My Album: An Assignment Using Photographs and Writing for Language Learning

「マイ・アルバム」：語学学習のための写真と文章を使った課題

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Abstract

University students learning English as a foreign language were assigned a final project called "My Album," which involved assembling a page using photographs that the students had taken and writing short paragraphs to accompany the images. The goal was to have students present narratives that were both visual and verbal in a manner similar to the show-and-tell assignments of an American classroom except that the verbal component would be written instead of spoken. The purpose of the assignment was to encourage a more spontaneous form of language communication and produce discussions based on subject matter that was of real interest to the students. Overall, the results showed a high level of enthusiasm among the students, judging by the wide variety of subjects the students chose to present and the degree to which the written narratives went beyond a simple description of the items in the pictures. At the same time, the feedback process on the part of the instructor was very efficient because the visual matter served as readily available data against which to check the written elements. In this paper the terms "project" and "assignment" are used interchangeably when pertaining to the name "My Album," as are "students" and "learners" when pertaining to the 2nd-year students whose work is the subject of this paper.

1. Introduction

Visual information plays an important role in the early stages of language acquisition. For example, when children learn language through instruction or various media such as books, television, or computer programs, visual elements are prominent. It is a common sight to see parents and teachers point out an object to
a child as they iterate the matching word, and a look through books in the children’s section of a library or bookstore attests that storybooks are replete with visual images, while TV programs that focus on basic learning and language such as Sesame Street illustrate ideas and concepts using pictorial aids and visual scenarios.

In learning a foreign language, visual strategies are also liberally used to support verbal meaning. Textbooks on English as a foreign language (EFL) typically contain many photographs and illustrations and several provide picture cards or other visual components for teachers and learners. The textbooks that this instructor uses for language teaching at this university have always featured pages of photographs and illustrations, since these are mainly the kinds of textbooks that are available. The pictures in these textbooks serve as useful implements for classroom speaking practice, for in many of the exercises students look at pictures representing the expressions they learned and they are prompted to recall and utter those words from memory since the words do not appear with the pictures. For example the student might say, “They are listening to music” upon seeing a picture of people doing such, and this is a more active form of communication compared to passively reading a sentence that might be written in place of or next to the pictures, because the exercise impels the student to remember the language. There is also more flexibility in the choice of words that can be used; for example, another student who sees the picture might say, “Three friends are listening to music,” and such a statement would also be correct. Therefore, it can be concluded that in language learning, visual prompts are useful for stimulating learners into recalling and using the language that they learned when there is an absence of written words, and they promote a degree of flexibility, or spontaneity, in speaking.

Another known technique for reinforcing language is writing. Language classes incorporate homework assignments in which students put the new language they learned into words and prose. Students are also encouraged to take notes as they study so they can review them for a test or keep a record of what they learned. An exercise that this instructor frequently employs as part of the lesson is having students write sentences using the grammar that was recently covered so that it

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1 The foreign language textbooks including EFL textbooks are those offered by major international publishers such as Cengage Learning, Oxford University Press, and Pearson Longman, to name a few. Textbook catalogs from these publishers for 2011 show a wide selection of books that contain many photographs and illustrations.
can become instilled in the students’ minds, and also so the instructor can check whether or not the students understand it.

The idea of having students incorporate visual elements into a written assignment was based on an awareness that pictures can be an effective tool for language learning and that they can promote spontaneous forms of communication. The purpose for using photographs that the students had taken was to make the assignment fun and unique for each student, and also so the instructor could have an immediate reference against which to check the written narratives. Thus the My Album project was created.

2. The Students, Course, and Background

The My Album assignment was given to 2nd-year students enrolled in a required foreign language course called English Communication at this university. The students were learners at a high-beginner level and had taken English courses in high school, with most beginning their English studies in middle school. The My Album assignment was given in the spring semester of 2009 to 68 students, and it was also given in the spring semester of 2010 to 63 students. Examples of students’ work that follow are from 2nd-year students’ projects in 2009 and 2010.

A factor that clearly worked to the advantage of the project’s implementation was the students’ familiarity with photographs and other visual imagery. In 2008, this instructor researched students’ cell phone usage after noticing an increasing presence of cell phones in the classroom and the complexity such devices. Those results are reported in an earlier article in the University’s Bulletin (2009). Among the findings was that students frequently used the camera function of their cell phones; in fact, the camera function was used more frequently than the telephone function. In the assignment, students were free to use photographs taken with cameras or even draw their own pictures if they desired, but the fact that students were overall quite familiar with cell phone photographs was an incentive for this instructor to try such a project.

Technology to support user-generated photographs was also readily accessible and could be used to make paper prints for this assignment at a small cost. Students could print their photographs from a computer and printer or use a multifunctional photocopier at any number of outlets such as a convenience store includ-
ing the one on campus.

3. Contents of the Assignment

The My Album assignment was given halfway into the spring semester and students had four weeks to complete it. The assignment and a final exam were the basis for evaluating the students’ performance for the semester. The exam focused on the technical aspects of English communication such as vocabulary and grammar, whereas the My Album project focused on the communicative aspects of English. In this assignment, students were not evaluated as much on language technicalities such as syntax and grammar as they were on the efficacy of their words and how they related to the images.

The students assembled their albums on an A4-size handout ("print") containing four 7x5 cm frames inside which the pictures had to be attached and wrote a paragraph of about 30 words to accompany each of the photographs. The images had to be photographs taken by the student, but if the student could not readily produce a photograph, a substitute would work, such as a photocopy of a ticket stub to a memorable event or a favorite CD album cover. In a few cases students drew pictures to represent their subjects of interest and no points were deducted in the evaluation, provided that the image contained a similar level of narrative representation as a photograph. An additional print explained how to do the assignment with step-by-step directions and the criteria for evaluation, and another print contained instructions for printing cell phone photographs on paper so they could fit inside the frames on the My Album prints.

4. Shorter Writings Lead to Concise Thinking

The instructor wanted to have learners increase their ability for verbal spontaneity and reduce a tendency for overly formal or stilted prose. It was felt that if students had to write shorter lengths of prose, they would choose words more carefully and the temptation to add superfluous expressions would be eliminated. Furthermore, if learners could add an element over which they had control, such as their own photographs, then that would provide a basis for more thoughtful introspection and an opportunity to explore new vocabulary.
As a point of comparison, in the past the instructor had given 100-150 word essay assignments that were related to a subject of interest to the students. In many of the assignments, the language lost its spontaneous quality, which was attributable to situations that an assignment requiring 100 to 150 words might invite, such as straying from the theme, using cliches to fill up the required word count, inconsistent verb tenses throughout the same essay, and in some instances, borrowing passages from other sources. It was believed that an assignment divided into four shorter topics that were of interest to each student could be given to avoid these problems. Photographs had to be used and would be considered just as important as the written component, and the word count for each image was limited to around 30 words. Although the overall word count was basically the same as a 100 to 150-word essay, the four shorter topics would allow for language that was more carefully thought out and less verbose compared to an assignment with a single theme.

5. Candid Photographs Inspire Candid Explanations

Nearly all images for the My Album assignment were candid snapshots that possessed a temporal quality indicating the time of day or season, the weather, the environment, a circumstance, a point in time in the student’s life, or another detail that lent support to a sentiment that the student wanted to convey. Such a quality is favorable to story telling. A photograph on a cell phone or camera can prompt a discussion because of the photographer’s personal attachment and a desire to tell the story related to it. In the context of language, the photographs taken by the students inspired a wider variety of manners of speech than a traditional essay would have. In the My Album assignment, writers adopted a more intimate tone of voice with the reader and their narratives reflected the use of different verb tenses (past, continuous, future, and conditional), or they expressed certain desires or ended sentences with exclamation points or question marks. This written style contrasts with that of the more traditional essay, which tends to stick with one verb tense and usually avoids a degree of intimacy with the reader for the purposes of objectivity.
6. Photographs Offer Tangible Points of Reference for Discussion

An immediate advantage to the incorporation of photographs in a language assignment is that the images offer tangible points of reference to the written narrative. The writer can choose to explain the elements in the photograph directly or use them as a point of departure to talk about ideas related to those elements. When students have a personal connection to the images, they are familiar with the details and can begin to talk about them with less hesitation than they might have if required to talk about an unfamiliar photograph.

All of the photographs, regardless of physical clarity or aesthetic composition, contained visual matter that was discernable and that could readily be described in words by the producers of those images. The visual elements acted as evidence to support the verbal statements, which simplified the instructor’s role as an evaluator since time-consuming activities such as guesswork or fact-checking could potentially be eliminated. The project turned out to be highly efficient from a standpoint of evaluation and correction because the assignments incorporated data that the written portions could be immediately checked against.

7. Results – Visual Matter Supports Language Learning Regardless of the Learner’s Level

The My Album assignment showed a high degree of interest among the students regardless of their language level. As it turned out, some students put more effort into this project than studying for the exam, in likelihood because this assignment had learners use their creative and improvisational skills, and that represented an interesting and engaging way to study a foreign language. The disparity in the results of the assignment and the results of the exam was revealed by those students’ exam scores: in some cases it was not uncommon for a student to receive a high grade on the My Album assignment but a barely passing grade on the exam. A breakdown of grades for comparison is as follows: in 2009, 23 percent of the students were graded A−, B+, or B on the My Album assignment but C− or lower on the final exam, and in 2010, 15 percent of the students were graded in these
respective categories. The project therefore indicated a suitability for learners of all levels in the same class because they were able to express themselves with the language proficiency they had, and the motivation to communicate was not held back when the topic was interesting and relevant to them.

Most of the pictures and descriptions were about the students’ everyday lives. They included pets, friends, celebrations, scenes from students’ apartments or school-related activities, possessions that had special meaning, the students’ means of transport such as a car or motorcycle or bicycle, an excursion, nature, meals or a special dish, and hobbies. Many pictures and descriptions were also of technological or electronic devices such as computers, portable electronic music players, video game devices, a blog, an electronic dictionary, cameras, and cell phones, indicating the degree to which these devices related to communication or entertainment were a part of the students’ lives. As mentioned earlier, the narratives were written in a wide range of linguistic styles that included the use of different verb tenses or manners of speaking. Excerpts from students’ narratives include:

- I lined up on the stairs in front of the graduation ceremony and took the last photograph of me in a uniform.
- I will go to America for this summer vacation with my friend.
- I’d like to stop smoking, but it is difficult!
- Now, this brings back old memories. [Said of a picture from high school.]
- He is my elder brother who is five years older than me. He is always complaining about something or other.
- I’m working out a jigsaw puzzle now. I have trouble with pieces of the background.
- Fireworks are flowers of fire in summertime. The night sky of summer in Japan is enlivened.
- I do not experience summer vacation, because as a part-timer, I am busy.
- When I cooked eggs, I found this. It was twin egg yolks.
- How pretty this pancake is!
- They are my friends. I made friends with them at the university.
- Do you think he looks like a small Totoro? [Totoro is an animated cartoon character.]
- I was able to see the soccer match and it was exciting to the last minute.
Thank you Japan!

- We are very good friends. Even if we become grandmothers, I want to be friends all the way.

The pictures brought out the writers’ memories and emotions, and the desire to convey such sentimental feelings was apparent. Learners were motivated to use a dictionary for words and expressions that were not covered in any of the lessons, as seen in the following examples:

- They are called “monster sunflowers.”
- I went to gather edible wild plants in the mountains.
- I saw a lot of fireflies. They were very beautiful and dreamy.
- I think it isn’t a stray dog because there is a collar around his neck.
- I can’t understand the meaning of those complicated poles. They may be avant-garde art.
- I watch an animated cartoon called Full Metal Panic. The chief character is working as a hired soldier in a battlefield and he guards a female high school student.
- He plays the drums. His performance is very attractive and aggressive.
- I am working at a wedding hall. This woman is a customer. The woman who puts on a kimono is very beautiful.
- I possess an educated ear for classical music.
- I’m enjoying importing a lot of music and movies into my iPod.

Although the total word count of the My Album assignment was basically the same as the word count of the single theme essay assignments that were previously given in this course, the results of the My Album assignment demonstrated a much more effective use of the students’ and instructor’s time for the purpose of language learning when the students are at a beginning level. When students have greater control over what they can write about—or tell (as in show-and-tell), and when an assignment allows multiple themes with shorter word counts, a certain spontaneity and brevity of expression results: the teller gets to the point more quickly, the reader is less likely to become bored with superfluous details, and the use of photographic images supports the narrative and helps to eliminate ambiguity.
8. Conclusion

Part of the challenge to written assignments is thinking about a subject to write about, and the process takes time away from actually working on the assignment itself. Even when guidelines are set — for example the instructor might say “Please write about your hobby or something that you are interested in” — the student might consider several possible themes but remain undecided until left with a minimal amount of time with which to satisfactorily complete the assignment. The My Album project reduced the time that might have been spent with such indecision, and it reduced the likelihood that a student would undertake the project at the last minute because it involved timely although not complicated steps in order to produce the required images.

Overall, the students had a wellspring of photographic images stored on their cell phones and digital cameras, so choosing and producing images to show and tell did not impose an unreasonable demand. Because subject matter was so readily available, students had more time to focus on how to discuss the subjects instead of wondering what subjects to write about. In this way the My Album project was successful because it made more productive use of the students’ time, which in turn led to higher quality assignments for the instructor to evaluate.

It may be said that a project like this owes its success to the fact that the learners were very familiar with the technology that had to be used to complete the assignment. The learners’ familiarity reflected an environment in which cell phones were nearly standard accessories², however those who didn’t use them used cameras or drew pictures. Furthermore, depictions of computers, MP3 players, smart phones and other electronic devices revealed that the learners were very comfortable with complex technological devices that serve as aids to communication: 21 out of 131 assignments in 2009 and 2010 combined had narratives about such devices. Had the environment been one in which people had little interaction with technological devices, then the requirement of photographic images for an assignment such as this would have been unreasonable.

² Figures for cell phone subscribers stood at 116,399,500 in Japan as of November 2010. In a country with a population of 127.5 million, this figure indicates a subscription rate for 91 percent of the population.
Another consideration was maintaining an even balance between the attention devoted to the visual and written requirements of the assignment. When learners are asked to incorporate visual elements into a written assignment for a class that focuses on language communication, there is the risk that some learners may become too focused on the visual task, because that may be fun and less arduous than the effort needed to adequately fulfill the language requirement. There may also be the temptation for a learner to believe that a greater amount of time spent on the visual requirement would compensate for less time devoted to the written part. Students whose language level is lower than the class average might be vulnerable to this pattern; at the same time students at a higher level may also succumb to this temptation and choose to write a quick description, treating it as an easy assignment. Both cases become apparent when there is a well-presented picture but the matching narrative does not reflect a level of introspection beyond a simplistic physical description of the subject in the photographs, nor does it make use of new vocabulary. Therefore the evaluation criteria should include whether or not the learner has explored new vocabulary (such as vocabulary not covered in lessons), and whether the narrative reflects introspection that goes beyond a basic physical description of the items shown or the fact that the learner simply likes the subject in the picture. Weak narratives can be avoided by demonstrating examples of effective and introspective writing and encouraging first drafts. Allowing time in class to look at the written drafts and check the progress of the project week by week is also helpful.

The My Album project was effective for having learners create natural and spontaneous discussions through writing. As a communicative strategy, learners were able to quickly get to the task of using and exploring the elements of their study, which are words and expressions, with the incorporation of visual matter. The incorporation of visual matter also supported the instructor’s role because the immediate availability of data against which to check the students’ work made the evaluative process easier. There is reason to believe that this strategy could be applied to other disciplines, not just language learning, when students are in the early stages of their particular discipline and clear communication of tangible subjects is an essential component of the learning and feedback process.
Examples of Students’ Work in the My Album Project

Photographs, pictures and accompanying narratives are samples from the My Album project by students in 2009 and 2010.
(1) This is a swing set from 1989. I played in the swing with my little brother 15 years ago. My little sister plays in the swing now.

(2) I work part-time at a home center. I’ve been working here for four years. I get tired of the busy daily life, because we have become less prosperous since a new supermarket opened in the neighborhood.

(3) In Japan people believe that there are rabbits on the moon. I tried to find the rabbits. Of course there weren’t any rabbits. But the moon was shining brightly.

(4) Kuromi gave birth on June 17. Three tortoiseshell kittens and one like a cow. Their names are Tama, Mike, Buchi, and Kuro. Kuro is the only male. The kittens are living in my closet now.

(5) It becomes warm day by day in the spring. And at that time the cherry blossoms come into bloom. The blossoms are a beautiful pink. I graduated on a day when the cherry blossoms were in bloom. And I entered college. In the four seasons, the trees change and people change their appearance. I love the four seasons.

(6) It’s my electronic dictionary. I got this dictionary from my uncle eight years ago. I used it all this while. I always use it for my English class. It’s useful very much.
(7) This scene is the autumn festival in my hometown. Last year, I took part in it with my friends. It was very fun. I’ll definitely participate in it again this year. I’ll perform in September. I’m looking forward to the festival!

(8) This photograph is of my website and blog. I upload short stories and a diary. I’m glad that I get impressions from visitors to my website.

(9) This cake is what my friend made me for my birthday. My friend suddenly came to my house on the day of my birthday. They came to celebrate my birthday. I was very happy.

(10) One year has already passed since I acquired the license to drive a car. My driving became better now than last year. In summer vacation, I want to drive to some far-off place.

(11) I like cycling. I like riding and I like looking. It is pleasant that I can do cycling while watching the scenery by bicycle more than I can if I move by car. I am tired for a long time when I go cycling.

(12) I like to draw pictures. Landscapes and characters are my favorite to draw. I also like oil painting. I like to be able to draw freely. Only when my feelings arise, I draw. I have been praised by my teachers for the pictures I have drawn in the past.
References

Catalogs from educational textbook publishers for the year 2011, including: Cengage Learning, Japan ELT Catalog 2011; Oxford 2011, Oxford University Press ELT Catalogue; and Pearson Longman English Language Teaching Catalog 2011.
