*Art: A Conversational Centerpiece*

Elizabeth Yoshikawa, Naruto University of Education, Japan

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**Abstract**
In the foreign language classroom understanding how cultural learning experiences of both the instructor and students combine and influence present classroom expectations is important. Without understanding this, learning expectations of both clash and this can thwart students' EFL communicative skills development. Drawing from the influences of past learning experiences this chapter addresses how students' foreign language confidence and fluency can be developed while also encouraging an autonomous learning situation. The discussion will focus on how through recognizing can provide a basis from which students' current learning practices can expand develop, thus encouraging an autonomous learning attitude to develop. The purpose is to demonstrate that when an instructor understands the cultural learning values of their students, these can use to their advantage in facilitating foreign language conversation skills to develop as well as encourages student to expand their overall learning skills.


Keywords: Cultural learning contexts, visual thinking skills, foreign language conversation

## 1. Introduction

The learning of a foreign language can be challenging, especially when students have limited opportunities to use the foreign language outside of the classroom. An attribute in this challenge that is often overlooked is a recognition of the differences in the learning pasts of both student and their foreign language instructor. How the learning past inhibits language learning is often ignored by language instructors. To facilitate the foreign language learners' communicative competence the foreign language instructor must address student's learning pasts in juxtaposition to their own learning past. This is of importance as it allows the instructor to acknowledge how the past is limiting present learning habits to develop. Learning past paradigms do influence the degree of freedom and experience students feel they have to voice their opinions in their foreign language. Understanding this enables the instructor to create a situation where students work collaboratively to develop their communicative foreign language abilities without dependency on textbook stock responses. One method to do this is to utilize the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) methodology. Using artwork, and not a textbook, VTS aims to encourage students to take a position in the verbalization of how they have interpreted the artwork and to support their interpretations with justification. While students are voicing their opinions or ideals to describe artwork, the art becomes a shield for students who are use to hiding behind a textbook. This paper will demonstrate how VST can be employed in the language classroom. It first discusses the importance of the instructor's awareness of how the learning past of influences current learning and teaching practices. It then discusses how VTS can be incorporated in a communicative foreign language learning classroom. Throughout these two stages the role of the instructor as a facilitator of conversations will be incorporated.

## 2. Learning pasts: Instructors vs. Students

In any learning situation the learning pasts of both the instructor and the students influence the current learning situation. Both the instructor and the students have expectations of the role the other should take within the classroom, and this influence learning expectations. As instructors we must not only be aware of how our students expect us to behave, but also how our learning pasts influence the way we expect our students to behave. When we consider in what ways our language learning situations were different and similar to those of our students, especially those students from different cultures, we may realize how our instructional practices need to develop according to the needs of our classrooms.

### 2.1 Learning pasts: Difference

As instructors we should juxtapose our own learning pasts against how we interpret what our students are doing. Within this there are four primary points to consider:

1) **Power distance**: Different learning cultures have different relationship roles between the instructor and the student. The type of relationships instructors have with their students influences how students and instructors interact with each other. In cultures where students view their instructors as authority figures this limits how students raise questions within or outside of class and how they interact with the material presented in class. When a teacher of language interacts with these students,

it is important to be aware of cues from students which indicate miscomprehension. Furthermore it necessitates the teaching of new learning habits and the encouragement of different interactions within the classroom.

**2)     Holder of knowledge**: Students who have primarily experienced a high-distant power relationship with their instructors in their learning past tend to be the passive recipients of knowledge. Here students' whose learning pasts dictated that the instructor is the holder of knowledge and they are the spoon fed recipients of that knowledge have developed learning habits in which the capacity to direct their own learning has yet to evolve. Therefore in the language classroom, instructors not only have the role of language instruction, but must also guide students in learning new habits in class interaction, as active learners.

**3)**     Questioning: In situations where students have been the passive recipients of knowledge, current language instructors must recognize that these students have not been encouraged to actively questioning their instructors in class. While this may occur outside of class or in small groups, it is unlikely to occur directly in class. This might be incorporating face saving techniques, which in some cultures are influential in social interactions. The language instructor accordingly must a range of tasks which are designed to facilitate the different learning preferences of students while also expanding how they incorporate new learning habits.

**4)     Activity in class:** Students who have developed in a high-distant power relationship society have experienced great deal of small group activities. It is here that the quizzical nature and active questioning of the knowledge presented to students or discussions to help clear misunderstandings can be found. While students within their own groups may have their own power-dynamics, students tend to use the group as the basis for knowledge acquisition and language comprehension. Instructors who experienced a very different type of learning past, with different expectations of the roles of the learner/teacher, must be aware of where they are looking for the questioning and critical nature of learning. This critical nature in learning, particularly through the questioning of knowledge differs depending on our learning expectations and pasts.

**5)     A constructivist vs. a Behaviorist learning paradigm**: The learning paradigm of many instructors of a foreign language might be said to be a constructivist paradigm. This may be different from what some foreign language learning students have experienced. These learning paradigms influence how autonomy in learning is achieved. While instructors who grew up in a constructivist learning paradigm, in their learning pasts expected help in learning, they also knew that they were ultimately responsible for our learning. While this is a gross generalization, it highlights the point that our language learning students have come from a behaviorist learning paradigm have different expectations. As these students experience a high-distant power relationship, they were the willing recipients of their instructor's knowledge. Learning is influenced by the social context. When the instructor and the student have experienced different cultural expectations in their learning pasts, the instructor must be aware of how this does influence the present learning situation, and therefore must offer student a learning situation which also expands their learning skill repertoire as wells and developing their language skills.

## 3. New Learning habits

Both instructors and students come from different points in their learning pasts, and this does influence what they expect from each other and how they expect each other to behave in the classroom. Taking the Vygotskian notion that the classroom is a product of the culture it is situated in, and adding this to the basis of Sociocultural theory in second language learning it cannot be denied that language as a cognitive process requires social interaction and this is contextually influenced. This would therefore mean that if as instructors, we want our students to behave differently, then we have to teach them new learning habits. The autonomous learning situation that language instructors experienced in their learning pasts is often very different from their current language learning students. As instructors, we must remember that what is considered as autonomous is culturally defined. If we want our students to develop a degree of autonomy we must first think how autonomy can be applied to the dynamics of our language classroom. According to Benson (2011) autonomous learning is the "capacity [of students] to take charge of [their] own learning" (pg. 10). At students' current level of foreign language learning, as instructors we must consider in what way can our students take charge and direct their own learning? This means that as Ertmer and Newby (1993) suggest: as instructors we must think about our how our instruction practices are enabling students so that they can actualize their learning goals and develop a degree of learning autonomy. Furthermore, we must be aware of how the cultural context influences how learning occurs. Therefore, to influence pedagogical development understanding the instructor/student relationship and expectations are just as important as understanding how culture influences language learning.

Within this there are two points to remember. First, as Lowe and Cook (2003) found that students' past study habits continue to influence their present studying expectations up to a year after they enter university. Therefore as instructors, we cannot expect a dramatic change in how students approach learning in the space of one term. Yet, this does not negate our responsibility as instructors to help lay the foundations for students to develop their learning repertoire. Secondly, social influences have great bearing even before a student enters university on their learning expectations. The value and the need for students to learning a foreign language will influence how they approach language learning. In contexts where the social value for learning a foreign language is low, as instructors, it is nevertheless important to provide students with a positive classroom atmosphere where they have the opportunity to create a foundation for future language learning.

### 3.1 Barriers to Conversing

In any learning situation there are always barriers to learning. In this section barriers to a conversation class from a behaviorist perspective will be briefly addressed. Students who have primarily experienced this learning paradigm in their learning pasts expect their foreign language instructor to 'spoon-feed' them. In this situation the instructor becomes be the gifter of knowledge. However in doing so, this limits the opportunities for students to converse in the foreign language, as the focus of discourse remains language patterns taught by the instructor. This learning paradigm does not promote discussions where students must negotiate for comprehension, or free speaking.

Students who have had limited opportunities to freely speak in English tend to have a dependency on the textbook. In this situation they do not support their opinions in the foreign language, as this is beyond the scope of the textbook based conversations. Furthermore if the foreign language has been presented as a test-taking subject, this also undermines students' negotiation for meaning in spoken language, as they have been trained to search for the correct memorized answer (Felder & Soloman, 2010). In addition, if students are learning a foreign language where outside of the classroom there are limited opportunities to use it, then their opportunities to expand their conversational skills are further reduced. Sato (2007) emphasizes that the foreign language instructor must therefore be aware of students' past language learning experiences. If students are characterized as being shy or quiet in the classroom then this would influence the type of activities that would encourage active learning in the classroom. Here these type of students might favour small group learning tasks which maintain group harmony over large group or class activities. In creating communication tasks it is therefore logical that instructors would take into consideration students' learning pasts so as to facilitate opportunities for students' learning skills to develop.

## 4. Visual Thinking Strategies

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) originated in the United States from the work primarily of Housen and Yenawine (2005). Focusing on a learner-centered approach to teaching, it is a method of instruction which is designed to employ students' background knowledge as well as to encourage deep thinking skills. So it stems from the Vygotskian notion that learning occurs through interaction with others and is influenced by context. Originally the purpose of the VTS technique was to develop students' visual understanding of art through encouraging students to vocalize their thoughts and feelings regarding a carefully chosen piece of art (Housen, 2002). Art here was used as a representation of the 'real world' or as a social representation – for example values/ or norms. In a foreign language classroom, using art, students are asked open-ended questions which facilitate discussions to activate students' schemata and prepare them for the lesson or to make it the lesson. VTS aims to draw students away from reading and writing and is based on the idea that visual stimulation can give students verbal outlet to share their knowledge and creativity with their classmates in a non-threating atmosphere. This also increases students' confidence in language use. This process also draws the focus away from right/wrong answers, which while may leave some feelings of ambiguity, also encourages students to question each other to gain a level of comprehension that they would otherwise not have achieved. The content of the lesson then becomes student dependent, and it is their responses which structure the lesson (Housen, 2002). Autonomy is achieved as students are the ones who are taking charge of the lesson within their capacity to do so. The lesson is automatically appropriate to the students' present level as it draws from students current levels, yet it challenges them through questions which do not demand more than what they could do when they apply some effort (Yenawine, 2013, 1998). Thus students are developing an autonomous learning attitude in their context, while also expanding how they approach learning in general.

Visual thinking skills can be incorporated in most conversation classes. Depending on the stage of students' foreign language learning, VTS can used as an extended warm-

up activity, where an image was chosen to raise students' schemata for the theme of the lesson. It also can be incorporated as a closing activity where after students have had an opportunity to study a grammatical form and language, students are encouraged to incorporate these in a discussion of an image. Students with higher foreign language abilities may use the image, or a series of images as the focus point of discussion for the whole lesson. The images used in the class discussion can thus be chosen for the topic or theme of the lesson. As the conversation is based on the image, topics that might be considered controversial or outside of students' experiences can be introduced to broaden the learning opportunity.

**4.1 Key questions**

Students are first presented with an image and given some time to look silently at it. Then the instructor, as Housen and Yenawine (2005) outline, asks three basic questions: 1) What is going on in this picture? 2) What do you see that makes you say that? And 3) What else can you find? It is through asking these three basic questions that the instructor is not only allowing students to become comfortable with a degree of ambiguity, but also is allowing them the power to create a dialogue on their own. Instead of the instructor telling students the correct answer, students use the image to create a response collaboratively enabling a learner-centered approach discussion. As Wolf (2013) found, students in charge of the direction of discussions are both more interested and more willing to communicate. Conversations centered on images allow students the freedom of this direction and removes the fear of right-wrong responses. In learning situations where student are characterized as being quiet in class, this activity works best in small groups. Within the small group the students together discuss the three questions to create their own story about the picture. Then, once they have had an opportunity to discuss the image in small groups and have prepared some responses, as a whole class activity each group can share their group's response to the image.

**4.2 The Instructor's Role**

The role of the instructor is to be a language facilitator. It is important the instructor remain as impartial as possible. The instructor should listen to students' responses, and ensure that they to support their ideas. In asking students these questions and listening to their responses, the instructor remaining neutral. There should be no "Yes, I see it too", or "No, I don't understand", as this would focus students towards right/wrong answers, which is not the point of this activity. The point is to encourage active engagement in developing conversation skills. In a foreign language learning situation, by remaining neutral the instructor is encouraging students to support their opinions with details and become active meaning makers (Fahim & Haghani, 2012). Through using the image to support their statements, the students have a shield, in a similar way that they may have used their textbook. When using art in the classroom, students can justify their statements and language use through their descriptions of the art, as the visual image complements the students' use of their verbal communication (Brumberger, 2007). This would therefore encourage students who are not used to using critical language skills to be objective. Yet as they are using the art to create a conversation, the image can be used to justify their opinions.

It is important that the instructor becomes the facilitator of language. When asking students what is going on in the  picture, in responding to students paraphrase what was said. Paraphrasing is important as it encourages language development as the instructor demonstrates correct sentence formation and alternate vocabulary use (Housen & Yenawine, 2005). The point of the activity is to encourage students to think and justify their opinions. It is not about right or wrong answers. The images and discussions encourage students to identify not only what they see, but also to justify this with supportive statements. This also encourages students to consider difference through the ideas posed and supported by their classmates.

5. **Closing Words**

It is important for foreign language instructors to acknowledge the cultural learning preferences of their student. These learning preferences influence awareness expectations of how language learning should be presented. However, it also important to recognize how stereotypes of how language learning should be done also influence the language classroom. This denotes that we must consider how culturally accepted learning paradigms can inhibit language acquisition. If communicative language skills are a priority in the foreign language learning situation, it is necessary that the instructor adapts a learning atmosphere which encourages communicative skills acquisition. Past research has proven that unless students feel a connection, even just a remote connection to a topic, they are unlikely to be motivated to develop meaningful discussions, and this would thwart acquisition (Wolf, 2013). Using the VTS strategy, students are encouraged to take a position in the verbalization of their interpretation of an image and support it with justification found in the artwork. This then sets up a situation where students are negotiating for meaning and the comprehension of others' ideas. This challenge then pushes students' learner capabilities as they reflect on their language use and comprehension of others' opinions. Although the three questions are simple, they engage students in meaningful. In these discussion, with their peers students together are developing their language base as well as their confidence through the small group work. Using art to initiate discussions enables students to be in control of how their discussions develop. This allows students to create links between their previous learning experiences, as well as their interests. In this way students together can create language knowledge in the direction which they choose to take their discussion of the artwork in. Students who in their learning pasts who had limited opportunities to freely speak on topics, accordingly increase their confidence in discussions while also increasing their conversational skills. The three questions demand that students do more than merely offering a statement, they must now justify their statements. The VTS strategy according encourages an autonomous learning capacity within their cultural learning atmosphere which also encourages the development or students' communicative capabilities in their foreign language acquisition.

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