

Invite you to imagine whatever you wish to imagine. And as you let your imagination run free, just notice how the words you are reading right now might influence your imagining. Words can affect your mind just as a relaxing massage might affect your body, or a warm bath might feel on your skin and muscles; like a sip of your favourite drink might taste on your tongue, like the smell of a tantalising perfume ...

something else. That is why it is so important that our words are understood in the language classroom, that we give comprehensible input. Some teachers keep students present by translating regularly. Some write and draw pictures on the board. Others do it by adjusting to the students' level in the target language, and combining words with gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication. Most teachers use a combination of these

Image *streaming*

Tim Murphey asks his students to close their eyes and describe what they see.

Words, when you understand them and pay attention to them, can make you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste things that are not even there (or, in a sense, perhaps they are). Good things or bad things. Therein lies their power. Therein too lies the power of people like teachers, who have the possibility of presenting things with words for minds to imagine.

Of course, we can visualise and access our sensory memories with and without words. How much have you developed your ability to visualise and tune into your inner images? How much have you noticed your students doing this while supposedly attending to the grammatical structures on the board?

Anyone can be anywhere (in their minds) at any time. In fact, it is such a common practice that I would guess that a good number of our students are visualising things outside of the class a lot of the time. Mentally, they just aren't there!

So, as teachers, how can we make positive use of this ability our students have? I would like to suggest three reasons for the importance of using visualisation and imaging.

Sensing meaning

Our inner and outer senses are almost always 'on'. We are almost always seeing pictures, hearing voices, smelling, tasting, and feeling, both internally and externally. When students are attending to what you are saying they are making pictures of it in order to try to understand it. If they can't make a picture and the 'imagining' is too difficult, they typically drift off into more easily accessible pictures, ie they imagine

methods to help students understand and make sure they can visualise the meaning.

Immediate images

Our words, and those of others, can direct what we imagine, just as what we imagine can direct our words. The images that naturally arise in our students' minds may well be the ones that will spark the most desire to describe them in words. Searching for and finding those words may have a significantly greater impact on their language acquisition because they are the most immediately meaningful.

Learner autonomy

Part of the learners' potential to become more autonomous involves their taking control of their metacognitive skills of directing, constructing and adapting images presented by others and themselves. It also involves learning to just let the images happen with no conscious direction and discover where their unconscious might take them. We might call this exploratory learning.

Image Streaming

Image streaming is an exercise which has proved very effective in accessing and enhancing the students' potential to become more aware of their capabilities, and to practise and harness their powers of visualisation in the service of their language learning.

I first did image streaming at a workshop in Finland in the summer of 1991. We just closed our eyes and leaned toward our partners and began



Image streaming

▶▶▶ talking about what was coming up in our minds on our visual screens.

I started. 'Well, I don't see much of anything but blackness ... [pause] ... Okay now I'm seeing a beach and I'm walking along and it's lovely ...' As instructed, after a sentence or two, I nudged my partner who took over the image and continued describing what she could see. 'Yes, well um, there is a beach, and there are birds flying up in the trees and over the waves and suddenly one comes near me and I quickly duck, and now I am the bird and I'm flying high and I can see a small 'me' down there on the beach and then the whole island, it feels so ...' We continued to go back and forth like that for some time and it felt great.

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The theory is that this activity connects different parts of our brains through words and visualisation, stimulating new connections and new learning. Richard Poe describes the process and how it can provide the unconscious perceptions needed for 'irrational flashes of insight'. The basic technique, as originated by Win Wenger, involves merely closing your eyes and recording your own descriptive monologue while image streaming for 20 minutes. This can lead you to important intuitive discoveries. The element of 'out loud' description while visualising is of key importance.

Wenger has reported studies in universities where IQ scores have increased by 20 points after 25 hours of image streaming, though (as far as I know) these studies apparently have not been widely replicated nor published in reputable journals yet. However, language teachers are drawn intuitively to things that work, regardless of whether they have yet received the stamp of academic approval. We tend to put our faith in our own holistic experimentation in the classroom. If it works for us and our students, that's good enough. I feel image streaming could indeed prove useful for those who care or dare to try it.

Doing it in class

In my own classes we have experimented with image streaming and students have seemed not only to enjoy the process, but to be more alert and involved following the exercises.

I demonstrate first so they see exactly what will happen. I remind students that they may imagine sounds, feelings, smells and tastes as well as pictures. In this kind of exercise, the different senses are often referred to as 'modalities'. I choose a confident learner to be my partner and give a brief description of the process. I let my partner start describing something and after a few sentences (whether they have been able to see something or not),

I take my turn. After two or three turns each, we stop and the rest of the class has a go. The first day we use the technique only for a few minutes. In later classes, we do it for longer and I may add one or more of the following:

- Remember your visualisation. Recreate it verbally with your partner and then tell it to someone else.
- After the visualisation, write down any new words your partner used and ask for explanations.
- Change partners and image stream with several people.
- After your partner has spoken switch to other modalities. If they are describing a lot of things visually, you describe things you can hear (auditorially) or feel (kinaesthetically). So for example, after the visual beach description above I might say, 'I hear the sound of the crashing waves and the cries of the birds and the wind in the palm trees' or 'I feel the sand between my toes and then the cool, wet, sticky saltiness of the water, and the warm sun on my skin'. Afterwards, you can ask students to notice how easy (or not) it was to experience things in the different modalities and encourage them to concentrate more on the ones they found less easy.

Student reactions


I am used to trying unusual things and I am also used to them not working sometimes. Each time I try image streaming I expect it to bomb, especially with my somewhat shy Japanese students. So far it never has and I think there are several reasons for its success.

Firstly, all of us really do have a lot going on inside our minds, and our brains know how to take off without us asking them to.

Secondly, students all have their eyes closed and are leaning in, talking to each other softly (I put on background music as well) and it is private. They are in natural 'rapport positions', matching body posture and voice tone. They are seeing similar things and using similar words. It is very conducive to rapport building and making friends.

Finally, by definition they are using language they feel comfortable with, and noticing their partner using new language that they would like to be able to use. When you use language unknown to your partner, there seems to be a lot of paraphrasing and reformulation, ie negotiation of meaning. On the surface it may only seem to be a fun activity, but at the same time, language is still clearly present and focused.

Educational psychologist Wilga Rivers said at TESOL 1971: *We [language teachers] must find out what our students are interested in. This is our subject matter ... we are limited only by our own caution, by our own hesitancy to do whatever our imagination suggests to us to create situations in which students feel involved ...*

Image streaming may very well involve more of our students' minds than anything we have ever done before. 

Rivers, Wilga *Speaking in Many Tongues* Newbury House 1976

Poe, Richard *Image Streaming: An Easy Way to Increase Your Intelligence* Success 1991

Thanks to Jane Arnold for comments on a previous draft of this article.



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