

VTS: FROM THE MUSEUM INTO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Les stratégies de pensée visuelle (VTS) sont une technique basée sur les musées avec un potentiel prometteur pour le développement de la langue des apprenants d'anglais (EL) et l'apprentissage du contenu. Les éducateurs des musées et des écoles ont adapté avec enthousiasme le VTS à leurs répertoires pédagogiques afin de renforcer l'appréciation esthétique, le développement de la littératie, la pensée critique, l'apprentissage des langues et l'apprentissage du contenu des élèves. Dans cet article, les auteurs présentent une vignette d'une classe de lycée pour illustrer le puissant potentiel du VTS pour une utilisation en classe avec des apprenants linguistiquement divers. L'article examine également comment les enseignants de langues peuvent modifier les VTS typiques pour étayer de manière constructive l'apprentissage des EL.

● Tom Meyer
| SUNY New Paltz,
Beth Clark-Gareca
| Binghamton University

Introduction

Art museums are *visual places*. Visitors and learners venture with expectations to see art; perhaps they will come to appreciate an artist's perspective on the world or the artist's craft, whether the colors, textures, or strokes. Many museum experiences are characterized by participants' silent contemplation of art. Depending on the cultural expectations tacitly enforced within museum spaces, museum visitors may consider their language as tangential or even an irrelevant distraction to the visual power within these spaces. These feelings of quietude may cause young viewers to question their own capacity to understand art at all. Thinking about art in this way, we wanted to explore how to foster young people's experiences with art, and more specifically, how to align language activities to those experiences to encourage language development in school settings.

In this article we suggest how Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a structured, yet open-ended dialogue, may be a parti-

cularly helpful method for language learners to appreciate art while also building their repertoires for language use. VTS sits at the intersection of art and language while providing rich opportunities for multimodal language learning and processing of textual stimuli. By augmenting what can be unidimensional, silent, isolated contemplation of art with words, both spoken and written, language learners can experience art linguistically and expand their expressive repertoires in new and innovative ways.

What is VTS?

The idea of VTS was shaped by early work in visible and visual thinking (Arnheim, 1969; Goodman, 1968) and through visual literacy and communication (Messaris, 1996). Today, VTS is a common pedagogical practice and approach that museum educators take to help visitors find a way to think about, talk about, and engage with art. The founders of Visual Understanding in Education, Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, are credited with

advancing the VTS technique through their long-standing, collective work in museums and schools (Housen, 2002; Yenawine, 1997; 2019). Both scholars sought innovative, pedagogical ways to find points of easy entry into museum spaces for all students, especially when these spaces can feel alienating and unfamiliar to the uninitiated.

VTS offers a predictable, yet provocative method through which people with limited museum experience can learn to meaningfully explore art through dialogic inquiry (Yenawine, 2019). When using this technique, educators pose three inquiry prompts to those viewing the art: *What's going on in this picture [or sculpture or photograph, etc.]? What makes you say that? What else can we find?* In the simplicity of its three guiding questions, educators scaffold viewers in collaboratively making sense of complex visual texts.

There is literature describing how VTS's implementation enhances school-museum partnerships and viewers' engagement with art (Bangeant, 2018; Cappello, 2017; Cappello & Walker, 2016; Chevalier, 2015; Franco & Unrath, 2014); there is also literature showing how English educators, both English language arts (ELA) and ESOL teachers, have integrated VTS into their instructional repertoires to bolster students' literacy development, language learning, and content learning (Dawson, 2018; Laman & Henderson, 2018; Limón-Corrales, 2020; Rojas, 2020; Walsh-Moorman, 2018). As we have written elsewhere (Clark-Gareca & Meyer, 2022), we believe that VTS has great potential for language learners as it fosters their positive interactions with art while also supporting language acquisition, critical thinking, and expressive writing whether in museums or school classrooms.

Planning: Modifying VTS for English Learners

Because of our continued enthusiasm for VTS, we decided to explore its use in a high school classroom with English as a New Language (ENL) students at all levels of English proficiency on a 1-5 scale as well as L1 English speakers. The classroom was a 10th grade English Language Arts (ELA) class with 21 students between 15-16 years old. The class, heterogeneous in their language proficiency,

included 3 students categorized as emerging, 6 transitioning, 7 expanding, 1 commanding, and 4 native, general education students. The non-native speakers spoke Spanish as their first language. The class was co-taught by two teachers: Federica the ENL teacher and Holly the English language arts teacher. US schools in our region employ these co-teaching arrangements so that ENL students gain access to the language and content demands of ELA class simultaneously. Neither the students nor the teachers had ever used the VTS process, collectively investigating an image.

The teachers were in the midst of a larger curricular unit with a theme "speaking up and speaking out" meant to complement the students' reading of Elie Weisel's memoir *Night*. Each day, the teachers introduced students to changemakers and activists before turning to their collective study of *Night*. With guidance from the researcher, Federica and Holly implemented VTS in their ENL/ELA class. In a meeting with the researcher prior to the class, Federica opted to have her students explore a photograph that conceptually linked to youth changemakers rather than photographs from either WW2 or Cambodia linked to Holocaust. The photograph that her students would explore was one of many taken on March 15, 2019 as part of a global protest, #Climatestrike (see Figure 1).



Tom Meyer is Professor of Adolescent Education at the State University of New York at New Paltz where he directs a site of the National Writing Project. He teaches courses in teacher leadership, action research, curriculum studies, and writing. He is currently studying how future teachers learn to teach writing.



Beth Clark-Gareca is Associate Professor of TESOL at Binghamton University where she prepares graduate students and in-service teachers to work with English learners (ELs) around the world. Her current research interests relate to assessment performance and academic pathway access for ELs in US public schools.

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The ENL teacher, Federica, designed modifications of the typical VTS technique to address her concern that without adequate scaffolding, including a more intimate interaction with the photograph, most students would likely remain silent if asked to speak aloud in front of everyone. The modified sequence included three steps:

- a - the teachers modeled VTS of a photograph;
- b - small groups of students (dyads and triads) discussed the same photograph; and then
- c - the whole class had a discussion.

The instructional sequence concluded with a brief individual writing task. Throughout the class session, the teachers and/or the student groups took notes, scribing the oral language on either the whiteboard or on shared paper. After the session, in an informal interview between classes, the researcher asked the two teachers to discuss their observations of the lesson: What did they notice? How was the lesson similar or different than others that they had had with this group and other language learners? What did they wonder about? The interview lasted about 15 minutes and took place in the school library.

Scaffolding learning, gathering language

On the day of instruction, after introducing the students to the agenda for the day and to a photograph of a “changemaker” (Malcolm X), the teachers launched a series of VTS-inspired activities to engage students’ interaction with this #Climatestrike photograph (AJ+, 2019).

Teachers model VTS-inspired conversation

Teacher 1 (T1) posed the questions, restated Teacher 2’s (T2) observations, and scribed T2’s language on a whiteboard in the front of the classroom.

T1: “What do you see in the photograph?” [Points to figure 1, above].

T2: “I see signs.”

T1: “Signs.” [Repeats the word, points to signs].

T2: “Yeah, people holding signs.” [T1 writes “people holding signs” on the whiteboard.]

T1: “What else do you see? [...The modeling conversation continues another minute with T1 drawing out descriptive responses from T2, pointing to the objects in the photograph and writing them down.]

T1: “What do you *wonder* about what you see?”

T2: “I wonder about the white house in the background.”

T1: “...the white house in the background?”

T2: “Yes. I wonder who is in that house and if they are part of this march.” [T1 writes the question on the whiteboard.]

T2: “You will be doing something similar now.”

Figure 1



Students engage in modified version of VTS in small groups

The teachers distributed one handout (Figure 2) and instructed heterogeneous groups of 2-3 students to talk more about the photograph and collaboratively write responses. For 10 minutes as the students talked within their groups, the teachers circulated throughout the room. In a couple of cases, the ENL teacher offered students a definition of the word “denial” and “wonder” in English or Spanish.

Federica, in her creation of the bilingual handout, wanted all students to deepen their understanding of the photograph and its content. She reasoned that the bilingual nature of the handout would invite each student regardless of their language proficiency to read, speak, and write in both Spanish and English. Here is what two sets of students wrote on the worksheet (Figure 2) in response to the left column questions: 1. What do you see? ¿Qué son algunas cosas que ves? 2. What is one thing that you wonder about what you see? ¿Cuál es una pregunta que tienes sobre lo que ves?

Dyad one [on left]:

1. I see children of color.
2. I see some posters.
3. I see a tree.
4. I see that they are dressing Nice.

1. I wonder what the symbols mean?
2. Why are they protesting?

Dyad two [on right]

1. niños [children]
2. Apartamentos [apartments]
3. cartulinas [cardboard signs]
4. Niños de distintas edades

1. ¿Qué hacen esas niños hay [sic]?

In their small groups, students noticed participants’ race, ages, and dress (e.g., “I see mostly children of color” and “niños de distintas edades” and “uniforms”) and various objects (e.g., posters, *cartulinas*, trees, etc.). They posed questions about the purpose for protesting and whether the protest was successful. Several were intrigued by an hourglass image on two of the posters. One student walked up to the large projection of the photograph on the whiteboard in order to more closely inspect a depiction of the earth on one of the posters.

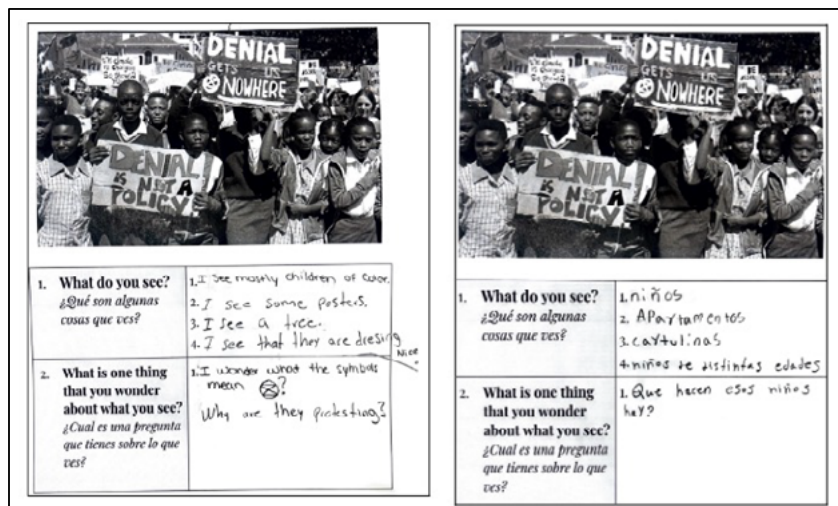


Figure 2

Whole-class VTS

Next the teachers asked the students to turn their attention to the same, projected photograph at the front of the classroom. They began to ask VTS-inspired questions for anyone to answer. Teacher one (T1) pointed to relevant details on the photograph connected to the students’ observations and other teacher scribed the ideas on the whiteboard.

T1: What do you see?

S: “There’s diversity.”

T1: “What makes you say that?”

S: “There are white people, black people, and Spanish people.”

S: “See the white girl on the right?”

S: “Yeah, and there’s a white guy on the left...in the back.”

T1: What else do you see?

S: “People of different genders.”

S: “People protesting.”

T1: “What makes you say that?”

S: “See the poster? It says, ‘Denial gets us nowhere.’”

T1: What else do you see?

S: “They are mainly young people.”

S: “Some of the kids are wearing uniforms.”

T1: “Uniforms.”

S: “Fancy clothes for their schools.”

S: “I see flags.”

T1: What do you wonder about what you see?

S: “I wonder what that symbol means [on the pink flag].”

S: “There’s a little timer. Like a sand timer on a pink flag and a poster.”

S: “Like time is running out.”

Figure 3

T1: What else do you wonder about?
 S: "I wonder if their protest is working."
 S: "Why is this mostly young people?"
 S: "Where are they? Where is this happening?"

T1: What else do you see?
 S: "I see pictures of the earth on some of the posters."
 S: "I wonder who is in denial and they are in denial about."

T1: What is something that you understand better now?
 S: "We understand climate change more. What their motive is. That they [the protesters] want to be heard."

T1: Heard? Heard about?
 S: "Climate change."

Students individually select a prompt and complete a short piece of writing

Next, the teachers invited the students to write a short response to one of the following prompts; they encouraged the students to use language from the whiteboard and their handouts. All but one of the students chose to write in response to the first two prompts (Figure 3).

We offer three samples of students' writing in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

- 1 - Write as if you were one of the kids in this photograph.
 - a. Write a journal about the morning you prepared yourself to go to the march. What were you thinking? Seeing? Feeling? Saying?"
 - b. Write about the first 20 minutes you were at the march. What were you thinking? Seeing? Feeling? Saying?"
- 2 - Pretend you are one of the people in the march. Write a letter to your friend or family member about your day at the march.
- 3 - Explain how this photo and the people in it help you think about Elie Wiesel's Night, and our study of the Holocaust.

Figure 4

Hi Mom,
 Im going to protest today against the government today. The government havnt been hearing us out on any of the changes we need. the climate is changing so we need some more seasonal stuff. Hopefully I will become famous one day for taking a stand against the government for what is right. I love you mom.

[Hi Mom, Im going to protest today against the government today. The government havnt been hearing us out on any of the changes we need. the climate is changing so we need some more seasonal stuff. Hopefully I will become famous one day for taking a stand against the government for what is right. I love you mom.]

Figure 5

I marched today at school. On the way ~~to~~ to the protest, I noticed an abundance of trash/pollution. This motivated me to protest louder and harder for ^{more} clean, ^{and} habitable earth. I hope that when I grow up, the earth is clean.

[I marched today at school. On the way to the protest, I noticed an abundance of trash/pollution. This motivated me to protest louder and harder for more clean and habitable earth. I hope that when I grow up, the earth is clean.]

Figure 6

In the march I saw.....
 During the march I felt.....
 The march was important because.....
 The march was important because por que asi pueden aser que los escuchen y se pueda resolver porlo que estan pelianodo y se hagan cambios.

[The march was important because por que asi pueden aser que los escuchen y se pueda resolver porlo que estan pelianodo y se hagan cambios. Translation: The march was important because that way they make themselves heard and they can resolve what they are fighting for and make some changes.]

Post-VTS debrief with the teachers

The researcher asked Holly and Federica what they noticed. They noted how the learners in their classes were more focused on the content and authentic in their conversation than was usual.

Federica: Every student spoke today. They were just having conversations about the image. Especially in their small groups. I noticed them having conversations about the image instead of 'I just need to complete this worksheet and then we can be done.' That was the big difference.

The teachers also expressed feeling inspired by the simplicity of the questions and power of the questions to evoke student engagement.

Holly: Normally in the class-wide discussion, if we ask them a question, it usually takes us a follow up question. Our questions are not usually very open-ended like these were. The open-endedness of the questions - that helped them participate more because they weren't constricted. They could just go anywhere. I do have a question. I wonder how VTS could support learners in studying other texts. Like, I'm about to start a unit with Shakespeare. I would love to think about what kind of image I would use. Could I even do that?

The Affordances of VTS

VTS offers ELs and their teachers an exciting, active alternative to more didactic, flat types of instruction. Rather than the "default" sequence of classroom questioning where teachers pose questions that they know the answer to and evaluate nearly every student response (see for instance, Cazden, 1988), in this lesson, teachers revoice and scribe students' language and ideas to make both audible and visible; they also pull themselves out from the center of students' talk so that the students can address each other with their ideas about what they see and wonder.

In this single classroom-based, VTS set of activities, we see language learners' construction of knowledge as they discuss and/or write about the visual text in small groups, the large group, and by themselves. The student writing supports our assertion that VTS allows ENL students to create and imagine sophisticated, creative language that art evokes (e.g., The march was important because *porque asi pueden aser que los escuchen y se pueda resolver porlo que estan pelianodo y se hagan cambios*). Through this process, the ENL students implemented their full repertoire of linguistic resources and literacy skills, and benefitted from translanguaging.

VTS, as seen in this classroom, allowed the ELs to be more participatory and brave in their interactions and assertions than what the teachers normally observed. Both teachers were impressed at the possibilities that VTS afforded their students, even just at the first try. Knowing what they knew about the learners in their class, Holly and Federica scaffolded the process of VTS for the ELs. They

incorporated tried and true elements that work with ELs - think, pair, share, incorporating visual stimuli, working through language by talking before moving toward writing, validating what the students said by creating a living word wall to reflect the meanings they wanted to convey.

From this experience, we discovered, along with the teachers and students in this class, that modified VTS offers ENL students new points of linguistic access to school related tasks through art. We offered teachers new ideas about how to elicit language production from their students, and they were surprised at how the students responded. Traditionally, VTS has been centered in museums for people to engage in meaningful, patterned inquiry and critical thinking, which are inspired by works of art. We believe that VTS can be a powerful learning tool to support linguistic expression in ENL classrooms as well. VTS has the capacity to alter students' notion of themselves as communicators, collaborators, and contemplators of art.

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