

MIND CINEMA: ENABLING STUDENTS TO SEE WHAT THEY READ

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ABSTRACT

When we read in our L1 it is normal for us to create pictures in our mind of the material we are reading, or to 'visualise'. However, research has shown that this is often not the case with L2 readers, particularly at lower levels. Despite the fact that the activity is the same, the reading strategies employed by L2 learners are not and this hinders comprehension. This paper shows that by encouraging L2 learners to visualise when reading, their level of comprehension can be improved. After a brief theoretical introduction a list of practical ideas is given, along with an example text showing how these ideas can be exploited in the classroom.

KEY WORDS

Literature, reading, reading strategies, ELT.

RESUMEN

Cuando leemos en nuestra lengua materna, solemos crear imágenes en la mente acerca de la lectura. Es decir, la 'visualizamos'. Sin embargo, nos indica la investigación que a menudo esto no es cierto en cuanto a los que leen en una lengua extranjera, especialmente a los que tengan un nivel bajo. A pesar del hecho de que la actividad sea igual, las estrategias de lectura empleadas no lo son, y esto obstaculiza la comprensión. Este documento demuestra cómo, por animar a los principiantes a visualizar mientras leen, su nivel de comprensión puede ser mejorado. Después de una breve introducción teórica, se ofrece una lista de ideas prácticas, junto con un ejemplo de un texto, los cuales demuestran cómo el autor utilizaría estas ideas en la sala de clase.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Literatura, lectura, estrategias de lectura, enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera.

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RÉSUMÉ

Lorsque nous lisons dans notre langue maternelle, nous avons l'habitude de créer des images de ce que nous lisons dans notre esprit, autrement dit, de 'visualiser' la lecture. Néanmoins, la recherche sur ce sujet a démontré que ce phénomène n'arrive pas chez les apprenants de deuxième langue, surtout aux niveaux faibles. Bien que l'activité reste la même, les stratégies employées par ces apprenants ne le sont pas (ils ne lisent pas de la même manière), et ceci gêne à la compréhension. Ce papier démontre comment la visualisation de la lecture peut améliorer la compréhension de la lecture. Suite à une courte introduction théorique, une liste d'idées pratiques est proposée ainsi qu'un texte modèle qui montre comment les exploiter dans les classes.

MOTS-CLÉ

La littérature, la lecture, les stratégies de la lecture, enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère.

INTRODUCTION

Steven Pinker (1994, p. 81) believes that people do not think in a particular language but that 'they think in a language of thought', which he calls 'mentalese'. The reason being, for example, that when native speakers come across homonyms they know which meaning of the word to take, provided they have a context, despite the fact that there could be four or five other meanings. Ten people who each speak a different language can be thinking and envisaging the same thing at the same time. Something as simple as envisaging an object, e.g. a mug, has the roughly same image for all of them, but each probably has a different word for it. 'Knowing language, then, is knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa' (*op. cit.*, p. 82). And Pinker continues that even without language we would still have meaningful thoughts. It seems, therefore, that mental imagery plays an important function in the learning process. Marks (1973, p. 23, cited in Arnold, 1999, p. 267) states that 'images have an important function in memory. Image vividness...facilitates accurate recall'.

What has all this got to do with literature? The way that I see students having an improved understanding of a text is by empowering them with the ability to decode strings of words in a foreign language into thoughts and *images*. By doing this, in my experience, the comprehension and appreciation of literature can be greatly enhanced. Thinking back to my first experiences of reading literature in Czech, despite not knowing every word, I was able to see moving pictures in my mind

of the scene that was unfolding in the book. To me it was ‘mind cinema’. I believe that to allow students to get the most from a text we need to develop this skill.

INCREASING VISUALISATION

Tomlinson (1997, 1998) found that while almost all L1 readers possess the ability to visualise during reading most L2 readers do not, particularly elementary and intermediate learners. The reason being that the main strategies employed by students (looking up words, translating and memorising in one study conducted) were low-level language learning strategies and not *reading strategies*. Tomlinson (1998) goes on to state that all the L2 subjects of his experiments who reported visualising when reading had greater comprehension and recall than those who did not. He (*op. cit.*, p. 270) believes that ‘increasing an L2 reader’s ability to visualise can facilitate positive engagement with the text and can increase the reader’s ability to comprehend and retain what is read’. He goes on to say:

The L2 readers who are content to leave many gaps in their mental images of what a text represents seem to be those who achieve the least understanding of the text whereas those who try to fill in the picture by, for example, compensating from their visual schemata, seem to understand more (*op. cit.*, p. 271).

Based on this information Tomlinson concludes that in order for L2 readers to see the text they need to be trained in the higher-level reading strategies of visualisation and inferencing. Such strategies include:

- a) stopping at the end of each paragraph and recapping/visualising what it was about and what was happening, followed by predicting what might come in the next paragraph;
- b) trying to see pictures of the people in the text and what they are doing whilst reading. The students are instructed not to worry about words they do not understand or to use their dictionaries, just to use the words they do know along with their own experience (schemata) to create pictures (Tomlinson, 1997).

In order for mind cinema to work properly, however, the reading needs to be fluent. When I started reading in Czech I used it as a tool for increasing my vocabulary and read with a dictionary close at hand. The flow slowed and the film snapped. Vision was lost and compre-

hension impaired because my mind was focussed on deciphering the meaning of individual words instead of dealing with the big picture. Once I realised this and switched to reading for fluency my comprehension was greatly improved and I was able to see moving images in my mind as I read. For this fluency to work there are two issues that need to be considered: (a) the language level must not be too far beyond that of the current level of the reader, and (b) not everybody has the ability to see what they read to the same degree – some people simply see a stream of words, not realising that they work together to provide a meaningful message, while others understand what is being described in words but cannot see beyond that, to envisage a fuller picture and embellish what the author has provided (Wilhelm, 1997; Arnold, 1999). It is this second point that teachers should work on with students from the beginning.

Wilhelm demonstrates how important seeing what you read is in his study of L1 and L2 readers in the US:

It became clear in repeated instances throughout the school year that these students [a group with learning difficulties] had great difficulty in spontaneously visualizing the story world. And if the visualization did not occur, they were unable to respond in any of the other response dimensions (1997, p. 65).

Despite the fact that these students had learning difficulties, it should not be taken for granted that other students will be able to see what they read, or at least not to the same degree. By explicitly working on this, we can develop the abilities of even the strongest readers to a further level.

PRACTICAL IDEAS TO USE IN THE CLASSROOM

– **Cutouts:** Characters, settings, props and anything else that played a part in the students' reading are cut out of card. Using the cutouts the students then position them on the table and move them around whilst they describe how they interpreted the story (Wilhelm, 1997). This is then easy for other students to comment on, revise and manipulate their ideas. This would also work well as preparation for a drama activity (see below).

– **Re-enact the scene:** Following on from above or done independently students can act out the scene/s they have read.

– **Pre-reading drawing:** Based on the title, summary, front cover or introduction to a book or poem, students are asked to draw a picture of the characters or setting. In this way the students already have images in their minds when they start reading. ‘These images are activations of their schemata...’ (Tomlinson, 1998, p. 274). These pictures or mental images are then adapted during reading.

– **Post-reading drawing:** Students are asked to draw a picture after reading the text. This can help them to read visually provided they are told *before* reading what will be expected of them. This means that they will be concentrating on images as they read (Tomlinson, 1998).

– **Character drawing:** Students draw a picture of a character/characters as they are described in the text (Tomlinson, 1997).

– **Cartoon strip:** Students read a text and then draw a cartoon strip of it (Tomlinson, 1997).

– **Group mural:** A nice idea if things can be put on the wall is for each student/small group to draw different images from a text and then put them all together to produce a mural (Tomlinson, 1997). This also has the potential to act as continual motivation for the students as they can always see the results of their own work around them.

– **Picture story:** Students tell the story from a series of illustrations before reading the text (Tomlinson, 1997).

– **Picture gallery:** Place a selection of pictures on a wall or table, which could be used to represent images in the text. After students have read the text they are asked to decide which picture best matches the person/room/scene or whatever that was in the text.

– **Fill in the blanks:** Students are asked to build on what the author has written to develop a fuller picture of the scene. For example, in a story about tennis, which mentions only the players, we can use our worldly experience to envisage an umpire, crowd, etc.

– **Instant images:** During reading a text shout ‘stop’ and ask students to work in pairs to describe to their partner what they ‘see’. Students can also be given the option of drawing their image.

AN EXAMPLE TEXT

The following extracts come from a book on the Cambridge FCE reading list and along with the activities is appropriate for upper-intermediate and above. The activities work on preparing students to read the text, general comprehension of the text (this is important if the

visualisation activities are to work) and vocabulary expansion (note that this is always done either as pre-teaching of some key phrases or after other activities which have focussed on visualisation).

Cry Freedom-John Briley

What do you know about South Africa? Have you heard of apartheid? What do you know about Nelson Mandela? What did he do?

(Show visuals of a white and a black man and say the title of the book.) What do you think this book is about? What does the phrase 'The explosive novel by John Briley' suggest to you?

(Explain that Steve Biko was, like Mandela, also a leader in the movement against apartheid in the 1970's.)

Read for the first time and discuss with a partner what your first impressions are.

When Woods stepped out, the door closed immediately behind him. He looked around, but saw no sign of anyone. The chattering 'busyness' of the church had been replaced by a silence that only the wind disturbed. The yard itself was overgrown with weeds and there was one
5 giant old tree in the centre trailing a waterfall of green tendrils that tumbled to the ground. Beyond it, in the centre of the lot, Woods could see a small building – but still no sign of anyone. He moved off the step down into the yard, looking about. The wind shifted the fronds of the spreading tree, dappling the yard with sun and shade, making it
10 difficult to pick things out, but there was no sign of anyone. Woods turned about, mystified, and grew annoyed again – then something near the tree caught his eye. He peered through the waving fronds, and there in the ever-changing light, standing as still as a tree-trunk, was a tall black figure, his eyes fixed on Woods, watching him without emotion
15 as he had apparently been doing since Woods came out of the door. 'Biko? Are you Steve Biko?' Woods called out.

The figure didn't answer, but after a moment, he simply turned towards the small building and gestured with his hand. 'Come, follow me.'

From a black man, this annoyed Woods even more. He sighed heavily, and muttering about the inanity of ever coming at all started to work
20 his way gingerly through the heavy weeds in his expensive shoes and equally expensive suit.

Have these men met before? How do we know? Picture these men in your mind. What do we know about their physical appearances?

(Divide the class into an even number of groups of 3/4 and number each group 1,2,1,2...) Group 1's, work together, you are Woods.

As you step out of the church describe what is going through your mind until the end of the extract. Group 2's, work together, you are Biko. You see Woods come outside. Describe what is going through your mind the whole time. Remember, you *are* this person so use the first person 'I'. (Once ready, put each A-group with a B-group to tell each other what they were thinking.)

Find three words that are new to you but that you think you can understand from context. What parts of speech are they? Read the whole sentences with these words. What are they about? Is that enough to help you guess the meaning of the word? If not, look at the sentences around it. (Elicit one word and go right through the process on the board as an example.)

In the next extract Biko is taking Woods to see a township for the first time. Do you know what a township is? (Explain if not.) Why do you think that this is Woods' first visit to a township?

Read the extract and say how the mood changes as the text progresses.

Biko was standing in some bushes. He came out and pushed into the front seat. Tully, the youngest in the group, hunched up and then straddled Biko's knees and those of the other front-seat passenger. There were four in the front and five in the back. John had already started
5 backing the car out into the road again when Biko turned around and glanced at Woods. He burst into a huge smile. 'You comfortable enough?' he asked solicitously. The others laughed.

'Hell, he's got the best seat,' Mapetla declared. They lurched onto the road, and John gunned the car away, Woods
10 being leaned upon and crunched at every pitch and roll of the car. Biko was still grinning at him.

'Listen,' Woods said defensively, 'I was raised in a black Homeland. I'm not half as uncomfortable as you think!'

'I know,' Biko said gravely, 'you only drive that white Mercedes because
15 of the *neighbours*. As a liberal, if you had *your* way, you'd be riding around in buses and taxis just like us.'

The others smirked at Woods and he had to smile, but he wasn't beaten. 'Well, despite all the evidence *to the contrary*, you keep telling me my days of white privilege are *numbered* – so I'm just enjoying them
20 while I can.' The ironic allusion to their own pretensions brought another touch of laughter.

'Listen, we may not have all the *transportation* problems of the revolution licked,' John rejoined, 'but don't think that just because we're sneaking around like this, we haven't got the System over the barrel.'
25 There were a few 'Amen!'s.

'Oh, ho,' Woods mocked at that bit of bravado.

'No, you listen to him, man!' Mapetla demanded cheerfully.

When they reached the township, the mood inside the taxi was still sportive, but they were soon caught in a long, dusty line of taxis and buses. In the deepening twilight everything seemed to turn grey – the buildings cluttered together near the rutted road; the red and black taxis, so covered in dust they looked like moving parts of the earth; the faces of the people jammed into taxis, hanging from the sides of buses, waiting by the roadside for a friend or a father or a husband or a wife.

35 And the mood inside the taxi turned grey too.

How many people are travelling in the car? Is this a normal situation? How do you know? What is the atmosphere like between the people in the car? How does Woods usually travel around? How would you feel travelling in a car with so many people on a bumpy, dusty road?

(Write 'see, hear, feel, smell' on the board.) Work in groups of four. Each person chooses a different sense before reading the text again. This time when you read the text focus on your sense and be prepared to describe everything you see, feel, hear or smell afterwards to the other members of your group. You can make notes or draw pictures to help you if you want.

What does the text between lines 6 & 21 suggest about the differences between blacks and whites in South Africa in the 1970s?

Why do you think the mood changed the way it did when they got to the township? Have you ever visited anything like a township? If so, what was it like?

How has the relationship between Woods and Biko developed since their first meeting?

(Explain what 'to have someone over the barrel' means.) What do you think 'the System' is in line 24? What do you think 'my days...are numbered' in line 19 means? Do you have any other questions about the text?

You are Woods. Write a letter to a friend telling him/her about your journey to the township. Don't forget to include your thoughts, opinions and feelings as well as describing the situation and the people you were with. (120-180 words.)

This is the final extract. Read it and write three words you would use to describe it.

The road-block was put up at 10 p.m. The police always tried to change the place and time of road-blocks because word travelled so fast on the

‘black drums’ – as they called the network – that somehow news was always passed from one black community to another throughout the whole country.

They didn’t keep the blocks in place long either, because they found that truckers very swiftly carried the news of one down the particular road they were on, and once that happened no one was ever caught who was worth catching.

So if you fell foul of a road-block there was always a bit of bad luck about it. On this night only two cars had been stopped before Peter Jones, one of Steve’s closest friends, drove round the bend and saw the flashing police lights of a road-block ahead. There were two police cars and a Land Rover. There was no chance of making a U-turn and certainly none of running through it.

Peter slowed the car. ‘They’ll probably only ask for my identity papers,’ he said nervously. *Biko was sitting next to him on the front seat.* They were on their way back from Cape Town.

‘Have you got anything in the back?’ Steve asked.

‘No...all the posters were given out in Cape Town. I’ve only got a spare tyre back there.’

The car ahead of them was sent on by the police. One of them used his torch signalling Peter forward. Peter slowly moved the car forward and stopped. A policeman threw the beam from his torch onto Peter’s face. ‘Keys and papers, hey!’ he commanded. A second policeman went to the boot.

Peter gave him his identity papers and the keys of the car. The policeman tossed them to his confrère, then shone his torch on Peter’s papers. The policeman at the boot fiddled with the lock – he was having trouble getting it opened. Biko glanced sideways at Peter. Peter shrugged, but neither of them dared say a word.

The policeman at the window handed back Peter his papers, satisfied, and shone his light around the back seat. He stepped back, prepared to let them go, but the policeman at the rear was still tinkering with the key to the boot. ‘I can’t get the blarry thing open,’ he said.

The policeman at Peter’s window was instantly suspicious.

‘What’s in there?’ he demanded harshly.

‘Nothing,’ Peter answered with desperate honesty.

One of the people at the road-block itself started back towards them. He was on Biko’s side of the car. ‘What’s the matter?’ he asked officiously.

‘I think they got something in here,’ the policeman at the boot answered. Another policeman from the road-block joined him and they both pounded on the boot and struggled with the key.

‘Can I try?’ Peter asked, opening the door to get out. The policeman on his side just signalled him to the boot.

But the policeman on Biko's side of the car stopped at the window. He tapped it. 'Out!' he ordered.

50 Biko hesitated for a moment, but he had no option. He pushed open the door and got out. He stood a head taller than his officious adversary and he just kept his eyes straight ahead at the blackness beyond the road-block.

'Papers,' the policeman demanded.

55 Again Biko hesitated. Then he reached into his coat and handed the man his pass-book. Perfunctorily, the policeman flipped open the cover and shone his torch from Biko's face to the face in the pass-book. Suddenly he stiffened. His light went back to Biko's face – then once again to the pass-book. 'What's your name, kaffir?' he said astoundedly. 'It's there in the book,' Biko answered.

60 'Say it! Say your name!' the man bellowed. The other policemen all turned to look. What the hell was the matter? There was another silent pause, then Biko answered. 'Bantu Steven Biko,' he said levelly. The other policemen stared in stupefaction.

What is a road-block? Why is it there? Why are Biko and Peter there? Are the police looking for Biko and Peter? What time is it?

How many people are there in this scene? (Six.) Who are they? (Have students draw a plan view of a car and cut out six squares of paper with names 'Biko', 'Peter', 'policeman 1', 'policeman 2', 'policeman 3' and 'policeman 4' written on them. Then have them place the first two in the car – remember that the driver sits on the right in South Africa!) Picture the scene using these figures and describe with a partner what the policemen do and show how and where the figures move.

Why do you think they were in Cape Town? What do you think will happen next?

What is a 'U-turn' in line 14? Why do you think the author wrote '*Biko was sitting next to him in the front seat*' in line 17 italics? Think of a more common synonym for 'fiddling' (line 29) and 'tinkering' (line 34) – one synonym can be used for both. How do you think the dialogue was spoken from line 58 to 62? (Go through this with the class, helping with vocabulary, i.e. 'said astoundedly', 'bellowed' and 'said levelly'.) What do you think a stare of stupefaction is (line 63)? Show your partner.

Work in groups (of six) to prepare and act out the scene. (Logistically, this is an easy scene to act because it all takes place around the car. The main focus here is on how they interpret the dialogue along with the body language.)

CONCLUSION

After doing these types of activities with my students they all say that they do visualise more and find comprehension less of a struggle. I assign my lower-intermediate students reading assignments to be done in their own time and they say later that they employ these strategies again, without my prompting, because they feel that they work.

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