Journal of English language Teaching and Learning

University of Tabriz

Volume 14, Issue 30, (Fall and Winter 2022)

Learning a Thousand Words: EFL learners' development of vision competencies

Seyyedeh Fahimeh Parsaiyan (Corresponding Author)

Department of English, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.

f.parsa@alzahra.ac.ir

Mansoureh Jalilian

Department of English, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

m.jalilian@student.alzahra.ac.ir

Khadijeh Karimi Alavijeh

Department of English, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

karimi@alzahra.ac.ir

ARTICLE INFO:

Received date:
2022.09.10
Accepted date:
2022.10.02

Print ISSN: 2251-7995
Online ISSN: 2676-6876

Abstract

Visual literacy (VL), despite its significance, has not received deserved attention in EFL classes in Iran. Addressing this pedagogic and research lacuna, the researchers integrated VL practices into a General English course attended by female university learners, and examined the vision competencies developed by them. The analysis of the data collected through class observation, learner documents, and semi-structured interviews revealed that the learners developed the vision competencies regarding compositional, affective, and critical dimensions of visuals. It is hoped that the findings of this small-scale study encourage language planners, materials developers, and English teachers to pay heightened attention to the visuals' potential and open more spaces for VL development in their curricula, materials, and language teaching practices.

Keywords:

EFL learners; general English; literacy; visual literacy; vision competencies

DOI: 10.22034/ELT.2022.53401.2506

Citation: Parsaiyan, F., Jalilian, M., Karimi Alavijeh, K. (2022). Learning a Thousand Words: EFL Learners' Development of Vision Competencies. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning,* 14(30), 245-263. Doi: 10.22034/ELT.2022.53401.2506

Introduction

Throughout the last few decades, tremendous metamorphoses have occurred to the conception of literacy; a corollary of which is that the traditional literacy comprising reading, writing, and thinking has been replaced with multiliteracies. Among evolving new literacies, Visual Literacy (VL) has rapidly grown in importance given the amount of digital and non-digital visual messages disseminated at the present time (Avgerinou, 2009; Kedra, 2018; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Rose, 2001; Serafini, 2014). VL, a term coined by Debes (1969), has been defined as "the abilities to understand (read), and to use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images" (p. 26). Not disregarding the diversity of disciplinary and trans-disciplinary perspectives, it seems that two components of *viewing* and *producing* are the building blocks of VL (Brumberger, 2011; Kędra & Žakevičiūtė, 2019; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Critical Visual Literacy (CVL) also deals with "cultural significance, social practices and power relations of visual texts" (Rose, 2001, p. 3).

With the emergence of "the visual turn" at the dawn of the new millennium (Goldstein, 2016, p. 23), barrages of criticisms have been levelled against the undue attention paid to such kind of literacy in educational curricula in general (Avgerinou, 2009; Kędra, 2018; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) and in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula in particular (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017). Although a large number of visuals are used in static and moving forms such as images, posters, flashcards, maps, comics, animations, and so on in English classes, it seems that "there is still a lack of understanding on how to read, use, and interpret these images" (Baylen & D'Alba, 2015, p. 13). As argued by a number of critics, visuals in language classes, despite their potential, are chiefly deployed for common pedagogical purposes like setting up the context, activating learners' schemata, and teaching words or grammatical points, not to mention market-wise motives like decoration, enhancing the products' look, and marketability (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Accordingly, rarely are they being employed as intrinsic means for developing VL or "vision competencies" in English learners (Rose, 2001; Serafini, 2014). As argued by Donaghy and Xerri (2017), "the power of images to stimulate ideas, discussion and creativity is still currently underexploited" (p. 2), and there is "little effort to develop learners' visual literacy" (p.4) in English classes. In view of that, the necessity of integrating VL into language teaching programs for the modern generation of learners, who dive "in 'bain d' images' (image bath)" (Avgerinou, 2009, p. 28), could not be overlooked (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017; Metros, 2008; Serafini, 2014; Share, 2015). This necessitates developing pedagogical strategies and training which equip learners with the abilities to thrive in the age of literacies and become informed analysers of visual data rather than passive viewers or users (Brumberger, 2011).

Considering EFL contexts as research sites, various qualitative and quantitative research studies have been conducted to introduce VL and CVL to English language learners around the world, each focusing on one mode of visual ensembles, including conceptual images (e.g., Brown, 2019 & 2022; Callow, 2010); advertisements (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2014; Takaya, 2016); and photovoices (e.g., Villacañas de Castro, 2017; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). Visual studies conducted in the Iranian context of English language teaching have also chiefly focused on evaluating visual elements in ELT textbooks and software (e.g., Ahour & Zaferani, 2016; Roohani & Sharifi, 2015) and investigating the effect of visual and multimodal inputs like

picturebooks, comic strips, animations, and film-based instructions on improving language skills (e.g., Erfani, 2012; Hashemifardnia et al., 2018; Rajaei Najafabadi et al., 2019; Fatemipour & Hashemi, 2016; Roohani et al., 2015).

Accordingly, studies depicting the process of VL enhancement in English language classes are comparatively scarce and, to best of our knowledge, no serious work has been done in Iran to integrate VL into English classes by focusing on several visual genres. Addressing this pedagogic and research lacuna, the researchers set out to design a number of VL activities (like reading images, advertisements, silent animations, and picturebooks) and integrate them into a General English course attended by female university learners. Examining the types of vision competencies developed by the language learners was the purpose of the study. The following question guided this qualitative study.

What types of vision competencies will be developed by the EFL learners of the present research as a result of receiving VL instructions?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

In the 1960s, John Debs, the founder of the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA), coined the term Visual Literacy and defined it as "a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences" (1968, p. 14). Following him, other academics from different disciplines offered further definitions. Among them, Ausburn and Ausburn (1978) proposed that VL might include a group of skills that enable a person to understand and use visuals for purposeful communication with others. Messaris (1994) added the element of *conscious awareness* to existing definitions and rephrased it as "gaining of knowledge and experience about the workings of the Visual Media coupled with the heightened conscious awareness of those workings" (p. 14). Later, Avgerinou (2009) accentuated the importance of *visual thinking* as one of VL competencies and claimed that a visually literate person should have the ability to understand, think about, and use images as well. Hattwig et al. (2013) proposed a comprehensive conceptualization of VL by classifying VL skills into three categories of visual reading skills, visual writing skills, and other VL skills such as how to cite visuals conventionally and how to use images ethically. Not disregarding the diversity of disciplinary and trans-disciplinary perspectives, it seems that the components of *viewing* and presenting visual materials or interpreting and *producing* them are the building blocks of VL.

Accordingly, multiple frameworks for practicing VL have been set by different authors. Drawing upon "social semiotics" framework and Halliday's systemic-functional grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 & 2020) expatiated on the transactional relations between the depicted participants (including actors, circumstances, goals, events, phenomena, carrier, attributes, and the like) and the processes or vectors. Similarly, van Leeuwen (2008) suggested the visual elements like the "gaze" at the viewer, shots or "size of frame," and "angle" that could be deployed for discussing the imaginary connections between the represented participants and the viewers. These elements can represent social interaction, social distance (distanciation), and social relation (power and involvement), respectively.

Adopting a more pedagogical approach, Joyce and Gaudin (2007) described three layers of meaning that could be considered by educators in teaching visual language, including "representational," "interpersonal," and "textual" meaning. In addition, Callow (2005) established a framework for reading images comprising "affective," "compositional," and "critical" dimensions (p. 13). Similarly, Serafini (2014) elaborated on "perceptual," "structural," and "ideological" dimensions that could be taken into consideration when reading images.

In a comprehensive review, Avgerinou (2009) further delineated a series of VL competencies, including "knowledge of visual vocabulary," "knowledge of visual conventions," "visualization," "visual thinking," "visual reasoning," "critical viewing," "visual discrimination," "visual reconstruction," "visual association," "reconstructing meaning," and "constructing meaning" of visual messages (pp. 29-30) which should be developed by individuals in order to become visually literate. Serafini (2012) also proffered four inter-related social practices viewers should develop while transacting with multimodal texts. They include reading as "navigation," which requires the ability to decode the visual elements and compositional design of multimodal texts; reading as "interpretation," which involves constructing viable meanings from visual images or interpreting them through drawing upon prior life experiences and backgrounds; reading as "design," which expands the readers' abilities to either produce multimodal texts or adopt idiosyncratic "reading paths" (p. 158), and eventually reading as "interrogation," which requires exploring the issues related to power structures and ideologies embedded in production and consumption of the visuals. Similarly, Rose (2001) proposed dimensions of "technological, compositional and social" modalities (p. 17), which could be identified in images.

Kędra (2018) also juxtaposed 11 VL definitions and proposed three lists of VL skills, including "visual reading skills," "visual writing skills," and "other visual literacy skills" (p. 67). He divided visual reading skills into five groups of interpreting, analysing, and understanding, visual perception, evaluation, knowledge of grammar and syntax, as well as translation (visual-verbal-visual). Visual writing skills include three thematic groups of visual communication, visual creation, and image use. Other visual literacy skills are divided into visual thinking, visual learning, and applied image use. Some critics (Costa & Xavier, 2016; Thompson, 2019) have also argued that VL practices should move learners beyond what could be found at the surface level. Accordingly, they have proposed the concept of CVL, which refers to the ability to perceive the socio-cultural and political contexts as well as power relationships shaping visual artefacts and to discover the social and political interests that are at work in the production and reception of images.

Research-based Studies on VL and CVL

The integration of VL and CVL into educational settings to develop learners' VL skills has been reported by several studies. For instance, working on the colour vocabularies and various meanings conveyed by them, Fresacher (2017) encouraged a group of learners to identify the elementary colours like red and blue and more difficult ones like "lime green or neon yellow" while analysing the visuals of advertising, packaging, and film clips and share their perceived cultural and psychological meanings. She proposed that initiating debates on colours had some

advantages for EFL learners, including promoting the level of vocabulary, becoming aware of "idiomatic use of colours" (p. 74) and different messages that colours might transfer, as well as understanding "how businesses might be using colours for persuasion purposes" (Fresacher, 2017, p. 71).

In another study, Abas (2019), adding the self-reflection phase to Serafini's (2014) three-tier model of "exposure," "exploration," and "engagement," shared her experience of practicing VL with a group of undergraduate learners taking part in a writing course. Having provided the learners with some training on VL, she asked them to bring their own selected photographs and images, collaborate in discussing and analysing them based on some guiding questions, and then present their evaluations in the form of a visual analysis essay. The final stage was getting the learners "consciously think about the lesson objectives and how they can be applied outside of the classroom" (p. 106) by writing self-reflections.

Besides images, developing EFL learners' skills to read advertisements has been the focus of various studies. In one case, Takaya (2016) tried to explore the VL skills of EFL learners by examining the extent to which they could understand "visual images with global connections" (p. 88). The learners, several EFL learners in a university in Taiwan, were required to "write an essay analysing advertisement featuring Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union" (p. 88). Although they had been familiarized with him in school classes, none of them could identify the president, and their essays seemed to be very simplistic. This supported the claim that it should be obligatory for university learners to acquire VL skills while studying other fields of study.

In another study, Hobbs et al. (2014) reported the case of an ESL teacher practicing critical reading of advertisements with a group of new immigrant learners at a public high school in the United States. They practiced several strategies, including the "cloze technique" and "generating questions," analysed print advertisements based on a set of provided critical questions, wrote an online analysis for their own selected magazine advertisements, and presented their interpretations. They discussed that the learners experienced learning events far "beyond advertising analysis" like expressing their emotions and learning to "value each other's ideas and to back up ideas with textual details and elaborations of their understandings and connections to real-life via their cultural understandings" (p. 21), among others.

Brown (2021) also attempted to engage 83 Norwegian EFL learners in practices of CVL via redesigning multimodal advertisements after they were introduced to the dimensions of visual analysis proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and persuasive techniques. A thematic analysis of the learners' multimodal redesigns and their reflections indicated that they gained the ability to identify specific ideologies underpinning the advertisements and modified them in their redesigns. In other words, "through their engagement in the task, the learners demonstrated their ability to read both with and against the text" (Brown, 2021, p. 17). In another qualitative study, Brown (2022) examined the ways by which familiarity with CVL and being engaged in critical discussions aided Norwegian EFL learners in developing "multiple perspectives" while reading and negotiating the meanings residing in images.

Several other studies have also attempted to enhance EFL teachers' and learners' VL via deploying memes (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2021), photovoice methodology

(Villacañas de Castro, 2017; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009); photography (Share, 2015); mobile multimedia technologies (Costa & Xavier, 2016); visual journaling (Loerts & Belcher, 2019); images containing cultural meanings (Newman & Ogle, 2019), inter alia. Visual studies conducted in the Iranian context of English language teaching have also chiefly focused on evaluating visual elements in ELT textbooks and software and investigating the effect of visual and multimodal inputs like picturebooks, comic strips, animations, and film-based instructions on improving language skills (e.g., Erfani, 2012; Fatemipour & Hashemi, 2016; Hashemifardnia et al., 2018; Rajaei Najafabadi et al., 2019; Roohani et al., 2015). The review of the conducted studies suggests that research studies tracing the process of VL enhancement in language classes are comparatively scarce, particularly in the Iranian context of English language education (Author, 2019). The present study was an attempt to address this pedagogic and research gap.

Method

Context and Participants

The study participants were three groups of Iranian learners taking a required three-credit General English course taught by one of the researchers, at a state-run, female-only university in the north of Tehran, Iran. Each group consisted of 25 to 40 learners (100 as a whole), chiefly freshmen, ranging from 18 to 28 in age, who were majoring in different fields of study. While a number of the learners had taken English courses at private language institutes for a varied length of time and had a fairly good command of English (roughly at pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate levels of English proficiency), more than half of them had no background in English, except for the instructions they had received at school. The literacy-oriented nature of the course and its objectives, which hovered around developing English language skills and sub-skills, made it a suitable place for implementing VL, as a branch of new literacies.

Data Collection

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study as it aimed at exploring the thriving of vision competencies by EFL language learners. Multiple methods of data collection were employed in this study, namely observing the sessions related to VL practices (almost 35 sessions, each lasting around 90 minutes) by one of the researchers; gathering a collection of visual, textual, and multimodal documents brought by the learners as well as comments, VL assignments, and mini-projects posted to a class weblog; and having semi-structured interviews with a selected number of learners (16 as a whole) at the end of the course.

Procedure

The preparatory phase of the study began months prior to its practical phase during which the researchers, two assistant professors of Applied Linguistics, one of whom was also the course instructor, and an MA candidate of TEFL, consulted literature on VL and CVL, designed various instructions and activities, and judiciously selected the visual ensembles (like images, advertisements, silent animations, and picture books) that could suit the purpose. In general, throughout the practical phase, the learners got acquainted with various VL practices, including reading conceptual images via focusing on compositional, affective, and critical dimensions of images (Callow, 2005; Rose, 2001; Serafini, 2014); decoding advertisements by paying attention to deployed verbal and visual persuasion techniques; analysing silent animations by

attending to animation techniques including camera placement, lighting, colours, framing, character design, changes of various scenes, sound effects, and background music (Serafini, 2014); and reading picturebooks by discussing the content, illustrations, and the movement of the pictures or "picture walks" (Lewis, 2017). The learners were also encouraged to present their own selected or created visuals, either individually or in collaboration with their classmates.

Almost every session related to VL practices was observed, recorded, and transcribed by one of the researchers of the study and detailed fieldnotes were prepared for further reflection and analysis. Furthermore, by the end of the semester, one of the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with 16 learners in order to gain insight into their perspectives and reflections concerning the VL training they had received in their General English course. Deploying maximum variation sampling, the interviewees were purposively selected from different types of learners (like those who actively took part in the class activities and discussions and those who often kept quiet) so as to have a variety of perspectives concerning the issue under investigation and to enhance the credibility of the findings (Tracy, 2020). Audio recordings of the interviews, which had been conducted in Persian, were then transcribed verbatim and translated to English.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The collected data, including observation fieldnotes, the learners' documents, and the interview transcripts, were analysed adopting a thematic analysis method. Having consulted the theoretical literature on VL, the collected data were read several times, codes representing vision competencies were assigned to segments of the data, and recurring codes were put under relevant categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The possible interconnections or overlaps among sub-categories were negotiated by the researchers; they were renamed and revised several times, and eventually, the researchers agreed to put the constructed sub-categories under two categories: *Seeing the Seen* and *Seeing the Unseen*. These categories are illustrated in this paper by excerpts taken from the data. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers gathered data from multiple data sources and provided a rich description of the research stages. Furthermore, prolonged engagement with the learners aided the researchers in having a more realistic view of the events and establishing intimacy and rapport with them. As to the ethical considerations, the researchers considered the potential usefulness of the practice for the participants, tried not to involve them in any situations that caused them harm, and kept their identities anonymous in reporting the results (Tracy, 2020).

Findings

Seeing the Seen

While reading and analysing the data, it could be noticed that the learners in their transaction with multimodal ensembles paid great attention to the subtleties at the surface appearance of the visuals like colours and hues, lighting, length and size of the objects, or spatial organization. As the focus here was on reading the observable visual elements, the category was titled *Seeing the Seen*; a number of which are presented.

Colours and Lighting

Some dimensions of visual semiotics the learners began to pay increased attention to were the colours, hues, and lighting utilized by the designers or creators of the visual images. In so doing, they moved beyond literal, neutral, or denotative meanings, generated various viable meanings and interpretations for the used colours and lighting, and sometimes argued vehemently with each other about "the idiomatic use of" these visual elements (Fresacher, 2017, p. 74). For instance, in one of the image reading sessions, when the teacher displayed an internet-downloaded image about media control (Figure 1), a discussion broke out about the colours used in the image. Initially, the learners simply mentioned the names of the visible colours like yellow, green, pink, and orange. With thought-provoking questions asked by the teacher, several learners, drawing on their background information about colour psychology, began talking about the differences or resemblances between the used colours and attributed various meanings to them. One of the learners suggested, "The colour of green means calmness and tranquillity" and "The colour of the man's shirt, red, is the symbol of power and anger". Another student referred to the similarity between the colour of the man's brain and that of the satellite and stated, "The colour of the satellite and his brain is alike, and it shows the influence of satellite on his brain". She then explained that to her, "the pistachio colour of sofa" meant immobility and "passivity of the man." In a more critical observation, another student stated that the colour of the brain "looked abnormal." She mentioned, "The colour of his brain is yellow but I know the real colour of the brain is pink and it suggests that he may not be using his brain actively."

Figure 1 *An internet-downloaded image taken to the class by the teacher*

Equal attention to the visual details was observed in the learners' analyses of lighting values, including darkness, brightness, shadows, tonal shades, the moods evoked by them, or the meanings residing in them. For example, while watching *Piper* animation, an animation about the adventures of a newly born sandpiper, one of the learners referred to "the sunrise" and "sunset" occurring in different scenes and compared them with the beginning of the piper's life and what she had achieved during the day. She said, "This animation begins with the sunrise, very bright lighting, and the birth of a piper and ends with the sunset, to show how and what the piper has gained in one day." Following her, other learners discussed the use of different lights and the emotions evoked by them in the viewers. One of them stated, "I also see various bright lights…which conveyed a positive sense to me."

Contrasts

Another sub-category was making sense of contrasting concepts and objects in the visuals. Contrasts are objects, people, or things that are different in shape, size, colour, and so on. In analysing the visual contrasts, the learners often provided multiple, even contradictory interpretations. As an example, in reading the following conceptual image (Figure 2), multiple views, containing analogies, were exchanged in a flow of arguments and counterarguments. One of the learners, who usually expressed critical views, stated that to her "the apples represent two images of one person, one in real life and another in virtual life." She reasoned, "The image displayed by people on Instagram looks so perfect…but when we see people in real life, they have many problems like all of us." Confronting her, another learner said, "But I think the apple seems to have a very strong personality as she is trying to ignore her deficiencies and make use of her capacities to reach great goals." Extending the discussion, another learner offered a psychological interpretation of the image by drawing on the concepts of self-doubt and self-confidence. She suggested, "…but we can consider this *differently*. This apple has not accepted itself as it has a different image of itself in the mirror."

Figure 2 *An internet-downloaded image taken to the class by the teacher*

Objects and Characters

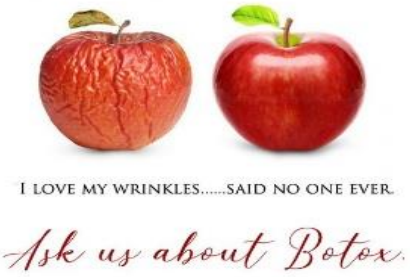
Besides negotiating the viable meaning of contrasts, the learners showed attention to the displayed objects or depicted characters. They made sense of the facial expressions, clothing and garment, hairstyles, gestures and postures, and body styles of the depicted people, and even sympathized with the characters. One of the images that led to a vehement discussion was Figure 3. They argued that the depiction of the characters as being barefoot, wearing tattered clothes, and having untidy and messy hair was meant to display "poverty." In a closer analysis, one of the learners contrasted the "torn clothes" of the poor people with the "elegant suit" worn by the rich donator and related that to "social class distinction." Another learner made sense of the "waiting" and "sorrowful eyes" of the characters and the "indifferent," "showing off" look of the rich person whose aim probably was "just to take a selfie to show off."

Figure 3 *An internet-downloaded image taken to the class by the teacher*

Typography

Semiotics of typography or various typefaces of letterforms, styles, sizes, fonts, and the like was another visual aspect a number of learners showed interest in, though comparatively less than other elements. For example, while discussing an advertisement of Botox (Figure 4), a couple of learners focused on the typographic features used in arranging the slogans. One of the learners explained how the "eye-catching capital letters" in I Love My Wrinkles, Said No One Ever was meant to attract the attention of the viewers and win their "trust." Another student while paying attention to the deployed "italic font" or slanted text and the location of the second slogan, *Ask us about Botox*, stated, "The italic font…absorbs attention and creates a sense of friendship…also makes the viewers do something with their wrinkles." In other words, she implicitly pointed to the "connectivity" typographic feature, which is associated with "wholeness" or "integration" in sloping typefaces (van Leeuwen, 2006).

Figure 1 *An internet-downloaded advertisement taken to the class by the teacher*



Seeing the Unseen

The second significant category was *Seeing the Unseen* or reading *beyond* the surface. As the course proceeded, it could be observed that the learners, besides paying attention to the visual nuances, tried to figure out the unseen issues, which were not apparent and identifiable at first sight. The learners read the visuals more deeply, made sense of the symbolic signs, and drew upon their personal life world or socio-political milieus to attribute meanings to the visuals. Some of these transactions are briefly explained.

Creating Metaphoric Meanings for Visuals

Moving beyond the literal meanings of the visually-depicted elements and pondering on their potential metaphoric or symbolic meanings could evidently be observed in the learners' VL practices. Instances of metaphoric meaning-making of the visuals could be seen in interpreting silent animations and picturebooks; an example of which was reading *There's No Such Thing*

as a Dragon picturebook which narrates the story of a boy who seeing a dragon growing up rapidly in his bedroom; however, the boy's mother keeps denying the dragon's existence. Referring to the images of the dragon growing up in size, some of the learners commented that the dragon could be considered a metaphor for things we take their presence for granted and "the ones whom we often ignore in our life." In a metaphoric reading, one of the learners suggested that the dragon is like "kids" who "need to be noticed…but because their parents ignore them, they try to convince others of their existence". In a different reading, another learner expressed that the dragon resembles "the faults and problems in life," which we sometimes "ignore instead of accepting" them. In a similar interpretation, another learner stated, "The mother is the symbol of individuals who resist the realities of life, but if they learn how to deal with the difficulties of life, they get along with them well."

Responding to Visuals Emotionally

While reading the visuals, there were times when the learners became so engrossed with the images that they expressed their emotional reactions and offered their feelings of empathy or sympathy with the characters portrayed in the images. Quite often, the learners put themselves in the characters' place and offered the producer some suggestions to improve the situation. In one case, one of the learners shared "the vulture and the little girl" photo (Figure 5) by Kevin Carter, expressed her deep sympathy with the child, and criticized the photographer for his "hardheartedness." She said:

> *The child in this picture is dying of severe hunger and disability. The vulture is waiting to hunt him after death. This photo was published in many magazines and was named the photo of the year. However, if I was in the photographer's shoes, I helped the child and prevented him from death instead of taking a photo. An individual should be very unfeeling and hard-hearted to see this event closely and just take the photo to become famous!*

Figure 5 *The vulture and the little girl by Kevin Carter*

Voicing Sociopolitical Concerns through Visuals

In reading some visuals, the learners explained how the images highlighted particular socio-political themes that they had observed in their context of living and tried to look at the raised issues critically. Paying attention to socio-political issues was more evident in the case of images and photovoices brought by the learners. For example, sharing the image of a child undertaking child labour while doing his homework on the street, the presenter critiqued "the painters, writers, photographers …who the pain and sorrow of child labour is the subject of

their painting, story, and poem", while "the truth is that they will become rich and famous…but these children are still working on the street and no one really helps them."

Another example of the learners taking up a critical stance could be seen in reading "taking a selfie with the poor" picture (Figure 3). The learners tried to relate the depicted theme to issues debated in Iranian society and on social media. The coincidence of the discussion with a tragic natural disaster in the country stimulated some to draw similarities between the image and the hypocritical reactions of some individuals including political figures and celebrities. A couple of learners suggested that the image reminded them of "the events occurring after the huge earthquake in Kermanshah." One of the learners suggested, "Selfies of our famous actors with earthquake victims in the west of country showed their inner intention." Another learner argued, "We see the negative side of charity works of some celebrities and politicians; some just think about their own profits, not people." Events similar to these suggested that the learners attempted to go beyond the surface of visuals and focused on different socio-political issues presented by them.

Crafting Stories for Visuals

In addition to reading images, on some occasions, the learners tried to make use of their power of imagination and creativity to construct stories for visuals by assigning specific meanings to relatively abstract visual items. Below is a story written by one of the learners for the following image (Figure 6):

> *As I saw this image on Instagram, I tried to read it, so I made a scenario that I share with you: The American army has forced the soldier to go to African countries for fighting. He has been far from his beloved for several months, and he was missing her. When he was walking around the forest, he saw this piano and remembered when he played the piano for his beloved. He was close to crying and wished to find a way to leave the war. But after he started playing the piano, he calmed down and forgot the current situation for a few minutes…*

Figure 6 *A Russian soldier playing an abandoned piano in Chechnya in 1994*

Seeing the Self in the Visuals

As the learners became more engaged with visuals and thought deeply about them, they made more robust connections between them and their own personal and social life. They put themselves in the characters' shoes and considered the issues or problems represented in the visuals as their own concerns. For example, when the learners were analysing *Piper* animation, one of them explained how the plot resembled her own life and how watching the animation had inspired her to overcome her fears. She said:

> *I think it is the story of myself. Whenever I fail, I am scared of trying more; it becomes something like a phobia for me and I do not know how I can overcome my fears... This animation inspired me to try more and make use of my failures as experiences for my life…*

Another time, after watching an animation about early judgment, a learner referred to one of her experiences of judging her friends and narrated:

> *Sometimes I judge people like Joy (one of the animation's characters). For example, one day when my friends and I were studying in the library, I understood that they were talking about me…I could not tolerate them so I left them. They tried to talk to me many times but I did not want to listen... After a week, one of my friends told me the story, so I understood that I was wrong and apologized to them... Now we are all together again just like before.*

Unravelling Hidden Languages of the Visuals

Unravelling the hidden ideologies underlying images and the possible ways by which they were influencing, controlling, or manipulating the minds of viewers was among significant visual reading events. Evidence supporting this conscious awareness of the visuals' hidden layers could mostly be seen in reading advertisements and commercials. In one case, one of the learners presented an advertisement of a McDonald's product and criticized the things "the advertisers had kept hidden behind the flashy appearance." She showed her awareness of the advertisements' ideological dimension as follows:

> *This McDonald's cheeseburger advertisement attracts the audience and customers by using beautiful and attractive colours… but behind this flashy surface, the harms of this food have not been mentioned. The food does not have a high nutritional value, and only the positive and outward aspects are shown so we should not be victimized by these kinds of visuals.*

Another student presented a photo related to a 3D PlayStation advertisement depicting an East-Asian girl (Figure 7) and offered analyses with regard to its hidden ideologies. She believed that "the landscape on display belonged to Western countries to magnify the United States and the West as a dreamland for all people of the world, especially Asian countries." She added:

> *If we look carefully at the advertisement, we can understand that there are some covert values in different nations. This girl is originally from an Eastern country and the dream world is shown as America. This shows the superiority of the Western world over the Eastern. As if all of the eastern people want to migrate to the west and United States to reach success and happiness. The US policy makers make their best to instil this thought in the minds of people to keep self-deprecating.*

Figure 7 *An internet-downloaded image shared by one of the learners*

Likewise, another learner, while referring to "the hidden stereotypes" created in advertisements, put forward the following idea:

> *The advertisements related to fitness and cosmetic surgeries make stereotypes for people but the people are not aware of that because the advertisers design the visuals so professionally and hide their intended values. For example, they only show thin and beautiful individuals as if the people around the world should all be like them.*

All these might suggest that the learners went beyond seeing the surface nuances in the visuals and became more visually and critically literate. In addition, the interviews revealed that they had gained new understanding of the visuals and their functions. Almost all the interviewees stated that the VL practices had enabled them to "look at the visuals anew" and appraised the training as "practical," "close to life," "necessary," and "fruitful."

> *As I am very active in cyberspace and I see a lot of photos and advertisements, our discussions about visual literacy were very necessary for me, my vision broadened, and I look at all visuals more accurately, as it is a need for our new world.*
>
> *We dealt with very useful and practical topics... Today we usually use visual language, so we must also learn how to read it. For example, I learned a lot from the advertisement analysis.*

They pointed out that the practices had encouraged them to pay heightened attention to visual nuances and details they used to ignore.

> *Before, I was not sensitive about the colors and models used in the advertisement. Now I try to examine the details of different images to understand their goals and functions.*
>
> *I never thought that I would be able to critique a conceptual image or silent animation… even I could find connections between the issues represented in the visuals and my personal life.*

Another key theme that emerged in the process of coding the interviews was the notion of "experiencing multiple voices." Reading various kinds of visuals and discussing them familiarized the learners with multiple mindsets and voices. Almost all the interviewees stated that during the analysis of visuals, they "became familiar with different mindsets" and this "made them experience listening to different voices."

> *I became familiar with different mindsets. For example, in the analysis of one of the images, my classmates expressed a variety of ideas; some of which I did not agree with.*
>
> *I used to believe that there is only one true opinion, and that is mine! Now I admit that there are numerous views, all of which could be true depending on the angle through which the viewer looks at that visual.*

The majority of the interviewees also pointed to their high "engagement," "participation," and "involvement" in class discussion and assignments. They stated that the visual contents "containing political and social issues" encouraged them to participate in discussions actively as they often found "some reasons" to voice their opinions.

> *This class was the one I had looked for it for years. I liked it so much as the participation of learners was very high, and the focus of the class centered around the learners, not the professor.*
>
> *I am a bit introverted and I do not usually talk in classes, but here, I was so involved in the practices and activities that, unlike in other classes, I did not play with my cell phone.*

More significantly, they chiefly maintained that as a result of reading and analyzing visuals critically, especially advertisements, they gained "a more critical perspective" on visually-presented materials and documents.

> *I became very interested in critiquing the social issues surrounding me as we learned to react to the problems of our society and we began to look deeper at these issues and not simply ignore them.*
>
> *I think our analytical skills increased. When we were focusing on a photo or commercial, we thought about it so much to be able to critique it.*

Discussion and Conclusion

Concerned with the lack of pedagogic practices on enhancing VL and CVL of EFL learners, in this study, we set out to familiarize Iranian EFL learners attending a General English course with the basics of VL via focusing on a variety of visual genres and trace the vision competencies that were developed by them. The meticulous analysis of the data revealed that the learners gradually began to develop "knowledge of visual vocabulary." In analyzing the visuals, they showed awareness of knowledge of the essential components of visuals like color, light, shape, line, the characters' appearance, size, volume, typographic elements, and the like and deployed a variety of lenses to interpret and analyze the potential meanings of these visible visual elements. All these might suggest that the learners developed, at least partially, the basic required competencies to perceive the "semiotic, structural, and contextual elements" (Goldstein, 2016, p. 9) in the composition of images or their "compositional" dimension (Callow, 2005, p. 13). They could see the relations between the components constituting the images and how they were brought together compositionally to make a meaningful whole (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Schönau et al., 2020). Considering Serafini's (2012) model, it seems that the instructions aided the learners in reading as "navigation" (decoding the visual elements and compositional design of multimodal texts) and reading as "interpretation"

(constructing viable meanings from visual images or interpreting them through drawing upon prior life experiences and backgrounds). Overall, the codes extracted from this category affirmed that the learners developed "viewing" competencies of VL proposed by Callow (2005) or "visual reading skills" offered by Kędra (2018) and Schönau et al. (2020).

At another level, the learners developed in reading the visuals metaphorically, empathetically, creatively, and critically. They began to move beyond the literal meanings and offered symbolic, emotional, creative, and critical interpretations of the visuals by concentrating on the figurative, affective, socio-cultural, and socio-political meanings reflected by them. This can allude to the "visual association" competency or "the ability to link visual images that display a unifying theme" (Avgerinou, 2009, p. 30) as well as "affective" dimension in reading visuals (Callow, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Schönau et al., 2020).

Similarly, other researchers (e.g., Abas, 2019; Brown, 2021 & 2022; Costa & Xavier, 2016; Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2021; Rowsell et al., 2021) have also suggested the potential of visuals for triggering EFL learners' creative and critical thinking. As argued by Yenawine (2005, p. 845), VL is closely related to "cognitive processes" as it involves a "set of skills ranging from simple identification–naming what one sees–to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric, and philosophical level." Furthermore, one of the noteworthy findings of the study is that the learners somewhat developed "critical viewing" (Avgerinou, 2009) or reading as "interrogation" competency (Serafini, 2012) via unraveling the ideologies, hidden messages, and stereotypes embedded in the visuals, particularly advertisements. In this regard, the findings of the study are partially in line with other classroom-based investigations, including Author (2019), Brown (2019, 2021 & 2022), Hobbs et al. (2014), Takaya (2016), inter alia.

Notwithstanding these major findings, it should be admitted that as there was less emphasis and hence practice on *producing* domain of visual competencies, including "generating visual ideas," "doing visual research," "making visual images," "presenting one's created images," and "evaluating the visual-making process" (Schönau et al., 2020, p. 5), these aspects of vision competencies could not be seen developing by the learners. This necessitates further attention to VL competencies like "visual thinking" and "visual reconstruction" (Avgerinou, 2009) in EFL contexts. In addition, "other VL skills" such as how to cite visuals properly, and how to use them ethically (Hattwig et al., 2013) were among missing VL skills that deserve instruction and practice.

Although the findings of the current study sound promising, additional studies with learners of different ages and backgrounds as well as training on other visual ensembles like memes, hoaxes, and comic strips are necessary to further advance our understanding of how VL can be practiced in various contexts. It is hoped that the findings of this small-scale study aid language planners, materials developers, and English teachers in paying heightened attention to the visuals' potential and open more spaces for VL development in their curricula, materials, and language teaching practices.

References

Abas, S. (2019). Reading the world – teaching visual analysis in higher education. *Journal of Visual Literacy, 38*(1), 100– 109.

Ahour, T. & Zaferani, P. (2016). A critical visual analysis of gender representation of ELT materials from a multimodal perspective. *The Journal of Applied Linguistics, 9*(18), 78– 98.

Ausburn, L. J. & Ausburn, F. B. (1978). Visual literacy: Background, theory, and practice. *Innovations in Education & Training International, 15*, 291–297.

Avgerinou, M. D. (2009). Re-viewing visual literacy in the 'Bain d' Images' era. *TechTrends, 53*, 28–34.

Baylen, D. M. & D'Alba, A. (2015). *Essentials of teaching and integrating visual and media literacy*. Springer International Publishing.

Brown, C. W. (2019). "I don't want to be stereotypical, but . . .": Norwegian EFL learners' awareness of and willingness to challenge visual stereotypes. *Intercultural Communication Education*, *2*(3), 120–141. https://doi.org/10.29140/ice.v2n3.194

Brown, C. W. (2021). Taking action through redesign: Norwegian EFL learners engaging in critical visual literacy practices, *Journal of Visual Literacy*, *41* (2), 91–112.

Brown, C. W. (2022). Developing multiple perspectives with EFL learners through facilitated dialogue about images. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2022.2030228

Brumberger, E. (2011). Visual literacy and the digital native: An examination of the millennial learner. *Journal of Visual Literacy, 30*, 19–46. doi:10.1080/23796529.2011.11674683

Callow, J (2005). Literacy and the visual: Broadening our vision. *English teaching, practice and critique*, *4*(1), 6–19.

Callow, J. (2010). I'm way more interested: Using visual texts to engage learners from low SES backgrounds. *Scan 29*(3), 28–33.

Costa, G., & Xavier, A. (2016). Critical visual literacy: The new phase of applied linguistics in the era of mobile technology. In A. Pareja-Lora, C. Calle-Martínez, & P. Rodrígue Arancón (Eds.), *New perspectives on teaching and working with languages in the digital era* (pp. 201–212). Research publishing.net. http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.tislid2014.434

Debes, J. L. (1968). Some foundations for visual literacy. *Audiovisual instruction*, *13*(9), 961– 964.

Domínguez Romero, E., & Bobkina, J. (2021). Exploring critical and visual literacy needs in digital learning environments: The use of memes in the EFL/ESL university classroom. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100783

Donaghy, K., & Xerri, D. (2017). *The image in ELT: An introduction*. In K. Donaghy & D. Xerri (Eds.), *The image in English language teaching* (pp. 1–12). ELT Council, Ministry for Education and Employment.

Erfani, S. M. (2012). Pictures speak louder than words in ESP, too! *English Language Teaching*, *5*(8), 164–169.

Fatemipour, H., & Hashemi, M. (2016). The effect of cooperative strategies versus concept visualization on reading comprehension ability of intermediate EFL learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 6(4), 686–692. http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0604.05

Fresacher, C. (2017). Colors in images: Developing color vocabulary and meanings in the EFL classroom. In K. Donaghy & D. Xerri (Eds.), *The image in English language teaching* (pp. 71–78). ELT Council, Ministry for Education and Employment.

Goldstein, B. (2016). *Visual literacy in English language teaching: Part of the Cambridge Papers in ELT series*. Cambridge University Press.

Hashemifardnia, A., Namaziandost, E., & Rahimi Esfahani, F. (2018). The effect of teaching picture books on elementary EFL learners' vocabulary learning. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics, 3*(3), 247–258.

Hattwig, D., Bussert, K., Medaille, A., & Burgess, J. (2013). Visual literacy standards in higher education: New opportunities for libraries and student learning. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy, 13*, 61–89. doi:10.1353/pla.2013.0008

Hobbs, R., He, H. & RobbGrieco, M. (2014). Seeing, believing and learning to be skeptical: supporting language learning through advertising analysis activities. *TESOL Journal, 6*(3), 447–475. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.153

Joyce, H. D., & Gaudin, J. (2007). *Interpreting the visual: A resource book for teachers*. Phoenix Education.

Kędra, J., & Žakevičiūtė, R. (2019). Visual literacy practices in higher education: What, why and how? *Journal of Visual Literacy, 38*(1-2), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2019.1580438

Kędra, J. (2018). What does it mean to be visually literate? Examination of visual literacy definitions in a context of higher education. *Journal of Visual Literacy, 37*(2), 67–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144x.2018.1492234

Kress, G., & Leeuwen, T. V. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Kress, G., & Leeuwen, T. V. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Lewis, S. (2017). *Using graphic novels and comics with ELT learners.* In K. Donaghy & D. Xerri (Eds.), *The image in English language teaching* (pp. 165–177). ELT Council, Ministry for Education and Employment.

Loerts, T. & Belcher, C. (2019). Developing visual literacy competencies while learning course content through visual journaling: Teacher candidate perspectives. *Journal of visual literacy, 38*(1-2), 46–65.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Messaris, P. (1994). *Visual "literacy"*: *Image, mind, and reality*. Westview Press.

Newman, M., & Ogle, D. (2019). *Visual literacy: Reading, thinking and communicating with visuals*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Rajaei Najafabadi, M., Bakhshizadeh, Y., & Mirzaei, A. (2019). Developing EFL Learners' oral proficiency through animation-based instruction of English formulaic sequences. *Journal of teaching language skills, 38*(1), 157–190.

Roohani, A., & Sharifi, M. (2015). Evaluating visual elements in two EFL textbooks. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 4*(2), 68–77.

Roohani, A., Jafarpour, A., & Zarei, S. (2015). Effects of visualisation and advance organisers in reading multimedia-based texts. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 21*(2), 47–62.

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies: An introduction of the interpretation of visual materials*. SAGE.

Rowsell, J., McLean, C., & Hamilton, M. (2012). Visual literacy as a classroom approach. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 55*(5), 444–447. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.00053

Schönau, D., Kárpáti, A., Kirchner, C., & Letsiou, M. (2020). Towards a revised model of the common European framework of reference for visual competency. *European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL*). Unpublished manuscript.

Serafini, F. (2012). Taking full advantage of children's literature. *The Reading Teacher, 65*(7), 457–459. https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.01067

Serafini, F. (2014). *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy*. Teachers Collage Press.

Share, J. (2015). Cameras in classrooms: Photography's pedagogical potential. In D. M. Baylon & A. D'Alba (Eds.), *Essentials of teaching and integrating visual and media literacy*, (pp. 97–118). Springer.

Takaya, K. (2016). Exploring EFL learners' visual literacy skills and global understanding through their analysis of Louis Vuitton's advertisement featuring Mikhail Gorbachev. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, *35*(1), 79–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144x.2016.1197561

Thompson, D. S. (2019). Teaching learners to critically read digital images: A visual literacy approach using the DIG method. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, *38* (1-2), 110–119.

Tomlinson, B., & Masuhara, H. (2018). *The complete guide to the theory and practice of materials development for language learning*. John Wiley & Sons.

Tracy, S. J. (2020). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishing.

van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.

van Leeuwen, T. (2006). Towards a semiotics of typography. *Information Design Journal*, *14*(2), 139–155. doi:10.1075/idj.14.2.06lee

Villacañas de Castro, L. S. (2016) 'We are more than EFL teachers – we are educators': Emancipating EFL student-teachers through photovoice. *Educational Action Research*, *25*(4), 610–629.

Yenawine, P. (2005). Thoughts on visual literacy. In J. Flood, D. Lapp, & S. B. Heath (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associate.

Zenkov, K., & Harmon, J. (2009). Picturing a writing process: Photovoice and teaching writing to urban youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 57*(2), 575–584.