

The value of the use of pictures and realia (actual objects) to explain the meanings of new words lies mainly in the fact that such illustrations make more impact and are more motivating than dry explanations or translations.

Pictures and realia are traditionally used a lot in classes of (beginner) young learners: partly because it is assumed that young learners respond better to pictures than do older ones, and partly because the vocabulary taught at the elementary levels tends to be more concrete and easier to depict.

However, older learners also like and benefit from looking at pictures (otherwise, why would newspapers include illustrations?). And there is some evidence that pictures can help learners retain the meanings of abstract, as well as concrete words: for example, a picture of someone looking frightened can help a learner remember the word for ‘fear’ (see the reference below).

In my experience, realia make more impact than pictures, so use them whenever you can. There is no good reason for a teacher to explain, for example, what an apple is by showing a picture of it, when it is fairly easy to get hold of the object itself. Teachers who have small children can borrow their toys to teach things like vehicles, animals and so on.

The advantages of pictures and realia in providing interesting and motivating illustrations of the meanings of new vocabulary are undoubted. The only problem is that they are sometimes ambiguous: a picture of someone laughing to indicate ‘happy’ for example, might be interpreted as ‘smile’ or ‘laugh’ or even ‘face’. However, if you back it up with a quick L1 translation to accompany the target-language word, you will achieve both clarity and impact.

Farley, A. P., Ramonda, K. and Liu, X. (2012). ‘The concreteness effect and the bilingual lexicon: The impact of visual stimuli attachment on meaning recall of abstract L2 words.’ *Language Teaching Research*, 16(4), 449–466.

Collaborative activities are ones where learners work together to get better results than they could have done on their own, and where there are opportunities for peer-teaching.

Collaboration is not, in my view, a value in itself: you should not ask students to work together just for the sake of the collaboration – only if it is clear that such work will be beneficial to all participants. If you ask learners to write a sentence in collaboration using a new word, for example, it is very likely that one of them will do all the work and the others will be relatively inactive; in such a case you will get far more participation – and learning – if they work individually.

‘Information gap’ tasks – where one participant needs to convey information to another – clearly have to be done in pairs or groups. Other than these, the main types of tasks appropriate for collaborative work are those where the task is based either on recall or on gathering ideas (brainstorming, for example). A larger number of participants will always recall or think of more ideas than will a single individual. So tasks like ‘see how much of the vocabulary we learnt last week you can remember’ – are best done collaboratively.

A useful sequence is to ask students to do a vocabulary task on their own, and then join with other students to add to, or improve or correct it (see an example in Tip 58).

Note that collaboration does not necessitate pair or group work. It is also involved in procedures like ‘Pass it round’, where vocabulary-based worksheets move from one student to another to be added to or changed (see Tip 60), or ‘mingling’, where students meet partners briefly to exchange ideas and then move on to meet someone else (see Tip 61), or even full-class pooling of ideas or ‘brainstorming’ (see Tip 64).