Enhancing Early-Stage Adult Maltese Language Learning: Unleashing the Potential of Visual Culture

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Abstract
Language learning, especially in its early stages, has been associated with right-brain practices. However, the utilization of visual culture to enhance these practices and promote language knowledge retention remains underexplored. This study investigates the role of right-brain processes through visual culture in early-phase language learning, with a specific focus on teaching Maltese as a second language (ML2) to adult learners. Employing a qualitative research methodology, a focus group of twenty-seven teachers was engaged to explore diverse visual culture practices applied in language classes. Thematic analysis in NVivo was employed to analyze the data collection. The study reveals a range of visual culture practices, such as drawing, sketching, matching games, orthographic mapping, the memory palace approach, wordless picture books, picture-based learning methods, infographics, the Face Memory Game, Spot the Difference, Word Search Puzzles, the Hidden Object Game, videos, the Shadow Matching, Find the Differences, and colour-coding methods, which are used with Primary, Middle, and Secondary school students. These practices offer promising opportunities for ML2 classes that could be used with adult learners, presenting valuable recommendations for incorporating specific visual culture techniques to facilitate language learning and elevate essential language skills and competencies. By unlocking the potential of visual culture, educators can enrich the early-stage ML2 learning experience and empower adult learners to achieve greater proficiency in the Maltese language.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Second Language Acquisition, Maltese Language, Orthographic Mapping, Memory Palace Approach, Picture-Based Learning Methods

Introduction

Language acquisition is a multifaceted process involving the enhancement of various skills such as reading, speaking, writing, listening, and comprehension (Ampera et al., 2021). The contemporary educational system offers a plethora of teaching techniques for second language (L2) learning, tailored to different types of learners. Among these techniques, visual learning methods have gained popularity (Lenkaitis and Hilliker, 2019). These methods encompass activities like drawing, learning through pictures, using graphics and animated flashcards, card memory games, video watching, virtual reality, and wordless picture books (Kalaja and Pitkanen-Huhta, 2018). Such methods are effective in capturing and sustaining students' attention and fostering motivation.

The research in question seeks to explore the impact of right-brain activities via visual culture in the initial stages of learning Maltese as a second language (ML2). The role of visual culture in facilitating L2 learning from the perspective of the right brain hemisphere's functionality is not well understood. ML2 is a relatively new field in Malta and many teachers who began their careers before 2014 lack training in teaching ML2 (Żammit, 2021). The research problem stems from adult ML2 learners' feedback that incorporating visual culture and music, especially in the early stages of second language acquisition (SLA), would enhance their vocabulary retention and overall ML2 learning experience.

The primary objective of the study was to critically examine the significance of right-brain activities via visual culture in the early stages of adults learning ML2. The research outcomes could potentially inform instructional methods that enhance students' success in learning any L2. These methods could specifically improve adult learners' pronunciation skills, augment the retention of new vocabulary and grammar concepts, and offer valuable guidelines for teachers untrained in L2 teaching. The study addresses a clear research gap, as no previous research has explored the importance of right-brain activities via visual culture in the early stages of learning ML2, a finding that could be generalized to other L2 learning contexts. The research questions were as follows:

1. How can an educator enhance right-brain activities in the language classroom?
2. What are the ways to introduce visual culture in the Maltese language classroom?
3. What language skills or competences could be improved through visual activities?

Literature Review

This study focuses on the role of right-brain processes in language learning, with a theoretical framework grounded in theories that posit the involvement of the brain's right hemisphere in processing visual and spatial information, thereby enhancing language learning (Qi et al., 2019; Yang, 2023; Bak, et al., 2016; Nilsson, et al., 2021).

The theoretical framework of right-brain processes in language learning is predicated on the understanding that the brain's two hemispheres (left and right) perform distinct functions, with language processing involving both hemispheres. The left hemisphere is generally linked with language processing, encompassing grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, while the right hemisphere is engaged in processing visual and spatial information, such as images, patterns, and shapes (Nilsson, et al., 2021). Bialystok's work on the impact of bilingualism on the brain has revealed that bilingual individuals exhibit enhanced cognitive control, potentially related to the right hemisphere's involvement in language processing (Yang, 2023).

Roehr-Brackin (2018) has conducted research on the use of visual input in language learning and has discovered that visual input can aid learners in better comprehending the structure and meaning of new words and phrases, which is crucial in the early stages of language acquisition. Bak's research on the effects of age on language learning has indicated that older learners may benefit from visual input and other techniques that engage the right hemisphere of the brain (Bak, et al., 2016).

Research in neuroscience and psychology suggests that visual and spatial information can enhance language processing by stimulating the right hemisphere of the brain (Nilsson, et al., 2021). For instance, studies have demonstrated that when language learners are exposed to visual stimuli, such as pictures, videos, or diagrams, they are better equipped to remember and utilize new vocabulary and grammar rules (Roehr-Brackin, 2018). Visual stimuli can also assist learners in forming mental connections between words and concepts, thereby enhancing their overall language proficiency.

One theory proposed to explain the role of right-brain processes in language learning is the "Dual Coding Theory". According to this theory, information is processed in two separate but interconnected systems: a verbal system that processes language-based information and a nonverbal system that processes visual and spatial information (Luo, 2022). When information is presented in both verbal and nonverbal formats, learners are more likely to retain and retrieve that information (Luo, 2022).

Another theory used to explain the role of right-brain processes in language learning is the "Memory Palace" or "Method of Loci" technique. This technique involves creating a mental image of a physical space (such as a room or a street), and then associating each item or concept to be learned with a specific location within that space (Ralby, Mentzelopoulos and Cook, 2017). This technique is particularly effective for language learners because it engages the right hemisphere of the brain, which is involved in processing spatial information (Ralby et al., 2017).

Consequently, the theoretical framework of right-brain processes in language learning suggests that visual and spatial information can play a significant role in language processing and retention and that language teachers can employ visual stimuli and techniques to enhance language learning for their students. The use of right-brain practices through visual culture in the early stages of learning an L2 has garnered attention from scholars (Xing et al., 2015; Bidelman and Howell, 2016; and Qi et al., 2019).

Methodology

The research methodology for this study is rooted in the interpretivism research philosophy, which relies on understanding the inner perceptions of the research participants. This approach aids in comprehending the psychology of participants and their attitudes towards a research problem (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2020). The study employed a qualitative research methodology, as the issue of right-brain practices through visual culture in the early stages of learning ML2 is yet to be explored. Interpretivism could offer a chance to delve into teachers' viewpoints on visual culture in the ML2 class, as qualitative research methods facilitate the analysis of participants’ experiences, concepts, and opinions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The primary data collection method for this study was the focus group. Unlike interviews, focus groups enable participants to express a variety of thoughts and interact with others, providing deeper insights into the problem under investigation (Breakwell, Wright, and Barnett, 2020). The focus group session, which lasted three hours, was conducted online via Zoom for the convenience of the participants. The session was structured around a set of predetermined open-ended questions aimed at eliciting detailed responses about the use of visual culture in early-stage adult Maltese language learning. These questions were formulated based on the research objectives and the existing literature on visual culture and language learning.

The data analysis process comprised several steps. Initially, the focus group discussion was transcribed verbatim. The transcript was then read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. The data was subsequently coded using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. The coding process involved identifying significant phrases or sentences related to the research objectives and labelling them with appropriate codes. These codes were grouped into potential themes and sub-themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. The themes were then used to interpret the data and answer the research questions. This thematic analysis process facilitated the identification of specific themes and sub-themes related to the use of visual culture in early-stage adult Maltese language learning.

The qualitative validity of the results was ensured through member-checking. The participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, and all ethical considerations were observed during the focus group. Participants signed informed consent forms, and their anonymity was preserved. These methods align with the recommendations of scholars such as Saunders et al. (2020), Breakwell et al. (2020), and Braun and Clarke (2021).

Participants

The study incorporated 27 participants who were part-time instructors of Maltese as a second language (ML2) for adults. These educators offered private ML2 lessons to adults in various settings, including home, online, or evening classes. The participant pool consisted of 10 full-time primary school teachers, five middle school teachers, and four secondary school teachers. Additionally, eight participants were independent teachers specializing in business English, medical English, and English as a second language for adults.

The researcher employed purposive sampling, selecting participants who taught ML2 to adults part-time and possessed a TEFL Certificate. The TEFL certificate was a crucial requirement as visual culture is not typically utilized in adult ML2 lessons, given that most ML2 educators were only trained to teach Maltese as a first language. The training for teachers to instruct ML2 commenced in 2018. Therefore, the researcher targeted educators with a TEFL certificate, indicating their training in teaching a foreign language, albeit not specifically Maltese as a foreign language.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed several key themes and subthemes regarding the integration of right brain practices through visual culture in early L2 teaching. The majority of participants, including Teachers 2, 3, 24, and 27, emphasized the effectiveness of incorporating art and play in language learning. Techniques such as drawing without looking, collaborative

sketching games, and using real-life objects were discussed to engage students and enhance vocabulary memorization, especially among younger learners.

Matching Games
Teacher 10 described the use of matching games as a visual tool to stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain, improving attention and visual memory. This interactive approach not only aids in vocabulary retention but also fosters a sense of competition and engagement among students.

Orthographic Mapping
Participants discussed the orthographic mapping method as a powerful technique to facilitate instant word recognition and effortless recall of unknown words, particularly beneficial for young learners grappling with complex phonemes. The method's simplicity in breaking down lengthy words into manageable parts resonated with the teachers, who found it instrumental in enhancing students' pronunciation and spelling skills.

Memory Palace Approach
The memory palace technique emerged as a valuable strategy for improving information recall, particularly among ML2 adult learners facing memory challenges. Teacher 26's example of using a memory palace to memorize the days of the week in Maltese showcased the method's adaptability and effectiveness in real-world language learning contexts.

Wordless Picture Books
The use of wordless picture books was lauded for its ability to foster critical analysis and storytelling skills irrespective of students' reading abilities. Teachers like Teacher 22 emphasized the importance of such books in laying the foundation for language learning by encouraging students to construct narratives based solely on visual cues.

Picture-Based Learning
Various visual methods, including PowerPoint presentations and movies, were explored to enhance language learning and critical thinking. Teachers leveraged visuals to elucidate complex concepts, stimulate discussion, and deepen students' understanding of linguistic and cultural nuances.

Infographics
Teachers utilized infographics as a dynamic tool to improve vocabulary retention, emphasizing their capacity to distill complex information into visually appealing representations. The accessibility and versatility of infographics were particularly advantageous for engaging students and facilitating quick comprehension of language concepts.

Using Videos
Videos emerged as a versatile resource for enhancing language learning, with teachers employing diverse approaches such as kinetic typography and augmented reality to create immersive learning experiences. The integration of videos not only catered to different learning styles but also fostered a sense of excitement and curiosity among students, making language learning more interactive and enjoyable.

Language Skills and Critical Thinking
Teachers creatively employed visual culture to enhance language skills and critical thinking through various activities such as storytelling and imaginative reading. By immersing students in visual narratives and thought-provoking discussions, teachers cultivated a dynamic learning environment conducive to holistic language development.

Working Memory
Visuals and gestures were harnessed to enhance students' working memory and facilitate the retention of new language concepts. Teachers recognized the importance of multisensory approaches in reinforcing language learning and empowering students to make meaningful connections between visual stimuli and linguistic concepts.

Creativity
Visual tools were championed as catalysts for fostering creativity among students, with projects like posters and sculptures serving as outlets for self-expression and exploration. By encouraging students to engage with visual media in imaginative ways, teachers nurtured a culture of creativity and innovation in the language classroom.

Recognition
Recognition processes were underscored as foundational to language learning, with games like word search puzzles and Spot the Difference serving as fun and interactive means of honing visual recognition skills. Through engaging activities that challenge students to identify patterns and make connections, teachers facilitated the development of cognitive skills essential for language acquisition.

Learning to Read
Strategies to simplify reading through right-brain activities were discussed in depth, with teachers employing visual aids and multisensory techniques to support students' literacy development. By capitalizing on visual stimuli and kinesthetic learning experiences, teachers empowered students to navigate the complexities of written language with confidence and fluency.

Storytelling
Speaking activities like storytelling emerged as powerful tools for enhancing fluency and comprehension in language learners. Teachers embraced visual aids such as story maps and graphics cards to scaffold students' storytelling abilities, encouraging them to weave narratives rich in detail and imagination.

Activity-Based Learning
Participants advocated for activity-based learning as an effective approach for engaging students and promoting language acquisition. Through hands-on activities like creating models and enacting stories, teachers fostered a dynamic learning environment where students could actively participate and collaborate in their language learning journey.

In general, the integration of right-brain practices through visual culture emerged as a multifaceted and transformative approach to L2 teaching, empowering educators to nurture creativity, critical thinking, and language proficiency in their students.

Discussion

The current study further elucidates the integration of right-brain practices in language learning, with a specific focus on teaching Maltese to international adult learners. By engaging a focus group of twenty-seven teachers, the study thoroughly examines the utilization of various visual culture practices within language classrooms. While highlighting the efficacy of practices like drawing, sketching, orthographic mapping, and games in facilitating language acquisition and promoting collaboration among students, it also acknowledges a notable gap in strategies tailored to diverse learning styles or learners with specific needs.

The study underscores the use of the matching game and orthographic mapping techniques, though it notes a lack of empirical evidence supporting their cognitive benefits. Furthermore, the incorporation of infographics and videos in language learning showcases the potential of visual culture practices to enhance comprehension and retention. Infographics, with their visually appealing representations, aid in vocabulary acquisition, while videos, including kinetic typography and augmented reality, offer immersive learning experiences, albeit dependent on individual learning preferences.

Various methods employed by teachers to enhance language skills and critical thinking through visual culture are discussed. These methods, such as using pictures for writing tasks, employing flashcards in games, and posing open-ended questions about visual stimuli, provide interactive and engaging learning opportunities, fostering both linguistic proficiency and critical thinking abilities.

The prevalence of interactive methods like playing, drawing, and sketching in language learning underscores their importance, not only in aiding vocabulary retention but also in promoting collaboration and communication. However, their limited application with adult learners suggests an area requiring further research and development.

Orthographic mapping emerges as a promising method, particularly with detailed descriptions provided by teachers. The use of colour coding simplifies the learning process and facilitates word recognition and recall. Yet, further discussion on adapting this method for diverse learner profiles could enhance its applicability.

The Memory Palace Approach, embraced by some participants, leverages spatial visualization to improve information recall, potentially benefiting ML2 adult learners with memory challenges. Similarly, Wordless Picture Books foster critical analysis and storytelling skills, engaging the right brain hemisphere crucial for processing visual information.

Picture-based learning methods, extensively discussed by participants, offer diverse approaches to second language acquisition, promoting collaboration and communication while facilitating comprehension. These practices underscore the potential of visual culture in language learning but may require adaptation to individual learning styles.

Teachers demonstrated a creative use of visual culture to enhance language skills and critical thinking through activities such as storytelling and imaginative reading. By immersing students in visual narratives and engaging them in thought-provoking discussions, teachers created a dynamic learning environment conducive to holistic language development. These

activities not only fostered language acquisition but also encouraged students to think critically, analyze information, and express themselves effectively.

Visuals and gestures were effectively utilized to enhance students' working memory and aid in the retention of new language concepts. Teachers recognized the importance of multisensory approaches in reinforcing language learning, understanding that by incorporating visual stimuli and gestures, students could make meaningful connections between what they see and hear, thus deepening their understanding and retention of language concepts.

Visual tools were celebrated as catalysts for fostering creativity among students. Projects like posters and sculptures provided outlets for self-expression and exploration within the language classroom. By encouraging students to engage with visual media in imaginative ways, teachers nurtured a culture of creativity and innovation, empowering students to express themselves confidently and develop their linguistic skills in novel and exciting ways.

The importance of recognition processes in language learning was emphasized, with interactive games like word search puzzles and Spot the Difference serving as engaging means of honing visual recognition skills. Through these activities, teachers facilitated the development of cognitive skills essential for language acquisition, such as pattern recognition and making connections between visual stimuli and linguistic concepts.

Strategies to simplify reading through right-brain activities were explored in-depth, with teachers employing visual aids and multisensory techniques to support students' literacy development. By capitalizing on visual stimuli and kinesthetic learning experiences, teachers empowered students to navigate the complexities of written language with confidence and fluency, enhancing both their reading comprehension and overall language proficiency.

Speaking activities like storytelling emerged as powerful tools for enhancing fluency and comprehension in language learners. Teachers utilized visual aids such as story maps and graphics cards to scaffold students' storytelling abilities, encouraging them to weave narratives rich in detail and imagination. Through these activities, students not only improved their language skills but also developed their storytelling prowess and creative expression.

Participants advocated for activity-based learning as an effective approach for engaging students and promoting language acquisition. Through hands-on activities like creating models and enacting stories, teachers fostered a dynamic learning environment where students could actively participate and collaborate in their language learning journey. These activities not only enhanced language skills but also encouraged teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills development.

While the study provides a comprehensive examination of visual culture practices in language learning, it also identifies areas for further research, particularly concerning their adaptation for adult learners and diverse learner needs. Despite limitations, the study contributes valuable insights to language studies, offering practical recommendations and shaping future research and teaching practices. By focusing on right-brain practices and visual culture, this study pioneers a novel approach that could revolutionize traditional teaching methods and optimize Maltese language learning outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations are evident in this study regarding the use of right-brain practices through visual culture in language learning. Firstly, ongoing debates about the functions of the right and left-brain hemispheres in language acquisition create contradictory opinions among researchers (Qi et al., 2019), which may affect the interpretation of the study's findings. Secondly, the small number of participants in the focus group results from the limited availability of ML2 teachers in Malta, potentially impacting the representativeness of the sample. Thirdly, the reliance on teachers' experiences introduces biases, and the findings may lack generalizability due to the small sample size. Lastly, the study overlooks the perspective of adult students, focusing solely on the viewpoint of teachers.

Recommendations

The study proposes incorporating right-brain activities and visual culture methods, including drawing tools, matching games, orthographic mapping, wordless picture books, and videos, in ML2 classrooms for adult learners to enhance language skills and learning outcomes. However, further research is needed to understand the impact of these practices on the right hemisphere and their effectiveness for adult learners in the early stages of learning Maltese. Conducting follow-up studies focusing on adult learner perspectives through individual interviews or additional focus groups can provide valuable insights into their experiences with visual practices in language learning.

Exploring adult learners' viewpoints on the impact of visual practices, comparing them to traditional methods, and suggesting improvements based on personal experiences can offer a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of visual practices in language acquisition. Additionally, investigating the influence of visual methods on the left hemisphere and conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects on ML2 proficiency and retention are recommended. Such studies can track learners' progress over time and evaluate the sustainability of learning outcomes achieved through visual culture practices.

Implications of the Study Findings for Language Researchers and Teachers

The study underscores the importance of integrating visual culture practices into language teaching methods for adult learners, emphasizing the need to move beyond traditional approaches focused solely on linguistic processes. By incorporating visual elements such as drawing, wordless picture books, and videos, teachers can create engaging learning environments that increase learner motivation and immersion.

The study also highlights the benefits of visual culture practices in the early stages of language acquisition, suggesting techniques like picture-based learning methods and memory palace approaches to help learners establish a strong foundation in the target language. Additionally, memory-enhancing aspects of visual culture practices such as infographics and memory games can aid vocabulary acquisition and improve memory retention.

Moreover, incorporating visual materials showcasing the target culture can promote cultural understanding and intercultural competence among language learners. Overall, the study provides valuable recommendations for language researchers and teachers to enhance language learning outcomes by integrating visual culture practices into instruction.

Conclusion

The study delved into the significance of integrating visual culture and right-brain practices in instructing ML2 to adult learners. Gathering qualitative insights from 27 part-time ML2 teachers, the research revealed that while these educators employed visual methods to enhance speaking and writing skills and fostered right-brain development through visual activities for various student groups (e.g., Primary, Middle, and Secondary students, and adult English learners), they did not utilize them in teaching ML2 to adult students. Consequently, the study suggests that incorporating visual culture practices could effectively cultivate the right hemisphere's capabilities, particularly during the initial phases of language acquisition. This finding presents an encouraging avenue for further investigation into ML2 instruction for international adults.

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