

The Efficacy of Visuals in Elementary English Language Textbooks: Teachers' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of visual images in elementary-level textbooks in Bangladesh and explored primary school teachers' perspectives on their efficacy. Using qualitative content analysis, the research revealed that visual images serve as a vital tool for effective communication, enhancing students' skills, and reflecting social practices. However, some images also perpetuated gender inequality and stereotypes. Teachers also emphasized the noteworthy contribution of images in improving students' communication skills, maintaining their engagement, boosting motivation, and nurturing critical thinking capabilities. Furthermore, they recommended a cautious approach to depicting social class, race, and gender within the textbooks through imagery. Hence, the study underscored the need for conscious image selection to foster appropriate socio-cultural values among young learners.

Keywords: visual images, textbooks, effective communication, social class, gender equality, moral values, teachers' perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks have long been considered a foundational tool in education, serving as a crucial medium through which students acquire knowledge and skills. Along with lessons, activities, or assignments; textbooks also embody a country's ideology through the nuances of language, content, and discourse (Chowdhury, 2018). However, the effectiveness of textbooks is not solely dependent on the text itself; the inclusion of images plays a pivotal role in enhancing communication and the learning experience for elementary learners. The utilization of visual aids within texts can support students in reaching the peak of cognitive processing capabilities (Mayer, 1989). Thus, images serve as powerful visual aids that complement textual content, engaging students' senses and promoting deeper understanding. Within the realm of education, visual images assume a central role by significantly enhancing the efficacy of instructional materials. The utilization of visual representations in textbooks is a prevalent and essential practice within educational resources, particularly in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Elmiana, 2019).

Besides, Textbooks can influence students' perception of social development within their surroundings (Chowdhury, 2018). Hence, visual elements along with linguistic elements may serve as indispensable tools in facilitating culture learning. In her research, Chowdhury (2018) contended that the creation or formulation of a textbook necessitates achieving equilibrium between content and context, ensuring parity across gender, class, religion, and profession. Thus, by supplementing textual content with visual cues, educators provide learners with a multi-dimensional means of comprehension, catering to diverse learning styles and enhancing engagement. This integration of visuals fosters a more holistic understanding of the subject matter and enables learners to grasp complex concepts more readily. As a result, visual images in teaching materials stand as a vital cornerstone in promoting active, informed, and dynamic learning experiences.

Therefore, this study investigated the multifaceted role of images in textbooks for beginners. It analyzed the

English for Today (EfT) textbooks for Classes I and II of Bangladesh. Besides, it explored the perceptions of ten teachers in the primary schools. Thus, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the possible impacts of visual images in the *EfT* textbooks for Classes I and II on young learners?
2. How are the role and impact of images perceived by the teachers of primary schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the primary objective of the EFL classroom textbook is to offer chances for language acquisition and skills enhancement, a notable body of subsequent research has emphasized that a textbook can also reflect culture and convey ethical principles through language and a variety of multimodal expressions. Multimodal elements, encompassing images and photographs in conjunction with language, hold notable importance in shaping the construction of meaning (Sultana, 2019).

Various research studies across the globe also revealed that the multi-modal analysis allows textbook researchers to analyze both texts and images to reveal the meaning and expose the foregrounded or backgrounded values and ideas as it (multi-modal analysis) is concerned with semantic expansions (O'Halloran, 2013). Ghouschi et al. (2021) uncovered a strong connection between textual content and images, contending that images possess a heightened ability to convey information and meaning, particularly benefiting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with greater competence and effectiveness.

Visual images play a notably vital role in the comprehension of textbook meanings among young learners, as demonstrated by Ghouschi et al. (2021). Their research unveiled that images have the capacity to convey meanings surpassing that of words. They also emphasized that intricate information can be swiftly and effortlessly communicated through visual elements. Additionally, Ghouschi et al. (2021) highlighted that the integration of visuals into teaching yields a heightened level of learning outcomes.

Thus, review of the existing literature revealed significant contribution of images in the textbooks in young learners' meaning making process. Besides, research studies also explored teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of images in the textbooks. Usman et al. (2020) explored the perceptions of the primary school English teachers of Indonesia regarding English language textbooks and revealed the significance of images in the textbooks for the learners of the primary level of education.

In the study of Usman et al. (2020), the teacher participants opined about the role of visual text and argued that "illustrations could support language learning" (p. 1061). A total of 27 in-service teachers participated in their study. Out of the total participants, 21 teachers (78%) concurred that illustrations could aid students in English learning, while 6 participants (22%) expressed a strong agreement that illustrations have the potential to actively involve students in the process of constructing meaning. Hence, the illustrations featured in the textbook could emerge as a potent tool for making meaning in the context of language learning. Furthermore, they posited that employing illustrations could assist students in deriving meaning from the language and enable them to engage in language learning by means of visual aids.

Despite having significant roles of images, Khalid and Ghania (2019) brought to light the limited emphasis placed on visuals during the textbook production process in their examination of gender representation within visual content in English textbooks. Their findings underscored that, when creating EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks, the responsibility for incorporating images is often delegated to publishers.

However, this delegation may inadvertently lead to insufficient consideration of guidelines aimed at preventing gender bias. Publishers, focused on concerns such as space limitations within the textbooks or

obtaining content copyrights, might unintentionally overlook the imperative of avoiding gender bias in visual representations. Thus, the current study investigated the role of images in textbooks. Alongside, it examined teachers' perceptions as they deliver the textual materials in the classrooms.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

The application of critical discourse analysis was deemed suitable for conducting a visual content analysis of the textbooks. The research utilized Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis as the overarching framework for analyzing the data. This approach operated across three tiers: the examination of discourse itself, the processes of producing and interpreting discourse, and the role of discourse as a constituent of social practice.

This approach to critical discourse analysis was employed in this study by providing visual data from the English language textbooks for Classes I and II. Then, teachers' perceptions were explored regarding the efficacy of the visuals in the textbooks for comprehending meaning to the young learners.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative content analysis method was chosen in this study to analyze the images of the textbooks published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and explore the perceptions of the teachers of the primary levels of education in Bangladesh. Images of the NCTB (2023) textbooks for *English for Today (EfT)* textbooks for Classes I and II were analyzed through a multimodal discourse analysis. The analysis of multi-modal discourse involves linking language to various other resources, including images, symbols, gestures, and actions, among others (O'Halloran, 2013).

Thus, the study explored the multi-layered role of images in textbooks for elementary learners in communication. To investigate the meaning making process, it analyzed the activities, body language, eye directions, clothing, etc. of the images in the textbooks. Khalid and Ghania (2019) also worked on that. They adopted Giaschi's (2000) analytical framework, critical image analysis, which comprised the following questions:

1. What is the activity of the image(s)?
2. Who is active (the "protagonist") in the image?
3. Who is the passive (the receiver) in the image(s)?
4. Who has status in the image(s)?
5. What does body language communicate?
6. What does the clothing communicate?
7. Where are the eyes directed?

(Khalid & Ghania, 2019, p. 778)

The current study also analyzed the above features for analyzing the efficacy of images in the meaning making process.

Further, the study explored the perceptions of 10 primary school teachers in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. Five of them were female, and five were male. The selected teachers were teaching English language textbooks in classes I and II. Semi-structured interview sessions were conducted with open-ended questions. Every teacher expressed a preference for conducting face-to-face interview sessions, and as such, the researcher scheduled appointments for the interviews. However, the teachers displayed a reluctance to have their interviews recorded. Consequently, the researcher took detailed notes during the interviews. Subsequently, the qualitative interview data underwent analysis under the researcher's purview, with a strong emphasis on

upholding ethical considerations. Respondents were given assurances regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of their information. To ensure this, they were identified as teachers A through J.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study involved an analysis of images extracted from the textbooks used in Classes I and II, aiming to investigate their efficacy in aiding young learners' understanding of meaning. Additionally, interviews were conducted with teachers to gather their perspectives on the significance of these images. Findings from the analysis of the textbooks and interviews are presented below:

Findings from the Critical Analysis of Images in Textbooks

The images in the textbooks revealed that students develop communicative skills from images. However, discrimination was also noticed in some images regarding the active-passive roles of girls and boys.

Developing Communication Skills

The very first unit (lesson 1, unit 1) of the textbook for Class I introduced 'Greetings' to the learners. Colorful images were used where a teacher greeted students with 'Good morning'; then the students also greeted the teacher, and they were standing. Later (in lesson 2, unit 1), they were exchanging greetings with their friends in similar ways. This is how children learn communication skills.

Figure 1

Greetings in a Classroom



(NCTB, 2023, Class I, p. 2)

Thus, young learners might learn communicative skills from this unit. Alongside, the image will transmit the socio-cultural values to the students that they have to stand up when the teachers enter the classroom. The first unit of the textbooks for Class II also told students about greetings and introductions through images and dialogues. Hence, through such visual discourses, the textbook demonstrated social practices. Based on a semiotic perspective, Weninger and Kiss (2013) argued that the potential meaning derived from a task, text, and image is harnessed to strengthen a literal interpretation that impacts students' interpersonal abilities.

Active Protagonist vs. Passive Receiver

Unit 15, lessons 1-4 of Class II, showed a girl named Rima who was busy gardening. Rima's weekly activities were shown through images. Rima was shown putting and nurturing a seed in a tub. However, no boy was shown in such activities, and thus, gardening was presented as girls' work. Moreover, unit 22, lessons 4-6 of Class II, depicted two images of boys and girls where boys started talking first, which demonstrated the first-place position of boys. Further, a boy was shown in front and a girl in the back in unit 25, lessons 4-6.

Figure 2

A Boy in the First Position and a Girl in the Second



(NCTB, 2023, Class II, p. 51)

The boy in figure 2 was thus presented in the first-place position, which might present him as a leader and an active protagonist, whereas the girl was depicted in the secondary position. Such active roles of boys might assert men's power and authority in society (Khalid & Ghania, 2019). Moreover, biased portrayal of gender roles, particularly in educational materials such as textbooks, can have a profound impact on young learners' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about gender roles, equality, and their own potential. When young learners repeatedly see boys as active leaders and girls as passive followers, they may internalize these stereotypes, assuming that these roles are natural and appropriate.

Therefore, this socialization can contribute to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and values in society. In contrast, the disparity in visual representation between females and males could potentially disrupt the value system of young learners, given that visual communication, alongside written communication, serves as a crucial instrument for effective interaction (Giaschi, 2000).

Disproportion in Body Language

Inequality was noticed in the body language of boys and girls. For instance, the listening and speaking activity in unit 10, lessons 1-3 of the *EfT* textbook for Class I included the activity "Look at the ground. Look at the sky" which showed discrimination. A boy was looking at the sky, and a girl was looking at the ground in those lessons. Thus, discrimination was revealed through this visual as 'looking at the sky' directed the unlimited view of the boy whereas 'looking at the ground' directed the restricted view of the girl. Similarly, a boy was visualized as happy whereas a girl was visualized as sad in the textbook of Class II (NCTB, Class II, p. 58). Thus, the visual positioning of the girl and the boy revealed discrimination.

Such body posture and facial expressions play a significant role in conveying meaning to learners, as noted by Khalid and Ghania (2019). For instance, according to their findings, gazing at the sky could symbolize ambition, while looking downwards might suggest limitations. Khalid and Ghania (2019) emphasized that the direction of one's gaze carries significance in meaning-making process. Sultana (2019) also emphasized the significant role of multi-modal resources, including images, in the construction of meaning.

Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Role of Images

The viewpoints of all the interviewed teachers (a total of 10) underscored the notable role of images in enhancing comprehension, retention, motivation, and fostering the growth of critical thinking skills among young learners.

Enhancing Comprehension and Clarity

Teachers perceived that one of the primary benefits of incorporating images into elementary textbooks is their ability to enhance comprehension and clarity. Teachers E, G, and H exposed that young students are often still developing their reading skills, and complex textual information can be challenging to understand on its own. Hence, visual imagery serves as a crucial link between abstract ideas and tangible comprehension, offering a direct pathway to enhance understanding. Teacher B mentioned that –

Images provide visual context that helps bridge the gap between abstract concepts and concrete understanding. (Teacher B)

For instance, the teacher explained that images can simplify the contents of the textbooks, making it easier for young learners to grasp the concepts being presented. In fact, the practice of utilizing images as a means of conveying messages is not a recent concept; its origins can be traced back to the earliest instances of human interaction, when visual elements were employed to facilitate communication among individuals (Domin, 2007). Visual elements provided a universal language that could transcend spoken or written barriers, allowing diverse groups of people to share their experiences and convey meaning.

Promoting Retention

All the interviewed teachers opined that images are not only valuable for aiding initial comprehension; they also contribute significantly to long-term retention of information. Teacher A, B, E, D, F and J perceived that when information is presented in a visual format, such as through images, students are more likely to remember and recall that information accurately. Teacher H mentioned that –

The integration of written information alongside pertinent visuals produces a dual-coding phenomenon, strengthening the learning experience and facilitating the recall of information. (Teacher H)

Thus, interviewed teachers of this study opined that the combination of textual content with relevant images creates a dual-coding effect, reinforcing the learning process and promoting memory retention. This is particularly beneficial in subjects where rote memorization is required, such as learning vocabulary or historical events. Ghouschi et al. (2021) also emphasized that incorporating visual elements into education leads to an enhanced level of learning results.

Stimulating Motivation and Interest

Teachers found a close link between the use of images and students' motivation and interest. During the interview sessions, teachers E, G and I opined that engaging elementary students in the learning process can sometimes be a challenge, especially in subjects that might seem abstract or less relatable. Images have the remarkable ability to captivate students' attention and stimulate their curiosity. Teacher G mentioned that –

Colorful illustrations, photographs, and interactive graphics pique students' interest, making the learning experience more enjoyable and dynamic. (Teacher G)

Teacher E added that when students are actively engaged with the material, they are more likely to stay focused, participate in discussions, and even seek out additional information beyond the textbook. Visual images depicted in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks present students with depictions of locations, scenarios, and individuals that serve to stimulate their perception of the tangible world. Moreover, these visual representations offer students the chance to nurture their comprehension of the target language, culture, and broader perspective, as highlighted by Mendoza and Reese (2001). Further, Peeck (1993) argued that visual images have motivational roles in learning.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills

All the interviewed teachers believed that images in textbooks serve as a catalyst for developing critical thinking skills in elementary learners. When students are presented with visual information, they are prompted to analyze, interpret, and draw connections between different elements. For instance, Teacher C revealed that a historical photograph can lead to discussions about the cultural context, social dynamics, and implications of events. Similarly, analyzing a scientific diagram can foster inquiry-based learning, encouraging students to ask questions, formulate hypotheses, and explore the underlying principles.

Furthermore, Teachers C, D, H, and J conveyed their reservations regarding the suitable portrayal of images. They highlighted the importance of selecting images that have the potential to cultivate positive mindsets among learners. Nevertheless, distorting images can lead to unfavorable opinions among learners. Teacher D pointed out that –

It is crucial to handle the presentation of social class, race, gender representation, and other such factors with care in textbooks. Failing to do so might result in young learners developing prejudiced ways of thinking. (Teacher D)

The teachers also perceived that images found in textbooks, especially within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, possess the potential to not only captivate students' interest but also to incite a deeper and more nuanced approach to language learning. As emphasized by Canning (1997), these visual elements have the capacity to stimulate learners' curiosity and engagement, prompting them to explore language with a critical lens and a creative mindset. When students interact with visual imagery, they are encouraged to analyze, interpret, and question the content presented before them. This process of visual analysis necessitates cognitive involvement and prompts learners to consider the underlying meanings, cultural contexts, and implications associated with the depicted scenes or concepts. Consequently, students develop not only their linguistic abilities but also their capacity for discernment and interpretation, fostering a more comprehensive and analytical grasp of language and its socio-cultural nuances. In essence, visual images in EFL textbooks serve as catalysts for promoting students' critical learning abilities by prompting them to delve beyond the surface and engage with language in a thoughtful, inquisitive manner.

Hence, the interview data revealed that images play a pivotal role in textbooks for elementary learners by enhancing comprehension, promoting retention, stimulating motivation, and fostering the development of critical thinking skills. The connection of textual content with visual aids creates a holistic learning experience that caters to diverse learning styles and engages students on multiple levels. As educators continue to refine teaching methods and materials, the strategic integration of images into textbooks remains a powerful tool for nurturing young minds and facilitating their educational journey.

Therefore, the research brought to light the notable significance of visuals in cultivating communication skills and instilling socio-cultural values among learners. Young learners also learn about equal gender roles

through the visual contents. Simultaneously, it unveiled teachers' concerns regarding the substantial role visuals play in enhancing learners' text comprehension, sustaining their interest, and facilitating retention. Additionally, educators emphasized that visuals are particularly advantageous in fostering critical thinking skills among beginners, particularly those in the first and second grades (Classes I and II), given that these learners, aged 6-7, embark on their educational journey and start acquainting themselves with various concepts during this schooling period. Consequently, textual contents assume a highly significant role during this phase.

CONCLUSION

The study illuminated the profound significance of incorporating visual elements not only in nurturing communication skills and imparting socio-cultural values but also in conveying essential concepts like equal gender roles to young learners. Primary school teachers opined that by seamlessly blending visual content with textual materials, educators have a powerful tool at their disposal to enhance students' text comprehension, maintain their engagement, and bolster retention. Furthermore, the research highlights teachers' perceptions regarding the vital role visuals play in cultivating critical thinking skills, particularly among beginners in the early stages of education. Well-structured and contextually relevant visuals contribute significantly to the comprehension and conceptual assimilation of young learners. As a result, the research suggests the imperative for curriculum developers to meticulously choose images with mindfulness, thereby nurturing relevant socio-cultural values within young learners. This conscious selection process may ensure that the visual content aligns with educational goals, promoting a more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning experience.

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