



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Significance of Signs and Symbols in ESL Learning: An Experimental Study Based on Semiotics

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: Sep 22, 2024

Accepted: Oct 29, 2024

Keywords

Symbols

Images

Semiotics

ESL Learning

Communication

The present study deals with the importance of signs, symbols and images in ESL learning. It supports the phenomenon that learners can comprehend the target language in a better way by using signs and symbols. Language is a unique characteristic of human beings to interact with one another. It consists of written and verbal expressions and responses. Verbal communication is highly important in conveying the meaning but no one can deny the significance of symbols and images for a better comprehension. Symbols and images play a substantial role of a facilitator in the language learning process facilitating learners' comprehension. These make the concept easier for them and transfer information at the same time. Data for this study were collected through handouts with printed images. These images were utilized as teaching tools to facilitate learning. Data were analysed qualitatively. The experimental study conducted by the researcher shows that ESL learners comprehended the target language more effectively and abruptly with the use of signs, symbols and images. They perceived the associative meaning in a better way. Many slow learners can get the meaning faster through images and symbols. Through the use of these visuals, not only learners' comprehension level is increased, but they also retain the things in their memory for a longer period of time. These must be utilized as mnemonic.

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INTRODUCTION

Human nature is voracious and inquisitive for establishing social contacts utilizing magnetic language force that keeps it in company of other human beings breaking seclusion. A human being can't live aloof and mum all the time. As a social animal, he is required a power of communication and thorough comprehension of his surroundings. With the passage of time, he improves his ability of communication and makes additions of visual aids like signs, symbols, images etc. to make it impressive and meaningful. These aids promote his level of comprehension and make him aware of his environment. Moreover, he can't exist without communicating with other human beings and language presents as a great tool of communication for him.

Images and symbols are of great significance in social setups. Our society is a visual dominated society. People believe in images, pictures, videos, movies and symbols more than words. Some people take more time to get the meaning of a written text through extensive reading. The same written text is more comprehensible if it is in the form of a movie, video or a picture. When we learn a concept with the help of an image, it becomes permanent in our memory e.g. one learns the word

'car' with its image, afterwards whenever he listens the word, his brain will definitely generate the mental image of the car in his mind.

Images carry meanings and compensate the written words enhancing comprehension of the people. Their utilization is frequent and visible in our daily life especially on sign boards of shops, roads, hospitals, malls, educational institutions etc. to convey meanings in a proper way. The trend of displaying images is promoting day by day because of their effectiveness. Sometimes images are displayed instead of language, and people effectively get the meaning. The following picture clarifies the concept in a better way. It is picture of a signboard of a café, on which only images are displayed. A single word has not been written on the board but by looking at these images, anyone can easily come to know that this is a place where you can take something to eat.



A symbol is a form of visual representation that is associated to something abstract or physical object. It stands for something else and represents some deep meaning. For instance, 'dove' is the symbol of peace. Some symbols are universal e.g. traffic signs and symbols, symbols related to hospitals and diseases. Some symbols are varied from society to society e.g. 'owl' is the symbol of wisdom in a western community and the same is symbol of foolishness in Pakistan. Images are the actual representation of an object e.g. the picture, photograph or drawing of a person, place or object.

Signs and Symbols are also of crucial importance. They carry different connotation and interpretations in different situations. These are used in almost every field of life. People feel more ease and comfort of using symbols than words or long phrases. Science, mathematics, sociology, language, literature each field of life carries its own signs and symbols which represent that field in its own unique and separate way than that of the other field. Traffic signs and symbols are different from medical signs or signs related to mathematics. Visual signs are easily understood by people; for instance, the sign of an arrow specifying direction is easy to follow to the destination. The concept of parrot demands details such as, it is a living object; it has feathers; it can fly; it is of green or multi colours. Students may get confused that many birds have these characteristics. A single image of a parrot will be enough for the students to grasp the concept.

Signs and symbols have gained a specific identity and have been recognized as modern gadgets and devices of communication. These are commonly used in SMS, online chat, emails, Facebook and X communication. People insert symbols that are called emoticons, instead of written words, for instance instead of saying I am happy a symbol of smile (☺) or (: D) is inserted and it conveys the expression in a successful manner.

We use available signs and codes to produce and receive verbal or nonverbal meaningful messages. While language is a powerful model for understanding communication, it has its limits as an explanatory schema because it ignores other forms of communication (e.g. visual) (Moriarty, 1996).

A lay man is able to get advantages from various known images and symbols even he is unable to read and write in daily affairs. Whenever he visits an unknown place, he inquiries about its identity in form of images that assist him to trace it. For instance, a driver who sets off for another territory

with a consignment and he can't read written boards erected on various places each side of the board, but he will definitely get the guidance from signs and images to reach the destination.

Hypothesis

ESL learners comprehend the meanings and messages in the target language promptly and more effectively through signs, symbols, and images.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

- To draw the attention towards the effective use of signs, images and symbols to convey meaning.
- To test the comprehension level of language learners by using symbols and images.
- To make the ESL teachers aware of the importance of using common signs and symbols in daily life to teach a language inside the class and make the students aware of these signs.

Delimitation

It is very important that language teachers and learners should know the reasons of using signs and symbols in daily life. Language is not only written or verbal communication, but signs and symbols are also an important part of it. They can be observed in almost every field of life. By keeping this phenomenon in mind, the researcher has delimited the present study to the use of signs and symbols in the classroom situation as a crucial part of ESL learning. The study is not denying the presence of pictures or general images in the text books. It is specifically dealing with the signs and symbols (mnemonics) and their associated meanings which are gaining a hype in the modern era of social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning is not inherent in words; it comes from associations with other things. So much research has been done to prove that if our words, ideas and thoughts take the shape of an image, they will process through our eyes, ears, brain and directly go to our long-term memory where they will retain for a longer period of time. Relationship of words and images plays a facilitative role in the area of second language learning process. Scholars are strongly in favor of visuals in learning process, even poets and philosophers did not deny the importance of images. Benson (1997, p.141) has mentioned a poet, Simonides whose "words are the images of things" show that words of any language also depict certain things. They cannot convey any meaning if they are not associated with certain items. He also pointed out that Aristotle, a great philosopher, also held a view that "without image, thinking is impossible". It means that images not only increase the comprehension level of an individual but his thinking process also becomes refined.

"Images are often more provocative than words, more precise and potent in triggering a wide range of associations, thereby enhancing creative thinking and memory" (Buzan, 2003:73). Every individual learner possesses a different level of intelligence. ESL learners process the target language differently. Many teachers in Pakistan are following the old traditional methods of teaching English that is most of the time Grammar Translation Method. They ignore the importance of teaching learners through images and signs. They often forget that teaching/learning process can be more successful when words are associated with images as Buzan describes that intellectual power results in multiplication with the combination skill of words and images, especially when you create your own images" (Buzan et al, 2003: 84). Students who learn through images develop an association with the words and images which enhance their creativity in language learning process.

Images and signs act as visual aids in ESL learning. These visuals can help infinitely in teachers' and students' communication needs. They have unique qualities that make images, symbols and sign the "right" one to use in certain language-learning contexts. Pickett (1988) indicates that visuals can be helpful in several ways:

- 'Visuals can capitalize on seeing. For most people, the sense of sight – more so than hearing, smell, touch, or taste – is the most highly developed of the senses.

- Visuals can convey some kinds of messages better than words can. Ideas or information, difficult or impossible to express in words may be communicated more easily through visuals.
- Visuals can simply or considerably reduce textual explanation. Accompanying visuals often clarify words.
- Visuals can add interest and focus attention.' (p. 538).

These helpful ways suggest that learners can comprehend the target language in a better way with the help of visual aids. Different learners do not have the level of comprehension. Many learners are auditory learners and many are visual learners. The goal of the language teacher is to provide the learners with 'comprehensible input'. By providing enough aural and visual clues to learners, he/she can achieve the required output from learners.

The present study focuses on the importance of these images and signs in ESL learning. Textual details can cause frustration for many students. The tendency of comprehending every detail of the text is very less, students forget these details soon. Use of signs and symbols is a common practice in daily life instead of words. The study has been carried out as an effort to prove that the use of signs and symbols inside the class can enhance the comprehension of learners. They can be motivated towards learning and their creative process can be activated. They learn to relate these signs with real life situations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study takes into account the importance of signs and symbols. The theory of semiotics can be well applied. It deals with signs and their function in daily life. Semiotics focuses on two main issues.

- It deals with the correlation between the sign and its meaning.
- Semiotics studies the way by which signs are combined through following certain rules, or codes (Kim 1996:3).

A sign can be a word, a sound, or visual image. It is an object which represents something else. A sign is divided into two categories by Saussure (Lechte, 1994). One is the signifier (the sound, image, or word) and the other is signified, which is the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning. Berger (Moriarty, 1995a) discusses that the problem of meaning arises from the fact that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional; different people interpret their meaning differently. It suggests that the fundamental idea of this semiotic theory is that all that we can know is mediated by signs. Pierce categorized signs according to meaning as iconic, symbolic, and indexical.

- An iconic sign is one which is more or less the same as the object signified, for instance a portrait, a cartoon etc.
- a symbol is one in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is purely arbitrary or conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt: e.g. language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences), numbers, traffic lights, national flags etc.
- An index is a sign physically linked to its object. For example, a cry for help may indicate someone in need. Similarly, a knock on the door may indicate that there is someone at the door. All these three types of signs are used in visual communication (Lechte, 2000).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study deals with the importance of signs, symbols and images. It is not restricted to only visual learners but its focus is on all the learners of multiple intelligence and creativity. Visual aids as teaching methodology were adopted as a research method for the study. Images are a great source of data collection. They are now commonly used as a data collecting method throughout the world.

An experimental study was conducted by the researcher. The research was carried out as a private sector school at junior level. A class of 20 students at 5th standard was taken into account. The class was being taught in a traditional manner by their regular teacher without any visual aids and

textbooks were the only source of knowledge for learners. The class had been taught for two days by the researcher providing them with visuals consisting of images, signs and symbols.

Students were given certain visual images with some exercises. They were taught in a routine manner through textbooks with explanation by the researcher on the first day of experimental study. After observing the comprehension level of learners, different structures were taught to them in form of small stories with images. An observation guide was designed to get an insight of students' comprehension level.

Another activity based on visual images was designed for the second day. This activity was designed to check the comprehension level of learners. Students were given two work sheets consisting of images and some language cues, so that they could associate the words with appropriate images. They were required to write appropriate words in front of the images. The results of these worksheets determined that the students learned through images better than the textbook. Through these images, the students also learned the signs used in daily life. The researcher observed the learners' comprehension and participation level by keeping the following points in mind:

- Ability of the students to relate the chosen images with real life situations
- Interest of the students in the activities conducted by the teacher
- Readiness of the students to participate in the activities
- Motivation level of students
- Ability of the learners to show successful learning

These points acted as an observation guide for the researcher. These helped in gaining the true idea of the comprehension of learners. They suggest that students learned with motivation and enthusiasm.

DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Data were collected through observation and conducting a test. The data were analyzed through a qualitative paradigm. It was collected from a public sector school named Air Foundation School, PWD Campus. The responses of the learners were presented in a descriptive manner. The researcher conducted activities based on images in the class of 5th grade.

First day: The students were taught a story first day. The text of story is as follows:

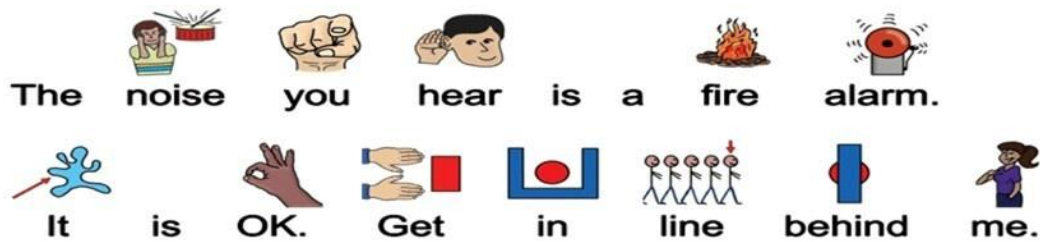
On Saturday, my mom and dad are coming. I hope they will take me camping. If we go camping, I can sleep in a tent. I am a great camper. Sometimes, we do not do camping, that makes me sad. But, mom and dad will have something else we can do. I like it when they come to visit. We will have fun whatever we do.

The teacher wrote the story on the board and explained the story verbally to the students as well. They were listening to the teacher attentively. When they were asked to reproduce the story in their own words, most of the students were unable to do so. Only four students tried to do the task to some extent. The left of the class did not participate in the activity. After this observation, the same story with images was pasted on the board as follows:



As the images were pasted on the board, these attracted the attention of all the learners and they were excited. They at once started discussing the story with the teacher. All image bars were explained by the teacher again. After explanation, the language was hidden by pasting paper with paper pins. The students were asked to come to the board one by one and reproduce the story according to these images. Many of the students were successful in describing the story. They were confused in explaining the sign if NO as it was a symbolic sign and did not have a direct association with the signifier. This sign was explained again by the teacher.

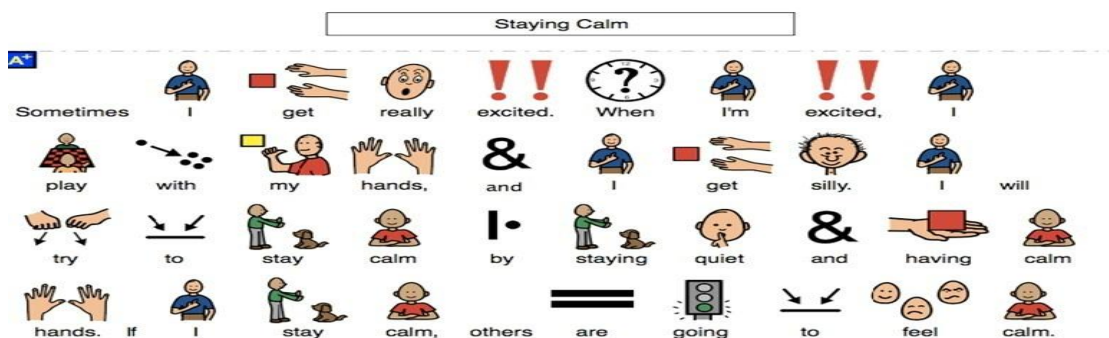
The second activity was based on teaching parts of speech. The following image was used for this purpose:



All parts of speech in the image were explained to the students. The responses of the students were worth noticing. They were all showing interest in learning, and also trying to make those symbols themselves. They were relating the images with real life situations. Everyone was eager to take part in the activity.

The teacher prepared some handouts printed an image on each which conveyed a specific meaning. These handouts were utilized to check the comprehension level of learners. In this activity, eight learners participated. First of all, these learners were explained the procedure to carry it out. The teacher jotted down the words, the noise on the board, a student who had the handout printed the image of a drum came to the whiteboard and stood facing the whole class. Then, the teacher wrote the word, you and another student having the image of hand pointing with an index finger came forward and stood next to the first student. Next word was noted down, hear and similarly the student with the relevant image, came forward and stood next to previous student and so on. When the whole sentence was written on the board, all the participants were standing in the right order without any misconception and disorder. It was a true success of learners.

Second day: Learners were given a task on the second day. An image consisting of many signs and symbols displayed on the whiteboard. All the words on the image were covered with pieces of papers. Word cues were written on the whiteboard besides the image. The teacher called the students to the whiteboard one by one. Each student had to associate the word with the appropriate symbol to create a story based on these symbols. It had been observed that learners were very enthusiastic. They were trying to associate the words with symbols. By doing this task, their creativity and thinking process was also active. The students completed the story with teacher’s assistance, because some symbols were ambiguous for them. After completion of the symbol story, the teacher got their oral response. It was found that all of the students had learned and comprehended the story well. The participation level was noticeable and encouraging.

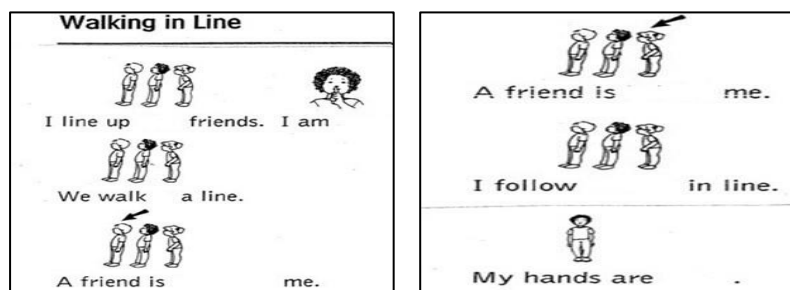


The story consists of all three kinds of signs; iconic, symbolic and indexical. It had been found that iconic signs were easily comprehended by the learners and they showed a quick response such as the signifier hands and I are directly related to their signified. I has an iconic sign of a human being pointed towards him. It specifies the personal pronoun I. Hands is also a direct signifier of its signified. The word play has also an iconic signified. Learners associated its signifier without any difficulty.

Symbolic signs in the story created a problem for learners to comprehend. They were not directly related to their signifiers or words associated with them. The signs of really, excited, calm, and going have got symbolic association with the words. The word really is an expression of uncertainty that has been shown on a face of human being. Some students comprehended it through that expression. The other word excited has also got an arbitrary relationship with its signified. An exclamation mark has been used to convey the meaning of this message. The students could not guess the associated word without the help of the teacher. At the point, the teacher told them the use of exclamation mark. The word calm is also a human feeling that is shown by a human image sitting in peace. Going is symbolized here with the traffic lights, as the green light is the symbol for traffic to move ahead. This sign is associated with its signifier easily by the learners.

Indexical signs can also be found in the story. The words get, my, and having are indexical signs as they are physically associated with the signified object. Get, having and my are the signifiers that show the relationship with a specific thing that is going to be your possession. There are many signs which get an arbitrary relationship between signified and signifier such as with, to, by and are. The teacher explained these symbols to students due to which they easily related the words with their signs and completed and comprehended the whole story.

The students are given a new task after the accomplishment of story creation. Learners' comprehension was tested by given them a work sheet consisted of images and incomplete sentences given under each image. The missing lexical items were written on the whiteboard randomly. The learners had to pick the appropriate word according to the image and put it in the blank. The missing words were: in, with, quit, friend, in front of, down and behind.



The results were very surprising. Out of 20 students 17 students completed the worksheet without a single mistake. The rest of the three students committed 2 mistakes in each worksheet. The comprehension level of the students was good. They were participating actively in all the activities based on images and signs. They were motivated to learn.

Data analysis shows that students are more motivated and more enthusiastic to learn through images than reading and memorizing the text. They were getting the meaning of words and relating them to the real world. Their motivation level was also increased. Textual descriptions are lengthy and most of the students get frustrated when they cannot understand these long descriptions. The students who get the meaning through these descriptions may understand the idea, but there are great chances of forgetting these details. The experimental study conducted by the researcher proves that ESL learners comprehend the target language by the use of signs, symbols and images to perceive meaning more effectively and abruptly.

CONCLUSION

ESL teaching and learning process is no more mystery and challenge in the presence of images, signs and symbols for assiduously agile trained instructor and motivating learners. It becomes very successful and impressive with a little extra strive and preparation. These mnemonics must be

guiding, facilitating, promoting, motivating, interacting and urging to both teachers and learners to improve the comprehension level and get prolific results.

Textual books most of the time are compiled neglecting visual aids and it brings monotony and disgusting feelings among learners. The learners are no more interested in these books to gain or learn information especially children at early stages. On the contrary, combination of symbols and images with textbooks can produce better aftermaths in developing the learners' inquisitive nature to know more and more.

In the field of semiotics, further research needs to be carried out specifically in relation to second language learning. Second language learners should be aware of signs so that they can learn the language in a better way and learn the cultural specifications as well. It should be taken into account that why signs and symbols are overwhelming in every field of life. Each product available in the market carries a specific sign over its label which represents its brand. These signs are becoming a common means of communication among communities.

Successful application guarantees comprehension of the concepts and ideas. There must be complete concordance between images and their meaning. Otherwise, it will result ambiguity and misunderstanding. Furthermore, their usage brings a change in the pedagogical technique instead of using GTM method. The learners respond better involving in learning process and they get the opportunity to interact with their classmates and the teacher as well. In short, well-chosen images, symbols and signs demand comprehensive appeal for their implementation to produce positive impacts on students' understanding of the target language.

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