

Research Paper

Visual Media in Communicative Writing

Mahmood Gozali*

1. English Language Teacher, Ardabil, Iran

Email: MahmoodGozali@gmail.com**Abstract**

The present study examines the role of pictures as instructional media in teaching writing through the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. CLT regards communicative competence as the ultimate goal of language teaching and holds that learners must be able to apply classroom knowledge in real-life situations. Since textbooks cannot always fully cover all language skills, particularly writing, teachers need to employ appropriate supplementary materials and media. Among these, authentic materials—especially pictures—hold a special place in EFL classrooms due to their availability, low cost, and visual appeal. This study demonstrates that pictures can bring the outside world into the artificial environment of the classroom, provide a shared experience for writing activities, supply learners with a common lexicon and language forms, and encourage them to write creatively and meaningfully. As visual stimuli, pictures also stimulate learners' imagination and personal interpretation, facilitating communicative tasks such as describing a scene, telling stories, and writing reports. From a psychological perspective, the theoretical framework of this research is grounded in the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) model, the theory of sensory preferences, and the dual-coding hypothesis (Paivio). Accordingly, visual learners retain information better, and pictures, by containing both visual and verbal codes, allow for easier retrieval of content. Overall, the findings suggest that the purposeful and informed use of instructional pictures, by creating authentic-like contexts and communicative tasks, can make writing instruction more effective in foreign language classrooms.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Teaching Writing, Instructional Materials, Pictures/Visual Media.

Introduction

Writing is widely regarded as one of the most demanding language skills, as it requires learners to simultaneously manage vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, organization, and content. Unlike speaking, writing does not occur naturally or spontaneously; it develops slowly and depends on the mastery of other skills such as listening, reading, and speaking. In foreign language contexts, where learners have limited exposure to authentic language use, this challenge becomes even more pronounced. Therefore, language teachers are expected to provide learners with appropriate materials, techniques, and tasks that facilitate the development of writing ability. Over the past few decades, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has shifted the focus of language instruction from mere mastery of structures toward communicative competence. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), the main concern of CLT is to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching. However, researchers have observed that although students may produce accurate structures in class, they often fail to use them appropriately in real-life situations. This gap highlights the need for authentic tasks and materials that reflect real-world language use. Ellis (2003) defines authentic tasks as real-world activities such as e-mails, notes, lists, reports, and essays, or activities that depict aspects of life, such as describing a picture or identifying differences between two pictures. In line with this perspective, instructional materials play a pivotal role in language teaching. Richards and Rodgers (2002) argue that materials have the primary role of promoting communicative language use. Among the various types of materials, realia—authentic, from-life materials such as signs, advertisements, maps, and pictures—are particularly valuable in EFL contexts, where learners rarely have access to native speakers. Pictures, as non-technical visual media, are affordable, convenient, and widely available, making them an ideal resource for language classrooms. Pictures can make significant contributions to language teaching. According to Buell (1950), they are practical, they help teachers create real-like contexts in the classroom, and they allow teachers to change contexts based on learners' needs. Doff (1988) adds that visuals focus learners' attention on meaning and make language more real, alive, and interesting. In the context of writing, pictures offer a wealth of possibilities (Harmer, 2007). They provide a shared experience for students, supply a common lexicon and language forms, and bring the real world into the classroom in a concrete way (Raimes, 1983). Moreover, pictures can stimulate learners' imagination, allowing them to place themselves in the pictured environment and create stories based on their own experiences (Moore, 1982). From a psychological standpoint, the use of pictorial media is supported by several theories. The Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) model suggests that some students are especially influenced by visual stimuli and remember things better if they see them (Harmer, 2007; Revell & Norman, 1997). The theory of sensory preferences indicates that visual learners prefer to learn through visual stimulation (Oxford, 2001; Reid, 1987). Furthermore, the dual-coding hypothesis (Paivio, 1986) explains that pictorial inputs contain two codes—visual and verbal—stored in separate parts of the brain, which facilitates recall and comprehension. Despite the widespread use of images in language classrooms, there remains a need for a systematic investigation into how pictures, as instructional media, can be effectively integrated into writing instruction within a communicative framework. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the role of pictures as media for teaching writing through the communicative approach, with particular attention to its psychological foundations and empirical support.

Method and Material

This study employs a descriptive research method based on library research. The process begins with an examination of visual media and an engagement with written texts and works. Subsequently, these materials are analyzed and, ultimately, subjected to a structured critique.

Results and Discussion

The present study set out to examine the role of pictures as instructional media in teaching writing through the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, with particular reference to its psychological foundations and empirical support. The analysis of the reviewed literature reveals several interrelated findings that merit extended discussion. This section interprets these findings in light of the theoretical frameworks presented earlier, draws connections among the various strands of literature, and considers their implications for classroom practice, limitations, and directions for future research.

The Communicative Orientation of Writing Instruction

The first major finding concerns the alignment between writing instruction and the principles of CLT. As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) maintain, the primary objective of CLT is the development of communicative competence rather than mere structural accuracy. This distinction is crucial because it reframes the purpose of writing instruction. Traditionally, writing in foreign language classrooms was often treated as a vehicle for practicing grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics—a form of controlled composition in which accuracy was prioritized over meaning. However, the communicative perspective challenges this orientation by insisting that writing should serve genuine communicative purposes. The literature reviewed here indicates that writing, like other language skills, possesses an inherent communicative dimension. Ellis (2003) emphasizes that authentic tasks—such as e-mails, notes, lists, reports, and descriptions of pictures—reflect real-world language use and thus serve communicative purposes. This implies that writing instruction should not be confined to mechanical drills or controlled composition; rather, it should engage learners in meaningful, contextualized, and purposeful written communication. The pedagogical significance of this shift cannot be overstated. When learners write for authentic purposes—to inform, to persuade, to narrate, or to describe—they are compelled to attend to their audience, to organize their ideas coherently, and to select language appropriate to the context. These are precisely the competencies that CLT seeks to develop.

A further consideration relates to the observation, reported by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), that students are often able to generate accurate structures and sentences in class but fail to apply them appropriately in real-life situations outside the classroom. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the transfer problem, highlights a fundamental limitation of decontextualized instruction. If writing tasks remain confined to the classroom and bear little resemblance to the writing demands of everyday life, learners are unlikely to develop the ability to communicate effectively through writing. In this regard, pictures emerge as a pedagogical device capable of bridging the gap between classroom instruction and authentic language use. By depicting scenes, situations, and events from real life, pictures provide a context within which written communication can occur naturally and meaningfully. They simulate the conditions of real-world writing without requiring learners to leave the classroom, thereby offering a practical solution to the transfer problem.

Moreover, the role of the teacher in CLT-oriented writing instruction deserves attention. Breen and Candlin (1980, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) characterize the teacher's role as that of a facilitator of the communication process between learners, various activities, and texts. This characterization implies that teachers should not dominate the classroom or prescribe every aspect of the writing task. Instead, they should create conditions in which learners can negotiate meaning, express their own ideas, and engage in genuine written interaction. The selection of appropriate techniques, media, and realistic tasks is therefore not a peripheral concern but a central responsibility of the communicative teacher. Pictures, as will be discussed in greater detail below, constitute one of the most versatile and accessible media available for this purpose.

The Role of Instructional Materials and Authentic Media

The second finding relates to the significance of instructional materials in language teaching. Richards and Rodgers (2002) assert that materials play a primary role in promoting communicative language use. This assertion reflects a broader shift in language pedagogy from an exclusive focus on methodology to a recognition of the decisive role played by materials in shaping classroom practice. Farhady and Delshad (2007) observe that in an era marked by the inadequacies of structuralist and cognitive methodologies in training communicatively competent learners, scholars' attention increasingly shifted from methodology to materials. This shift is significant because it acknowledges that even the most sophisticated methodology will fail if the materials employed do not support communicative objectives.

The literature reviewed suggests that textbooks alone are often insufficient to address all language skills, particularly writing, especially in EFL contexts such as Iran, where course books are centrally prescribed and may not fully meet learners' communicative needs (Kalbasi et al., 2018). This observation resonates with the broader critique of textbook-driven instruction, which tends to prioritize coverage of prescribed content over responsiveness to learners' actual needs and interests. In such contexts, teachers are expected to supplement official materials with ancillary resources, including visual media. This expectation places considerable demands on teachers, who must not only select appropriate supplementary materials but also integrate them effectively into their lessons.

Among the various types of supplementary materials, pictures are identified as authentic materials because they mirror real-life dimensions and are not produced solely for instructional purposes (Brinton et al., 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The concept of authenticity is central to the communicative approach, as it ensures that learners are exposed to language as it is actually used rather than to artificially simplified or contrived specimens. Authentic materials, according to Ahmed (2017), should contain characteristics such as providing language input, promoting skill development, exerting a positive impact, provoking thought, compensating for deficiencies in the learning setting, and giving confidence and security to learners. Pictures, particularly those drawn from real-life sources such as newspapers, magazines, and advertisements, satisfy these criteria to a considerable degree.

The classification of instructional media proposed by Brinton (2001) provides a useful framework for understanding the place of pictures within the broader array of teaching aids. Brinton distinguishes between technical media—such as radio, television, video, computers, and overhead projectors—and non-technical media, including printed pictures, mounted photos, whiteboards, flashcards, newspapers, and magazines. Technical media require electrical power and may be unavailable in many EFL contexts, whereas non-technical media are traditional, inexpensive, and within the reach of both teachers and students. Pictures fall squarely within the category of non-technical media, which explains their widespread use and enduring popularity in language classrooms around the world. Their accessibility makes them particularly valuable in resource-constrained settings where technological aids may be scarce or unreliable. Furthermore, the selection of instructional materials should be guided by principled criteria. Johns (1985) enumerates several principles for teaching materials, including authenticity, relevancy, and the exploitation of background knowledge. These principles are directly applicable to the selection of pictures for writing instruction. Authenticity ensures that the pictures reflect real-life situations and thus prepare learners for genuine communicative encounters. Relevancy ensures that the pictures are connected to learners' interests, experiences, and needs, thereby enhancing motivation and engagement. The exploitation of background knowledge ensures that learners can draw upon their existing knowledge and experiences when interpreting the pictures and generating written text. When these principles are observed, pictures can serve as powerful catalysts for meaningful written production.

The Pedagogical Functions of Pictures in Writing Instruction

The third and perhaps most central finding concerns the pedagogical contributions of pictures to writing instruction. The reviewed literature identifies a wide range of functions that pictures can perform in the writing classroom. These functions can be grouped into several categories: contextual, linguistic, motivational, and creative.

From a contextual perspective, pictures provide a shared experience for learners, thereby establishing a common referential framework that facilitates classroom interaction and writing activities (Raimes, 1983). This shared experience is particularly valuable in heterogeneous classrooms where learners come from diverse backgrounds and may have little in common. By directing all learners' attention to the same visual stimulus, pictures create a common ground upon which discussion and writing can proceed. Wright (2004) emphasizes that teachers should bring the outside world into the classroom, and pictures are an effective means of accomplishing this. They offer what Hill (1990) describes as images of reality within the artificial environment of the language classroom, thereby reducing the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use.

From a linguistic perspective, pictures supply a common lexicon and language forms that can serve as the basis for a range of writing tasks, from controlled composition to original genres such as reports and essays (Raimes, 1983). This function is particularly important for learners at lower proficiency levels, who may lack the vocabulary and structures needed to generate text independently. By providing a shared lexical and structural resource, pictures scaffold learners' writing and enable them to produce more elaborate and coherent texts than they could otherwise manage. At the same time, pictures do not dictate the content of learners' writing; they leave room for personal interpretation and expression, thereby striking a balance between support and freedom.

From a motivational perspective, pictures make language more real, alive, and interesting (Doff, 1988). They focus learners' attention on meaning rather than on form, thereby reducing anxiety and increasing engagement. This affective dimension of pictures is particularly relevant in writing instruction, which many learners find intimidating and stressful. The fear of making errors, the pressure to produce correct grammar and spelling, and the cognitive demands of organizing ideas can all inhibit learners' willingness to write. Pictures, by providing a concrete and engaging stimulus, can alleviate some of this anxiety and encourage learners to take risks and express themselves more freely. Clare (2017) emphasizes that learners should take ownership of their learning and that activities should be meaningful to them. Pictures, by connecting writing tasks to visual representations of real-life situations, can help achieve this sense of ownership and meaningfulness. From a creative perspective, pictures stimulate learners' imagination, enabling them to place themselves within the pictured environment and construct narratives based on their own experiences (Moore, 1982). This imaginative engagement transforms writing from a mechanical exercise into a creative act of self-expression. Byrne (1980) notes that pictures have the capacity to spur learners' interpretation of a topic, while Harmer (2007) observes that pictures offer a wealth of possibilities for writing tasks. Teachers may ask learners to describe a scene, to construct a story based on a series of related pictures, or to imagine themselves as participants in the depicted situation. Such tasks are inherently communicative because they require learners to convey meaning to an audience, and they are inherently creative because they invite learners to draw upon their own knowledge, experiences, and imaginations. The versatility of pictures as pedagogical tools is further enhanced by the variety of formats in which they can be presented. Scrivener (2011) notes that pictures can be presented through printed posters, flashcards, screen boards, or drawings on the board and in books. This flexibility means that teachers can adapt pictures to a wide range of instructional purposes and classroom conditions. Whether the goal is to introduce a new topic, to present new language, to

provide a stimulus for writing, or to assess learners' written production, pictures can be adapted to serve the purpose.

Psychological Foundations Supporting Pictorial Media

The fourth finding pertains to the psychological justification for using pictorial media. Three theoretical frameworks were identified in the literature, each of which offers a distinct but complementary perspective on why pictures are effective in language instruction. The first framework is the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) model. According to Harmer (2007), all students respond to various stimuli such as pictures, sounds, music, and movement, but some things stimulate them into learning more than others. NLP takes account of this by showing how some students are especially influenced by visual stimuli and are therefore likely to remember things better if they see them. Revell and Norman (1997) describe NLP as an attitude to life and a collection of techniques, patterns, and strategies for effective communication, personal growth, and learning. They propose four key principles: outcomes, rapport, sensory acuity, and flexibility. Richards and Rodgers (2001) note that NLP is not a method of language teaching but rather a humanistic philosophy based on popular psychology. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that if language teachers adopt and use the principles of NLP, they will become more effective teachers. From this perspective, pictures are valuable because they cater to the visual modality, which is dominant in many learners, and because they enhance sensory acuity by providing concrete, perceptible input.

The second framework is the theory of sensory preferences. Oxford (2001) classifies sensory preferences into four main types: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. These preferences refer to the physical, perceptual learning channels with which the learner feels most comfortable. Visual learners prefer to learn or acquire through visual stimulation, and for them, pictures are a natural and effective medium. Reid (1987) demonstrated that ESL students vary in their sensory preferences according to cultural background, with Asian students tending to be highly visual while students from Hispanic backgrounds were frequently auditory. This finding is particularly relevant in EFL contexts such as Iran, where learners may exhibit a strong visual orientation. By incorporating pictures into writing instruction, teachers can accommodate the visual preferences of a substantial proportion of their learners, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of instruction. The third and perhaps most compelling framework is the dual-coding hypothesis proposed by Paivio (1986). According to this hypothesis, verbal input is stored under a single code, whereas pictorial input is stored under two codes—visual and verbal—in separate locations in the brain. Dewan (2015) explains that pictures are effortless to recognize and process than words and are easier to recall. The dual-coding of pictures supports the idea that when we deal with pictorial contents, we have two independent access ways of visual memory. This has profound implications for writing instruction. When learners are presented with a picture, they not only perceive the visual image but also generate verbal labels, descriptions, and associations. Both the visual image and the verbal information are stored in memory, and either can later serve as a retrieval cue. As a result, learners are more likely to remember the vocabulary, structures, and ideas associated with the picture, and they are better able to access this information when composing written text. Taken together, these three frameworks offer robust psychological support for the integration of pictures into writing instruction. They suggest that pictures are not merely convenient or attractive additions to the classroom but are grounded in fundamental principles of human cognition and learning. By accommodating visual learning preferences, providing dual-coded input, and enhancing sensory engagement, pictures can facilitate the cognitive processes involved in writing, including idea generation, lexical retrieval, and text organization.

Implications for Classroom Practice

The findings of this review carry several pedagogical implications. First, language teachers should recognize that the selection of instructional media is not a peripheral concern but a central component of communicative teaching. As facilitators of the communication process (Breen & Candlin, 1980, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001), teachers are responsible for choosing materials that engage learners in meaningful and authentic language use rather than mechanical practice (Farhady & Delshad, 2007). This responsibility requires teachers to develop criteria for evaluating and selecting pictures, to consider the needs and preferences of their learners, and to integrate pictures purposefully into their lesson plans. Second, given the visual orientation of many learners, particularly in EFL contexts, pictures should be systematically incorporated into writing lessons at various stages—as a means of introducing a topic, presenting new language, or providing a stimulus for written production. Teachers should not regard pictures as mere decorations or time-fillers but as substantive pedagogical tools that can advance communicative objectives. This requires a shift in mindset from viewing pictures as supplementary to viewing them as integral to the writing curriculum. Third, teachers should select pictures that are authentic, relevant, and thought-provoking, in accordance with the principles of authenticity, relevancy, and exploitation of background knowledge (Johns, 1985). Pictures that are ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations may be particularly valuable because they invite learners to negotiate meaning and to express their own perspectives. However, teachers should also be sensitive to cultural considerations, ensuring that the pictures they select are appropriate for their learners' backgrounds and do not inadvertently cause offense or misunderstanding. Fourth, teachers should provide learners with opportunities to engage with pictures in interactive and collaborative ways. Writing need not be a solitary activity; learners can discuss pictures in pairs or groups, negotiate interpretations, and co-construct written texts. Such activities align with the communicative orientation of CLT and promote the development of both writing and speaking skills.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the literature provides strong theoretical and pedagogical support for the use of pictures in communicative writing instruction, several limitations should be acknowledged. Much of the existing evidence is theoretical or anecdotal rather than empirical. The reviewed sources include relatively few experimental or quasi-experimental studies that directly measure the effect of pictorial media on writing achievement in EFL contexts. Without such evidence, claims about the effectiveness of pictures remain plausible but not definitively established. Furthermore, the role of individual differences—such as learning styles, proficiency levels, and cultural background—has not been sufficiently investigated in relation to pictorial writing instruction. While the theory of sensory preferences suggests that visual learners may benefit most from pictures, empirical studies are needed to confirm this hypothesis and to identify the conditions under which pictures are most effective. Similarly, the interaction between pictorial media and other instructional variables, such as task type, feedback, and assessment, remains underexplored. Future research should therefore adopt empirical designs to examine the effectiveness of picture-based writing tasks, compare different types of pictorial media, and explore the moderating effects of learner variables. Longitudinal studies could investigate whether the benefits of pictorial instruction persist over time and transfer to other writing contexts. Qualitative studies could provide rich insights into learners' perceptions, strategies, and experiences when writing from pictures. Mixed-methods designs could combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the reviewed literature indicates that pictures constitute a valuable and psychologically grounded medium for teaching writing within the communicative approach. They provide authentic contexts, stimulate imagination, supply shared lexical and structural resources, accommodate visual learning preferences, and enhance memory through dual coding. When selected and employed judiciously by teachers, pictures can transform writing instruction from a mechanical exercise into a meaningful, communicative, and engaging activity. However, further empirical research is needed to substantiate these theoretical claims and to identify the conditions under which pictorial media are most effective in EFL writing classrooms. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, such research can inform the development of evidence-based pedagogical practices that harness the full potential of pictures for the benefit of language learners.

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