

# The use of image in *Eyes Open*

## Introduction

Using images in the language classroom is something we take for granted. However, although our classroom materials are full of images, most of these are used as a support with written or spoken texts. As text provides the main focus of our attention in class, the images alongside often perform a secondary role or are simply decorative.

The information of digital age that we live in is a highly visual one. These days, people often communicate through images and video or through a combination of image and text. We therefore believe it appropriate to rethink the role of images in learning materials and place more emphasis on 'the visual'. This brief introduction outlines the different roles that images can have in our teaching practice and what we have done in *Eyes Open* to make the image more central to the course and to more fully exploit image.

## High-impact images

In *Eyes Open*, we provide high impact photos on the opening page of each unit. These images have a multiple function. Firstly, they provide an engaging link with the unit content, stimulating the students to take an interest in the topic. An image is a more efficient and impactful way of conveying a message. In this sense, a picture can really be worth 'a thousand words'. Secondly, the *Be Curious* section beside the image poses specific questions related directly to the image. Thirdly, the image often acts as a cultural artefact which is open to multiple readings. In the *Be Curious* section, students are often encouraged to hypothesise about the image in question. For example, looking at the photo of a busy street market, they might, for example, be asked, 'Where do you think it is?' Students should feel confident here that they can provide their own answers, using their imagination as much as possible providing they can justify their opinions.

The images in both these opening pages and in others have been selected because they offer an original angle on a well-known topic or show a different perspective.

## Intercultural Awareness and Critical thinking

The images have also been carefully selected to encourage intercultural awareness and critical thinking. For example, in Level 1 Unit 3 (Schooldays) the image shows the journey to school in a developing country rather than from the English-speaking world. The students can be encouraged to find differences and similarities between this and their own experience. In this context, this classic task has a clear intercultural angle. At the same time, students may be asked what conclusions they can draw about school life from looking at the image. Students must look for evidence in the image to support their argument. The important concern again here is that students can provide their own answers rather than simply second-guess a 'correct' answer from the answer key.

This may be something new and even daunting, but if done in stages, students will soon get the hang of analysing images in this way and thinking more deeply about them. Notice that in the *Be Curious* section, the first question is sometimes, 'What can you see in the photo?' So, before analysing students merely *describe*. Such scaffolding supports a gradual increase in cognitive load and challenge. Students are not expected to hypothesise immediately, but reflect on the image once they have described it and visualised it.

## Teaching tips for exploiting images in class

If your class has problems analysing the images, consider three different ways of responding to them: the *affective* response – how does the image make you feel, the *compositional* response – how is the image framed (i.e. what is in the foreground/background, where the focus is, etc.), and the *critical* response – what message does the image communicate; what conclusions can we draw from it? This can be a useful framework for discussing any image.

## Moving on: selecting your own images and student input

Taking this further, you could select your own images for use in class to supplement those found in the course. Some criteria for selecting images could be: *impact* (will the images be able to stimulate or engage the learner on an imaginative level?), *opportunity for personalisation* (how can the students make these images their own?) and *openness to multiple interpretation* (how many different readings can be drawn from a certain image?).

There are a number of great websites and image-sharing platforms where you can access high quality and high-impact copyright-free images to be used in class. These include:

<http://unsplash.com>

<http://littlevisuals.co>

<http://www.dotspin.com>

<http://www.lifeofpix.com>

You can also then allow students to take a more active role by inviting them to bring their own images to class. Thus, images provide an even more central focus, functioning both as objects for analysis in their own right and as a clear way for students to provide their own input. This can be easily achieved digitally. Why not set up an Instagram page with your class or a blog or even a class website? This will allow students to upload their own images and interact with them by sending posts or messages describing or commenting on the images. In this way, they get extra practice at writing and even speaking. This interaction can then inform the face-to-face classroom to create a blended learning environment, as you prompt face-to-face discussion and negotiation of ideas based on what you view online.