

A Qualitative Study on Teaching Visual Texts by Using Reciprocal Teaching Approach in a Virtual General English Course During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Nargess Hekmati^{1*}, PhD 

¹Department of General Courses, School of Medicine, Birjand University of Medical Sciences, Birjand, Iran

ABSTRACT

Background: During the Covid-19 pandemic, teaching and learning have taken a detour, and the unexpected shift from face-to-face to virtual learning has made instructors and learners think about new methods for more effective virtual instruction. The present study aimed at examining a new method for enriching the medical students' understanding of visual texts through applying Reciprocal Teaching (RT) strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods: The study had a qualitative action-research design. The participants of the study were 54 medical students enrolled in an online General English course at Birjand University of Medical Sciences during the Fall semester of 2020. The class was held twice a week for 24 sessions. The strategies of RT were integrated into watching films that were used as teaching materials (visual texts). The researcher used semi-structured interviews and field notes and also recorded the class sessions for data collection. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results: The results showed that the students found using RT strategies advantageous in the understanding of films and in improving their language proficiency. They reconceptualized the importance of their film-watching habit, and revalued the importance of films for language learning, and considered them as textbooks that could be divided into different sections such as introduction, body, and conclusion. In addition, they discussed different sections of the films with peers and wrote summaries about them which improved both their language proficiency and their knowledge about medical terminologies.

Conclusion: The findings of this study showed that applying RT strategies in virtual classes can be advantageous in helping medical students recognize the importance of films and use them as reliable sources for language learning. Therefore, as today's students are called 'digital natives', it is suggested that the RT strategies and the new modes of instruction be integrated into teaching medical students.

Keywords: English language learning, Students, Medical, Education, Distance, Reciprocal teaching, Teaching, Visual texts

*Corresponding author:

Nargess Hekmati, PhD;
Department of General
Courses, School of Medicine,
Birjand University of Medical
Sciences, Postal code: 97178-
53577, Birjand, Iran
Tel: +98 56 32381501
Fax: +98 56 32433004
Email: nargess.hekmati@
gmail.com

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Introduction

Because of its tremendous advantages, virtual education has been developing so fast across the world especially in the recent decade. The outbreak of Covid-19 has also added to the importance of virtual learning. As the Covid-19 pandemic has spread across the world, many schools, universities, and educational centers were forced to shift to online education because of the risk that the educational gatherings can provide for the spread of the virus (1).

Despite the huge advantages of online education and its ever-growing momentum in the education arenas in today's world, it has encountered instructors with some concerns such as how to improve students' engagement, how to evaluate their performance, and ultimately how to help them to learn the input more effectively. Therefore, language instructors should apply more innovative teaching methods and use multimodal learning materials to help students improve their language learning. One way that can be helpful in this regard is using audio-visual materials in the class, and teaching students how to use them to learn the language more effectively. Hopefully, as today's students are 'digital natives' (2), they know how to work with various technological tools and use multiple mode of learning more effectively.

The shift to virtual education has hugely influenced the approach and methods for teaching different language skills and components. For medical students in the Iranian context, the ability to read and understand medical texts is more important than other language skills, because students always need this skill in different stages of their studies (3). As reading is a mental process that needs interactive cognitive processes in mind, readers need to activate different sources of knowledge (including knowledge of language components and the topic) to be able to understand a text (4).

In 1984, Palincsar and Brown (5) introduced 'Reciprocal Teaching' (RT) which includes four strategies of predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing.

This theory is related to "Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, proleptic teaching, and expert scaffolding" (6). This approach helps the students to be more competent and autonomous in language learning. According to Koda (7), applying these strategies can reduce learners' deficiencies and improve learners' critical thinking. Myers (8) believes that RT enables learners to have a purpose in reading and self-observe their own progress. RT is basically and mainly done on written texts (5). However, according to Werner (9), the students' life is saturated with visual stimuli, and in this environment, visual media is not just a medium for learning, rather it is itself a subject matter that should be treated in a new way. Based on this idea, textbooks should also be based on learners' visual needs. Similarly, Werner (9) maintains that it is very important for today's learners to be able to read imagery in various ways.

It is noted by Arnold (10) that thinking is tightly related to images and images can facilitate learning a language. He further maintains that the use of images or visual texts in the classrooms can improve creativity and 'empower' students to learn more effectively. Movies are considered as the visual form of written language and they can help learners to understand complicated texts with the help of pictures (11). Hobbs (12) maintains that teachers try to enrich their classrooms with different teaching materials such as media and films. He further believes that to benefit from movies and films in the class, it is important that teachers become literate in using the media and their instructional use.

Accordingly, considering films as visual texts in teaching the English language to medical students is a new area that has not been explored in the Iranian context. As students have problems comprehending the movies in another language, this study aimed to examine if applying the four strategies in the RT approach; namely predicting, clarifying, questioning, and summarizing can be beneficial for the medical students' understanding of visual texts. Therefore, the following question guides this study:

To what extent can applying the four strategies of RT help medical students to learn visual texts during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Methods

Study Design

The study was nested within a qualitative action-research design. Considering the potential benefits of using films as visual texts in teaching English to medical students, and the problems that the students had in understating the films, the researcher tried to adopt an action-research design by implementing the RT approach to help the students understand films and use them to improve their language proficiency.

Having established the action research design for the present study, the researcher collected data through the analysis of online class records, field notes, class assignments, and students' interviews and comments. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis, and the themes were extracted.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Birjand University of Medical Sciences (BUMS). The population of this study was the medical students at BUMS, among them one class consisting of 54 freshmen (23 males and 31 females) medical students were selected. Based on the formulated research question in this study, the inclusion criteria were identified as the following: recruiting all medical students who registered in the General English Course at BUMS during the Fall semester of 2020. However, those with extended leave of absence during the study were excluded. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling because this was the only class that the researcher had to run the study. All of the students registered in a General English Language Course at BUMS, and their written consent for participation in the study was granted.

Data Collection Tool

At the beginning of the course, semi-structured written interviews were conducted

with 54 students to examine their perception about the role of watching films in language learning, the potential advantages and disadvantages of integrating films in teaching the General English Course to medical students, and the strategies that can be used to help students understand the language of films more effectively. After the treatment and at the end of the semester, oral interviews were conducted with 26 students to examine their ideas about the effectiveness of implementing RT strategies in understanding films, and the way that watching films could help them improve their language learning. The interviews were conducted in Adobe Connect Software. The duration for each interview was around ten minutes.

To check the validity of the data, first, the transcribed data were analyzed by the author and two outside researchers. Then, emerging themes were discussed and the final themes were agreed upon. The inter-coder reliability was estimated as 0.82. Finally, the extracted themes were returned to the interviewees for validation.

Method of Approach

The class was held online through Adobe Connect Software for 24 sessions, twice a week during the Fall semester of 2020. In this general English course, in addition to reading the written texts, the students were asked to watch educational films/speeches in the English language about medical sciences. The RT model was used in this class to support the learners in comprehending the pictorial texts.

The course materials included a variety of medical films such as documentaries, speeches, and movies related to the students' major. At first, the students were taught how to watch films and to pay attention to specific parts more, that is, to look at films as texts with introduction, body, and conclusion. Then, they were taught to make meaning out of the pictures. It means that they were asked to look at the pictures and try to read the pictures in mind and check their understanding of the language. However, they were not supposed to analyze the films

completely at this stage; instead, they were asked to draw webs (concept maps) and write summaries.

Later, when they had more knowledge about watching movies, they needed to move forward and watch them more carefully. Therefore, the RT strategies were used to help the students clarify their meaning and enable them to talk about the films more than just giving a summary. Knowing the fact that RT helps the students to understand written texts more deeply, the researcher decided to implement its strategies in watching movies to enhance the students' understanding of the visual texts.

Besides applying the RT strategies, a comprehensive worksheet for working on films was given to the students. As the worksheet was organized in different parts, the students knew exactly what they had to do in each part. In fact, it reviewed the films for

the students and asked them to reflect more on the issues raised in the films. They were asked to think about the topic, the content, and the information presented in the films one by one. As shown in Table 1, the items in the worksheet were in line with the RT strategies that encouraged students to reflect on the issues mentioned in the film.

After answering these questions, the class entered a discussion time. The discussions were recorded in Adobe Connect for further analysis. Table 2 includes further information about the class procedure.

The recorded class sessions, field notes, and the students' semi-structured interviews were the sources of data in the present study. Method-triangulation, meaning the use of all the aforementioned methods for data collection, was used for data validation. The semi-structured interviews seeking the students' perception of the experience were

Table 1: The worksheet including the information elicited from the films/speeches

Questions	Answers
1. Title of the film/speech	
2. Dates, places, names in the film/talk	
3. Main themes of the film/talk	
4. Words and adjectives to describe the film/talk theme	
5. Two points that encourage the audience to follow the film/talk	
6. Two specific points you learned from this film	
7. Two questions that you have from the director/main character/or the speech presenter	
8. Two suggestions for making the film/talk more effective	
9. The group(s) of people who would like to listen/watch this talk/ film	
10. A summary of the talk/ film	

Table 2: The four classroom procedures based on reciprocal teaching strategies

RT* elements	Definition	The class procedure based on RT
Predicting	Prediction happens when learners try to predict the topic of the text by activating their background knowledge.	Writing some related words on the board by the teacher to help students activate their background knowledge. Helping the students to guess and predict the topic
Questioning	Generating questions helps the students to concentrate on important issues	Asking <i>what, who, why, when, and where</i> questions, and searching for the answers while watching the films/speeches
Clarifying	Clarifying the misunderstood concepts and ideas helps the learners to check their understanding of the main points.	Dividing the films/speeches into different sections, and working on meanings in different parts
Summarizing	Summarization is the gathering of the main issues in a text.	Summarizing the main points of the whole visual text and reviewing them.

*RT: Reciprocal Teaching

conducted with all of the students before and after the experience. The interview data were transcribed and the related themes regarding the four elements of RT were induced based on thematic analysis.

Results

In this action research study, the researcher analyzed the recorded sessions in Adobe Connect and used field notes to find students' development during the course. The participants of the study included 54 medical students (23 males and 31 females). Semi-structured written interviews were conducted with 54 students to check their perception of the potential benefits of watching films in language learning at the beginning of the course. After the treatment, oral interviews were conducted with 26 students in Adobe Connect Software. What follow are some themes and the related excerpts of the students' comments:

Reflecting on the past experiences:

The students did not dive into deciphering meanings or summarizing the films before the course as mentioned in the following excerpts:

When I watch movies I write down the new words. [...] I don't know the other uses of the film for language learning.

I think we can improve our speaking by watching films. I watch films and learn new words [...]. Sometimes I repeat the words and sentences by myself.

After eliciting the students' ideas about watching films and language learning, the researcher had a clearer picture of what and how to work on films. Based on the ideas and opinions of the students about watching films, it became clear that students did not know how to watch films and get deeper meaning out of them. Therefore, implementing the strategies of RT for inferring meaning out of films and coming to a thorough understanding of language accompanied with pictures was beneficial for the students.

At the end of the course, the students' ideas about the class were collected. The following themes and the related excerpts

were mentioned by the students:

Relearning the importance of films:

The students found out that working on films could not only help them to improve their language skills, but also it could familiarize them with some key concepts and information about their major:

Films were like a textbook full of information. We learned many things about the language and our field of study from the films.

You divided the films into different parts and asked us to focus on them. By applying this approach, I understood most of the parts. At first, it was difficult, but gradually it was like reading a storybook with pictures.

The documentary about the craniopagus twins was very interesting. Because we do not go to the hospital for the first semesters of our studies, these films really helped us to know about the hospital and sickness. Also, we could improve our language proficiency.

It was a good class. Especially because we watched a lot of films and worked on them. The good point was working deeply on films [...].

Re-conceptualizing the film-watching habit:

Finding the films as a textbook full of information was very fruitful for the students. Working on the films and doing the homework encouraged them to think more deeply about learning through films:

Working on the films really helped us improve our language proficiency. We did not watch them haphazardly. I watched them again in the dormitory with my friends and tried to copy what you (the teacher) did in the class.

The students mentioned that having a plan for watching films was very helpful. They even watched the films again and tried to work on them once more. The teacher's modeling and instructions were helpful for students to continue working on the films even outside the class, as mentioned by one of the students:

After watching the film, I watched it again at home. I even searched to find the transcripts of the dialogues of some films to learn the

new words. While watching, I sometimes paused to repeat the correct pronunciation of the new words.

Revaluing the films:

Working on the films encouraged the students to work more on the topic and do not leave the ground. The procedure undertaken to work on documentaries and speeches were fruitful for students as mentioned below:

The way that we worked on movies was very helpful. Because we worked on all parts of the movies, there was no unknown point, and it was like a book that we should go through and read all of it.

We learned how to watch films correctly. Now I know better how to watch films and how to look for important information in them.

Going through the comments, it became clear that the students liked the way they worked on movies. Considering the authentic films/speeches as textbooks with introduction, body, and conclusion encouraged them to search more about the film outside the class.

Generally, the results of the interviews indicated that the students had a very superficial understanding of the contribution that visual texts (films) can have in the process of language learning. They referred to the benefits of watching films in learning new words or improving their pronunciation, but they did not know that they can use the films as texts and divide them into different sections such as introduction, body, and conclusion, and discuss them with peers and write a summary about them.

Through this experience, it became clear that the strategies of RT paved the way for a deeper understanding of the visual texts, and learners found a framework for how to watch movies and connect it with language learning. Before this experience, the students mentioned that they just learned new words and tried to improve their pronunciation by watching movies. They did not know how to use movies for learning the language more efficiently. However, the novel use of RT strategies gave the students the power to predict the theme and topic of the films,

divide it into different parts, question their understanding, clarify the misunderstood parts, and finally summarize the whole text in a stepwise manner. Going through all of these steps could help them to not only improve their language proficiency but also boost their knowledge about their field of study.

Discussion

This study focused on the educational use of integrating films (visual texts) in the language classrooms by using the strategies of RT to help the medical students improve their language proficiency. The students were interviewed to know about their perception of the effectiveness of the applied approach. The findings indicated that the participants had a positive attitude towards integrating films in language classes by the use of RT strategies. They considered the films as effective teaching materials, and divided them into different parts, and worked on them with their peers. They could both improve their language proficiency and learn some terminologies about their field since the films were about medical issues.

Working on films can be a more influential tool for language learning if their contents are related to the students' fields of study. As the students were studying medicine, they needed to be more acquainted with the language of the field, therefore, authentic materials like films and documentaries about medical sciences were good sources of learning in the class. Based on the students' comments, the findings showed that before the experience, students watched movies for learning new words and practicing pronunciation. After giving instruction to them and working on written texts, they learned how to approach a visual text and improve the other language skills as well. This is in line with what Ausburn and Ausburn (13) mentioned that if learners become visually literate, they would be more competent in understanding a subject matter.

In addition, after this experiment, the students reconceptualized their film-watching practice and revalued the importance of

films in language learning. For example, they learned how to divide the films into different parts such as introduction, body, and conclusion, and discuss the different parts with peers in the class, and write summaries about them. This is in line with Arnold's (10), Kasper's (11) and Hobbs' (12) ideas maintaining that the use of visual input in the classroom can enrich the language class by improving students' creativity and helping them to learn the language more effectively.

Overall, the results indicated that the students believed that working on films based on the RT strategies in this online English language class could be very beneficial as they considered movies as textbooks that could be worked on piece by piece. Although some previous studies indicated the benefits of using audiovisual materials in in-person language classes (14), the findings of this study confirmed their benefits in virtual classes too.

The study tried to shed light on the effect of integrating films based on RT strategies on the students' language learning. The finding indicated that it can help students learn the language more effectively. As holding general English courses virtually in Iranian medical universities is rather new, it is hoped that other researchers continue this line of research to explore the other educational benefits of integrating films and applying the principles of RT in online and in-person language classes. Furthermore, considering that some university instructors are not very skillful in teaching online classes (15) in spite of its widespread use and potential advantages (16-18) in students' learning, it is recommended that more studies be done in this regard to encourage instructors to apply more innovative approaches in these classes.

Limitations and Suggestions

In this study, the participants were not selected randomly, and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts. In addition, as the study was conducted virtually, during the first sessions, it was difficult for the students to adapt to the new online

teaching platform. Also, some of the students had problems with the internet connection during some of the sessions and they needed to listen to the recorded files. Therefore, it is suggested that this study be replicated in other contexts with a larger sample size. In addition, exploring the extent that using authentic audio-visual materials can improve medical students' learning in other courses is another area that the future researchers can address.

Conclusion

In order to mitigate some of the shortcomings of online classes, teachers should apply some innovative methods to improve their teaching effectiveness and students' achievement. The findings of this study showed that the students found watching films based on RT strategies very advantageous not only for learning the English language but also for learning medical terminologies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Vice-Chancellor for Research and Technology and Ethics Committee of Birjand University of Medical Sciences (Ethics code: IR.BUMS.REC.1400.071).

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