audio-recorded. Parents’ participants consent form was required as well. This was the main concern of working with students that are so young. As McKay (2006) observes, “when participants in a study are minors, informed consent forms should be obtained from parents or guardians” (p. 25). Needless to say, students also were asked to participate voluntarily.

Finally, artefacts which were students’ copybooks were used in order to demonstrate progress in regard to vocabulary instruction. As Bowen (2009) notes, one of the functions of this material is to offer means of tracking change and development. As observed, students could not remember the taught vocabulary when they were learning vocabulary through translation. Hence, copybooks serve as a valuable source since those have the register of vocabulary instruction as

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well as of the activities carried out in order to recall vocabulary. One of those activities provided information about how much vocabulary students could remember with each kind of instruction. Following Bowen (2009), these documents “can be analyzed as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources” (p. 30).

Since the gathered data was qualitative, the process to understand and analyze was developed through thematic coding. The focus groups and the observation notes provided data that needed to be analyzed by identifying relevant themes or recurrent patterns that may be present in both methods. The artefacts’ analysis provided quantitative data that served to measure and to create graphics in order to understand quantitatively the improvement of students’ performance when recalling vocabulary. However, this data was understood from a qualitative point of view to corroborate the findings of the other data collection applied instruments.

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Research Findings

This research was designed to understand whether the use of visual aids could lead to enhancements in the vocabulary learning of a young learners group used to translation into Spanish. This issue arose from the researcher's observation that students were constantly requesting the teacher to provide the meaning of words they wrote in their copybooks. Through the analysis of observation notes there is a significant change found. Students' questions about the meaning of words significantly decreased during the used of visual aids. Regarding the latter, there is consistency with the focus groups where students mentioned that for them, it was funnier to learn with visuals. When asked about their favorite activities during the English class, they mentioned coloring images, cutting and pasting, watching videos and creating posters, all visual strategies.

The observations noted also more engaged, participative and interested students' during the use of visuals than during translation methods, where students seemed rather confused, lost and disengaged. Coherently with focus groups, where students unanimously choose the whiteboard with images (see appendix B.2) arguing that it was "funnier" because they could color, cut and paste and not just write on their copybooks. When asked what was for them the easiest way to learn English, the students did not recognize any facilities in regard to translation into Spanish. In fact, the Haitian participant referred to the difficulty that Spanish represented for her to learn English.

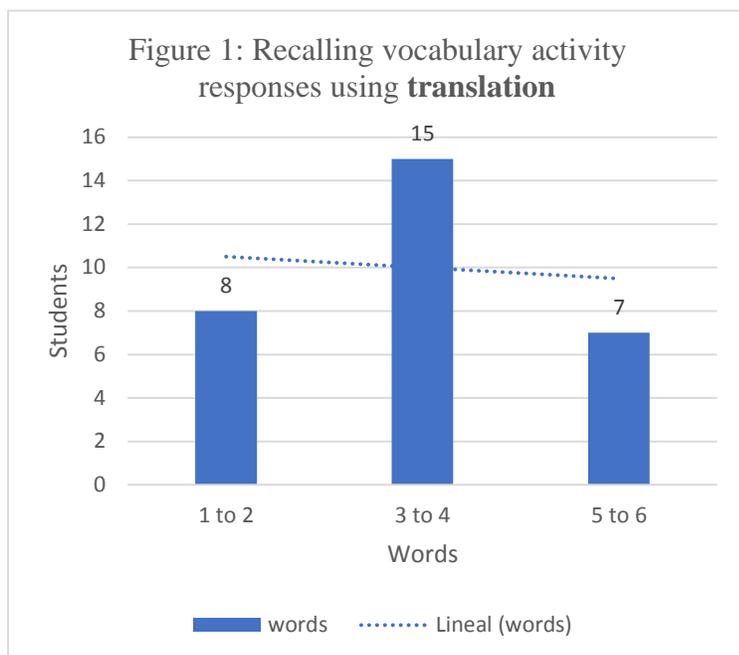
In the same vein, artefacts, which were students' work on their copybooks, demonstrated a change which is consistent with the observation and with what students pointed out in the focus groups. Translated words did not represent any challenge for students since they only copied

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them from the whiteboard. Conversely, the images that students colored, cut and pasted involved a stimulating work that students remembered they did and had fun while doing it (see samples in appendix C). In general, this was a universal response with just a couple of exceptions of students that did not fully accomplish the tasks since they do not read and write yet.

Unit 1 vocabulary “parts of the house” was written in an unchallenging activity consistent in just copying the words from the whiteboard. Unit 2 vocabulary “professions” was written along with an image provided to students to color, cut and stick.

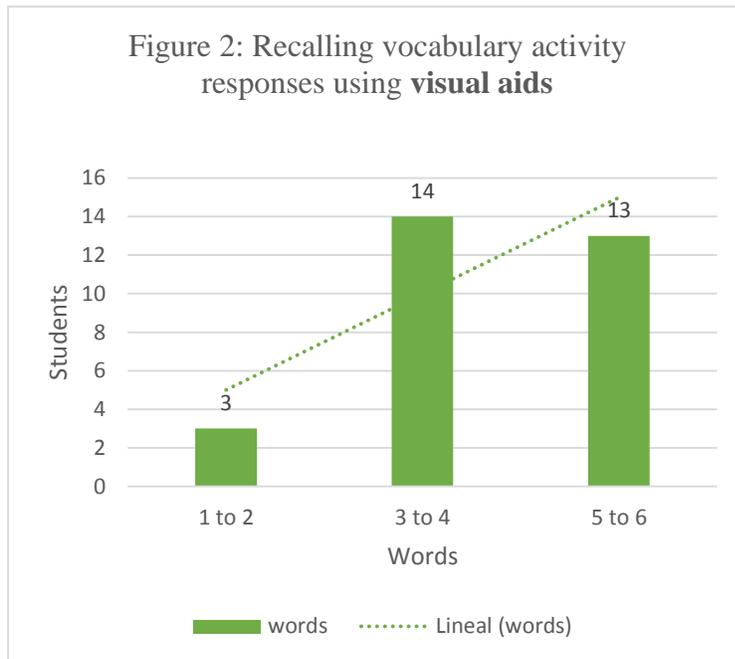
After students received vocabulary instruction with both methods, they were given a worksheet activity (see appendix D) to check how much vocabulary they could recall. Although, when observing translation instruction students were constantly asking for the meaning of words, particularly for this activity. Help was not provided in order to obtain fair and reliable results.



As **figure 1** illustrates, when recalling vocabulary from its Spanish translation (see appendix D.1), half of the class could recall only 3 or 4 words. Eight students recalled 1 or 2 words while only seven students recalled 5 or all the words taught. After the use of visual aids, the same activity was carried out (see appendix D.2). In this

occasion, students recalled vocabulary from pictures, with slightly different results as shown in **figure 2**.

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Although the number of students who recalled 3 to 4 words did not vary significantly (from 15 to 14), the number of students recalling 1 or 2 words decreased to only three. Finally, and more importantly, the number of students who were able to recall 5 or all the words increased to thirteen.

Therefore, the most significant finding of this research is that the use of visual aids contributed to students' vocabulary learning. It can be said that the majority of the students improved the quantity of words they were able to recall after the vocabulary instruction. The students whose recall did not really improve are the ones who struggle with reading and writing. Therefore, they usually have to be assessed orally.

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Research Implications

It is important to consider that both teaching methods were taught using different vocabulary themes – parts of the house and professions. Time constraints and the necessity to carry on with the curriculum influenced this part of the research design. Then, one may think that students were more enthusiastic with one topic rather than with the other. However, according to the observations made, there were no significant differences in terms of the motivation of the students to talk about their houses or to talk about what they want to be when adults.

When analyzing the gathered data, the results demonstrated the benefits of visual aids over Spanish translation method. In order to understand these outcomes, related research was considered to explain how pictures can facilitate learning vocabulary in a foreign language. Carpenter and Olson (2012) refer to the common finding of memory researches that pictures are remembered better than words based on the phenomenon called “picture superiority effect”. To understand why words are best remembered by learners they refer to the finding that “is easier to name a picture than to form a mental image of a word” (p. 92). In this study, the use of pictures to teach vocabulary in a foreign language (Swahili) was found to be more effective and easier to remember than teaching words with their English translation. Similarly, Konomi (2014) conducted research to establish to what extent teachers used visuals when teaching English vocabulary to young learners. The results indicated that teachers used visual materials at different extent. However, the most interesting finding was that, after the first vocabulary test where the teacher only used the textbook, 85% of the students were correct. This percentage increased after the second test (97%) where the teacher used flashcards and blackboard drawings

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to teach vocabulary. Furthermore, 42% of the interviewed young learners asserted that objects and drawings are their favorite technique when language is taught. 39% opted for flashcards.

In view of these outcomes, it seems that the effect of visual aids is generally considered in research to positively influence students' achievement. As also investigated by Sadeghi and Farzizadeh (2013) in their study of the effect of visually-supported vocabulary instruction. They emphasize the "necessity to adopt a visually aided approach to teaching vocabulary to young people learning English as a foreign language in order to jump-start student achievement" (p. 8). The authors investigated two groups of participants, one was taught using visual aids and the other was taught using traditional definition. The results indicated that visual aids group outperformed significantly better than the traditional definition group.

Furthermore, nowadays the world we live in is predominantly visual and most children are visual learners (Krčelić and Matijević 2015), media are bursting with images and teachers cannot neglect this fact. For this reason, Krčelić and Matijević (2015) titled their research about visual tools in ELT as the proverb "a picture is worth a thousand words". In their paper, they applied visual tools not only for vocabulary teaching but also for grammar and speaking. The application of visual tools led them to conclude that they are highly motivational for both students and teachers, that they allow students to use their imagination and contribute to a relaxed atmosphere. Some of these benefits were also observed by Joklová (2009). In her paper, she demonstrates that pictures are an indispensable tool to teach vocabulary, highlighting the impact they have on students' motivation and interest. She carried out several activities using pictures that were all significantly engaging and successful according to her evaluation and analysis.

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Yet, and more precisely, the research undertaken by Carrasco and Miranda (2013) about visual aids in English language teaching in Chile was helpful as they contextualized this topic in a closer context to the one researched here. The authors refer to the Chilean Ministry of Education's efforts to provide public schools with appropriate educational materials to support better learning and the emphasis on audiovisual aids. Further, they maintain that when the curriculum contents are taught "by means of visual aids, the language learning process becomes appealing and meaningful for them" (Carrasco and Miranda, 2013, p. 52).

Therefore, it can be asserted that visual aids are significantly useful when properly used to teach vocabulary to young learners. As Phillips (1993) claimed "vocabulary is best learned when the meaning of the word(s) is illustrated, for example by a picture, an action or a real object" (p. 74). Then, it is important to provide students the opportunity to enjoy while they learn, otherwise the learning outcomes are not going to be that successful. This view is supported by Phillips as well, as she states that "if an activity is enjoyable, it will be memorable; the language involved will 'stick', and the children will have a sense of achievement which will develop motivation for further learning" (p. 8).

Conclusions

The use of visual aids can be very beneficial for young learners' ESL classrooms when they are properly implemented. Currently, children are exposed to a high number of visual stimuli in their daily lives, which should definitely be taken into the classroom and be used to enhance their own learning achievement. As teachers, we should be able to realize when students' outcomes and attitudes do not demonstrate an effective learning, and take part to change this situation. This research results reported that students' achievement and attitude towards vocabulary learning improved at least to some extent with the use of visual aids. Therefore, these results should be considered by other teachers to best meet students' needs and to provide them best opportunities to learn vocabulary in English.

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Appendices

Appendix A: English-Spanish and English-Pictures used to teach the vocabulary.

Unit 1: "Parts of the house"

Unit 2: "Professions"

Living Room: Living

Dining Room: Comedor

Bedroom: Pieza

Bathroom: Baño

Kitchen: Cocina

Yard: Patio



Doctor



Nurse



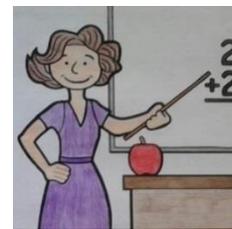
Dentist



Firefighter



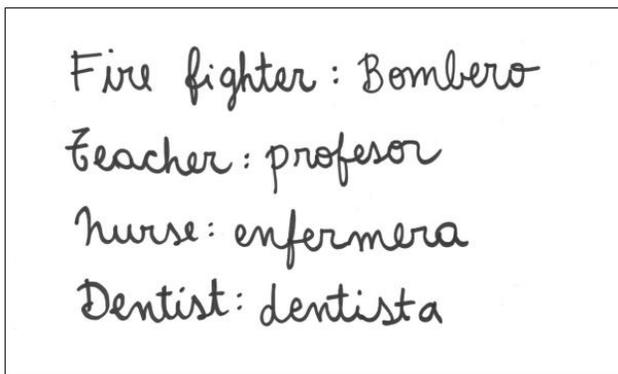
Police Officer



Teacher

Appendix B: Images used in the Focus Groups.

B.1



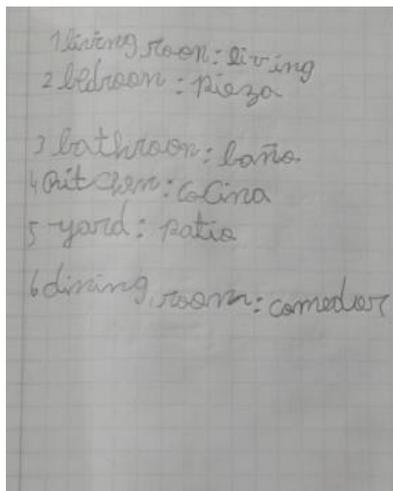
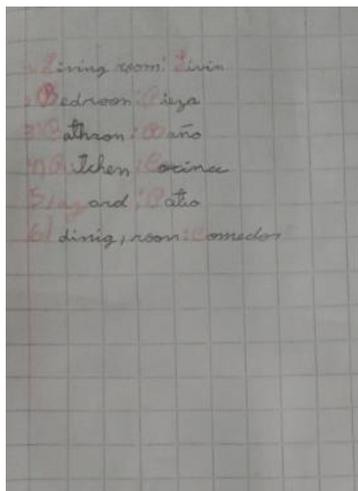
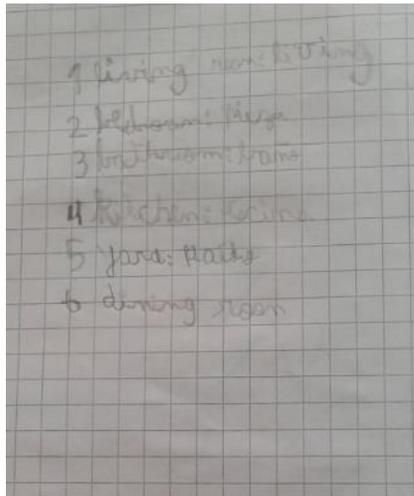
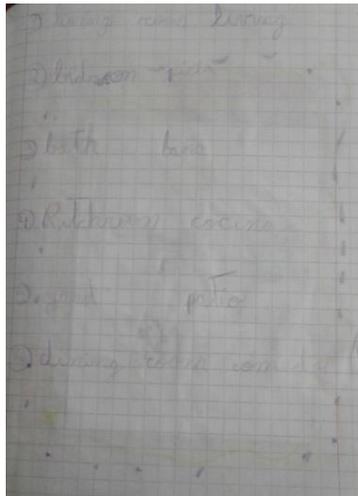
B.2



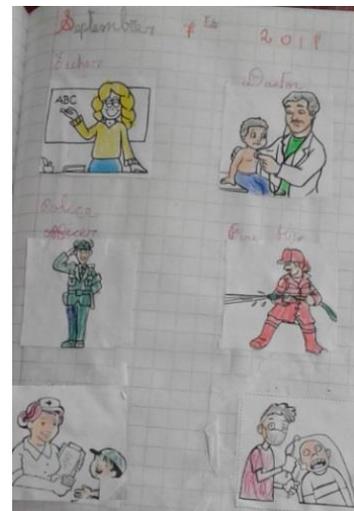
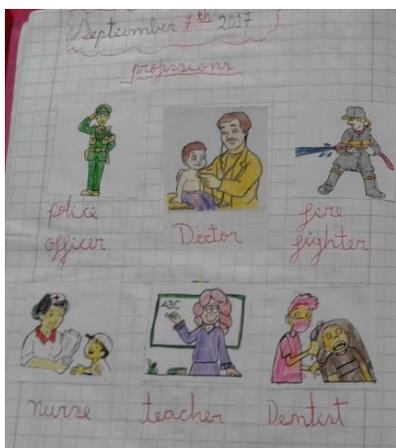
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Appendix C: Samples of vocabulary registered on students' copybooks.

Translation:



Visual Aids:



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Appendix D: Activities to recall vocabulary.

D.1

Translate the following words:

1. Living:
2. Comedor:
3. Cocina:
4. Baño:
5. Dormitorio:
6. Patio:

D.2

Name and color the professions:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 

Appendix E: Observation notes sheet

Observation nº _____		Date: _____	
Grade: _____			
Description of the Events		Analysis	