



Sight and Insight – Teaching Language through Visual Arts

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Abstract

Language instructors have different resources to choose from when designing learning activities. This article explores the benefits of using visual materials to develop language proficiency across the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. It discusses how this engagement promotes extensive language use, by referencing a content-based Modern Hebrew course, which focuses on visual literacy and critical thinking.

Keywords: Visual Literacy, Language Acquisition, Multiliteracies, Critical Thinking, Cultural Awareness

Many cultures around the world regard visual arts as powerful tools to convey and communicate different messages. Cognitive research has shown that the human brain is able to process images much faster than it is able to process words. In fact, it is more likely that images, as opposed to written texts, will remain in a person's long-term memory (Levie and Lentz, 1982).

Foreign language instructors often focus their attention on various textual materials—vocabulary, verb forms, sentence structures, etc. However, as research continues to demonstrate, authentic visual resources, such as: fine art, advertisements, films, video clips, and more, are able to elicit and develop language proficiency across the four domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Brumberger, 2011; Eliam, 2012; Baker, 2015).

As a result, *visual literacy*, a term coined by Debes in 1969, as a set of skills that humans are able to foster by reporting what they are seeing, becomes all the more relevant in the 21st century classroom (Baker, 2015). These skills enable individuals to describe and analyze any visual experience they come across, as well as communicate it to others (Eliam, 2012).

Furthermore, as the *multiliteracies framework*¹ suggests, in today's world “meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning interface with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile, and spatial patterns of meaning.” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015, p. 3). By combining representations (text, image, sound, etc.) and incorporating them into the curriculum, meaningful connections can be made and further explored. This approach helps support the idea that there is a wealth of possibilities, worth examining, that visual arts can offer for language acquisition.

The content-based, advanced-level course, *Contemporary Israeli Art - Since 1948 Until Today*, which I developed for the *Modern Hebrew Program* at Yale University, provides a unique opportunity for learners to showcase their skills and strengthen their critical thinking abilities, through the exposure to the Israeli visual art world. Throughout this course content is consistently linked with continued language study, as learners use structures of language they mastered, while discovering new ways of writing and talking about art.

In accordance with the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (ACTFL), this course targets the “5-Cs”—communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities—in the purpose of preparing learners to put into use their studied set of skills (ACTFL, 2011). This course also teaches learners how to employ their analytical competence, in order to elevate and reinforce their individual abstract perspectives, in agreement with ACTFL's advanced-level proficiency guidelines (ACTFL, 2012).

Back in 2003, the *North Central Regional Educational Laboratory* (NCREL) listed several skills that will become increasingly valuable to students entering the work force. Among these skills is *visual literacy*, which is defined as “the ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st century media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning.” (NCREL, 2003, p. 24).

¹ The “multiliteracies framework”, also known as the “pedagogy of multiliteracies”, is a term that was introduced by the New London Group in 1996. It refers to an educational approach that sees the development of literacy skills as connected to the various uses of language, in different sociocultural contexts (Paesani et al., 2016).

The publication concludes that students who are visually literate are able to understand basic aspects of visual design, technique, and media; they are also aware of emotional, psychological, physiological, and cognitive consequences that arise when dealing with visual resources; they can grasp both abstract and symbolic representations; they are knowledgeable viewers, critics, consumers and producers of visual information; they are innovative visual thinkers and successful problem solvers (NCREL, 2003; Brumberger, 2011).

That being said, as Brumberger notes, even if 21st century students are exposed to visual materials in an early stage of their lives, and have repeated access to visual resources, no assumption can be made that they are, indeed, visually literate. Therefore, “if we accept that visual literacy is an essential ability for the 21st century, we must teach our students to be visually literate, just as we teach them to be verbally literate.” (Brumberger, 2011, p. 46).

Since the engagement with visual materials can promote extensive language use, lesson plans and classroom activities that utilize these resources can make a productive contribution to language learning. Baker offers a number of ways in which *visual literacy* can drive students to extend their language abilities—for example, through the use of visual resources students can produce meaningful oral interaction (with one another as well as with the instructor); students are given a chance to think critically and express their opinion when interpreting images; students learn to consider different points of view and develop global perspectives; students can use visuals to support other learning tasks; and, since visual resources are often authentic materials, students can link language with content in a more significant way (Baker, 2015).

When considering specific visual materials that can be used for language learning, the term *visual culture* comes to mind. Eliam explains that this term most often refers to the various visual arts, usually highlighting their “effects on human society and their role as an artifact and a mirror of society.” (Eliam, 2012, p. 85). In fact, Eliam argues that, *visual literacy* and *visual culture* make up two overlapping concepts. That is because some of the skills that *visual literacy* refers to can be found within *visual culture*’s goals, for example, the ability to describe and interpret what is seen, which leads to the development of critical thinking (Eliam, 2012).

Freedman, who focuses on the term *visual culture* from an art education perspective, emphasizes the interdisciplinary and multimodal nature of *visual culture*, which includes—the fine arts, advertising, popular films, folk art, television, and other forms of visual production. For this reason, the study of *visual culture* has an important educational implication—it is closely related to identity formation (Freedman, 2003). This interaction influences the way learners address their personal experiences, and how they communicate them through language.

The above-mentioned advantages of integrating visual resources in education, and specifically in language learning, provided a strong case for the positive possibilities of creating a content-based course that includes these elements. And, in fact, the course *Contemporary Israeli Art - Since 1948 Until Today*, did exactly that—it helped refine learners’ existing *visual literacy* skills, and translated them across languages and across cultures.

In order to achieve this goal, I chose to use the principles of the *multiliteracies framework* to create meaningful classroom experiences. According to this approach, learning is the practice of coming-to-know, while pedagogy is perceived as an act of formalized learning—“it is conscious, premeditated, and structured. Pedagogy is learning by design.” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015, p. 23). Design itself, is seen as a dynamic process which includes three closely tied concepts: Available Designs, Designing, and the Redesigned. Available Designs are all the resources—linguistic, social, cultural—that learners bring with them to a text to create meaning. In the process of interpreting or producing a text, learners make use of these resources to participate in Designing. The result of Designing is an altered representation of Available Designs which is the Redesigned (Allen and Paesani, 2010; Paesani et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the *multiliteracies framework* recognizes four pedagogical acts—situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. These should be viewed as part of an active sequence of learning, that can move backwards and/or forwards, depending on the specific learning goals (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015; Paesani et al., 2016).

For example, when the students in my course engaged with an art piece, they were able to apply their real-world experience to describe what they are seeing (situated practice); they were given context or researched for historical, social, economic, etc. contexts regarding the piece and/or the artist (overt instruction); they began to analyze and think critically about the piece and the person(s) who made it (critical framing); and, they created their own text(s) and creative projects using the information they learned and gathered (transformative practice). By following these stages, students went through the design process, as the *multiliteracies framework* suggests—they used available resources, learned to examine them in detail and respond to them, and eventually were able to create their own.

It has been my experience, so far, that when visual resources are used effectively during in-class and/or out-of-class activities, learners are not only studying the language, but are also repeatedly conveying and constructing meaning. As a result, the combination of authentic representations and their inclusion in the curriculum, have great potential in helping learners create meaningful connections when applying the target language.

In Fall 2020, I was fortunate to be awarded with the *Yale Center for Language Study Professional Development Fellowship*, in order to develop the course *Contemporary Israeli Art - Since 1948 Until Today*.

During that time, I explored the *multiliteracies framework* and implemented it to create reading, writing, speaking, and listening assignments for this course.

I launched an online “database” of relevant Israeli visual art productions, which includes paintings, photographs, drawings, sculptures, and more. I also connected with education program coordinators at the *Yale Art Gallery* and at the *Haas Arts Library* to organize class visits, so that my students could have the opportunity to experience, first hand, artworks created by Israeli artists that are available for “real life” view on the Yale campus.

Becoming familiar with the professional jargon and conventions of particular visual resources, allowed my students to develop thorough responses to works of art, as well as to speak and/or write about visual imagery with more accuracy and fluency (Tucker, 2002). Since elements of genre, technique, structure and more became evident while working with the different visual resources, I created additional materials (in print and online), that introduced specific vocabulary, phrases, etc., that are consistent with the Israeli art world. This provided my students with the confidence to speak and write about Israeli art in Hebrew.

The addition of this new course has also served the *Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations Department* and the *Modern Hebrew Program* at Yale, by adding a unique content-based course to the curriculum. The *Modern Hebrew Program* at Yale is now offering a “Certificate of Advanced Language Study”² to students who complete four Modern Hebrew courses at the L5 level, which is leading to a demand for more content-based courses. The course was cross-listed with the *Judaic Studies Program* and *Modern Middle East Studies*, and was open to the participation of both undergraduate and graduate students.

Overall, the course *Contemporary Israeli Art - Since 1948 Until Today* provided students with ample opportunities to exercise and apply their language skills, through class discussions, reading and researching, expressing their opinions in oral and/or written form and reflecting on their learning process. The course was divided into topics based on historical, social and cultural references, when every two weeks were dedicated to a different decade—since 1948, when the state of Israel was first established, until today. This structure helped students begin to form connections between trends and changes that occurred in Israel throughout the years, and inevitability influenced the visual art world.

As we have seen throughout the course, Israeli art is rich in technique, style, forms of expression and variation of topics, that reflect individual’s attempts to establish local identity. Before Israel became a state, local and traditional forms of art were in the forefront, however, as time went on, artistic productions became more compatible with the “Fine Arts”, in the western tradition. Since Israel was granted independence, in 1948, visual representations seem to continually move between dealing with local issues, and the participation in a dialogue with international artistic trends. Therefore, the course focused on enhancing student’s *visual literacy* and critical thinking skills, within the context of world-celebrated artistic productions.

The course *Contemporary Israeli Art - Since 1948 Until Today* was first taught in Fall 2021. In an anonymous survey, at the end of the semester, I requested students to comment on their experience, the materials used and share any feedback they wished. The responses were quite positive, pointing at the variety of artworks and authentic materials that assisted in providing a good overview of Israeli art history. The students enjoyed reading academic texts in Hebrew; participating in online and in-class discussions; and creating art projects in class as well as for their midterm and final projects. They found the class visits to the gallery and the library very informative, and appreciated the chance to learn “outside” of the classroom.

The students noted that the combination of reading authentic texts, viewing the artworks and watching videos about the artists and their works, were especially engaging, because it helped them get a good sense of not only the art in Israel, but also the academic discourse about it. This, in turn, improved their language competence greatly, especially when performing productive skills, such as writing and speaking. The students were also able to recognize how reading and listening to various materials at a high, academic level is important to their growth. They mentioned they had managed to internalize new concepts and ideas due to the collaborative class environment, and comprehend the linear and non-linear trajectory of Israeli history more clearly, as the course progressed through the historical periods and artistic trends. In summation, the students’ testimonies prove that the course had accomplished its goals, and was a valuable step in developing and refining their language proficiency, visual literacy and critical thinking skills.

² See the announcement from the Yale College Dean regarding changes in foreign language study (April 2018). <https://yalecollege.yale.edu/get-know-yale-college/office-dean/messages-dean/changes-foreign-language-study>

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