

# The effectiveness of using visual communication in teaching vocabulary to non-English majors students at the Foreign Languages Center of Nguyen Tat Thanh University

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## Abstract

Due to the essence of English vocabulary learning and its challenges, teachers tend to be in search of effective pedagogical techniques. The current case study aims to explore the usefulness of visual media in teaching vocabulary at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. A total of 240 non-English majors completed an online survey to express their opinions on using visual media in vocabulary class. Findings revealed the benefits, such as interesting learning conditions, stronger word memorization, improved learning strategies, high contexts for word practice, and convenient word meaning presentation. The perceived reasons were interesting, memorable content, different kinds of visualizations, interactive and extensive exercises, and the use of many senses. The results have a few applications to EFL vocabulary teaching and learning at the university. This study could make contributions to future studies as its findings delineated that visual media adapted from the coursebook can facilitate students' vocabulary learning and foster their learning motivation.

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## Keywords

visual media, EFL vocabulary learning, interactive learning

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## 1 Introduction

Vocabulary refers to one's set of words stored in their minds for use in practical contexts [1]. Because vocabulary is essential for English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, it is useful to conduct a study on teaching and learning EFL vocabulary [1]. One of the most important elements in any EFL vocabulary class is its teaching and learning materials [2]. Visual media is proved useful for EFL vocabulary learning because of the interest, adaptability, and comprehensive content [3-13]. While visual media, which contain sounds, images and other aids for language learning, can be useful for English vocabulary learning because of interactive, motivating learning environment, its effects in practical teaching and

learning may depend on the reality of educational settings [3, 7, 12].

The application of visual media in EFL vocabulary learning was considered effective [3-9, 12]. In these studies, Internet-based visual media was used to facilitate students' vocabulary learning, and they could remarkably improve their vocabulary learning gains after the teaching treatment. A few other studies focused on the students' insights into the benefits of visual media for vocabulary learning [10, 11, 13]. In these studies, students completed a survey to express their perspectives on the advantages of visual media for English vocabulary learning. However, there is a scarcity of research into students' perception of coursebook-based visual media for English vocabulary learning. Therefore, the present study is going to address the two

following research questions: (1) What are the students' perceptions of the use of visual media for English vocabulary class? and (2) What are the reasons for those perceptions?

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 The Role of Vocabulary in English Teaching and Learning

It is essential for any EFL learner to develop their vocabulary because of its usefulness for language use [1, 14]. Thanks to vocabulary knowledge, EFL learners can express their ideas correctly and fluently [15]. Vocabulary knowledge is also a crucial element in receptive language skills like listening and reading, particularly for advanced levels [16]. As a result, English vocabulary teaching and learning receives much scholarly attention.

### 1.2 Using Visual Media in English Vocabulary Class

#### 1.2.1 Definition of Visual Media

A researcher reported that “media is anything that is capable of transmitting messages from sender to receiver so that it can stimulate students' thoughts, feeling, attention, and interest in such a way that the learning process takes place, and the learning objectives are achieved” [17]. Then, in education, visual media refers to both sounds and images to support teaching and learning. Visual media is comprised of three types: (1) sound and motion film, (2) video, and (3) television.

#### 1.2.2 The Effects of Using Visual Media in EFL Vocabulary Class

Visual media can facilitate EFL vocabulary teaching and learning. Visual media can be used as a hint to help EFL learners guess word meanings, visualize word image and meaning, and memorize words more easily [2]. It is because EFL learners will not depend much on their cognition. Thanks to visualization, EFL learners can understand the abstract words and deepen their understanding about word meanings. It can be suited to visual learners who are able to memorize content via images [18]. Visual media can also facilitate the use of different senses for learning vocabulary. Furthermore, using visual media as a kind of mnemonic device for EFL vocabulary instruction can encourage EFL learners to learn new words and enthusiastically partake in vocabulary class [19]. Visual media is demonstrated to aid EFL learners in vocabulary

retention for language skills [20, 21]. They can also facilitate improvement in other language areas like pronunciation and grammar. According to a researcher, using technology advancements for visual media (e.g., “non-captioned videos”, “online educational platforms”, etc.) can also help teachers to conduct vocabulary classes more interestingly and support their professional development [17]. In short, the use of visual media, particularly technology-enhanced one, can be conducive to EFL vocabulary learning because it assists EFL learners in vocabulary memorization and retention and motivates them to learn vocabulary. It also enables EFL teachers to conduct enjoyable vocabulary lessons and facilitate their professional development.

### 1.3 Previous Findings

The effectiveness of visual media on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge was confirmed in a study in 2016. Cartoon films were used as the main visual media to test the impact. Thanks to the key research instruments: questionnaire, pretest and posttest, the researcher concluded that the use of the visual media could positively influence EFL learners' vocabulary retention [3].

The effect of using visual media on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge was found through a study on digital video game [4]. The study included 241 EFL learners who were exposed to different kinds of visual media. The test comparisons showed that the utilization of visual media could help improve students' vocabulary learning gains.

The impact of using YouTube as a key visual medium on EFL learners' vocabulary learning has also been reported [5]. The participants were 100 EFL learners who completed the questionnaire, pretest, and posttest. The results demonstrated that the application of using visual media could help EFL learners improve their vocabulary knowledge. They were also interested in this application.

The impact of TED Talk as a visual medium on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition was reported [6]. The study included 64 university students (32 for the control group and the others for the experimental group). Through pretest and posttest results, the research concluded that the experimental group with visual media could improve their vocabulary learning gains after teaching treatment.



The effects of visual media on EFL learners' vocabulary retention was claimed in 2019 [7]. The study included 25 university students and 10 EFL teachers who completed the online survey. The research findings demonstrated that the use of visual media could facilitate EFL learners' vocabulary learning gains and the participants expressed positive attitudes towards this application.

The use of visual media on Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition was explored [8]. The study included 105 university students who completed different vocabulary tests. The results demonstrated that the students could improve the vocabulary knowledge after course.

The application of visual media into EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition was investigated [9]. The study included 25 university students who completed the questionnaire, pretest, posttest, and the videos. The results demonstrated the usefulness of visual media on EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition. They were in favor of the videos with full captions of L1 and L2, enjoyable related images, and the suitable audio volume.

The effects of technology-enhanced learning tools (TELLs) on EFL learners' vocabulary learning were claimed by non-English majored students [10]. The participants were 240 university students (questionnaire respondents) and voluntary 20 student interviewees. The findings clarified that the students improved their vocabulary learning gains and expressed positive attitudes towards this application.

A study on the use of videos as visual media at a university was conducted in Viet Nam [11]. The research included 25 EFL learners who completed the online survey to express their perceptions of visual media's benefits for EFL learners' vocabulary learning. The findings illustrated that visual media had a positive influence on EFL learners' vocabulary learning.

Another Vietnamese study included two study groups in an experiment with visual media for university students' academic vocabulary learning [12]. One control group received no vocabulary instruction without visual media while one experimental group was exposed to visual media. The findings demonstrated that applying visual media into academic vocabulary learning is very useful. It also encourages students to learn vocabulary.

The effects of visual media on EFL learners' vocabulary learning at a university were investigated by Ngo et al. [13]. The research included 154 English majors as questionnaire respondents and voluntary 15 student interviewees. The results showed that the use of visual media can help the students increase their learning motivation and vocabulary learning outcomes.

### 3 Research methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design and Context

The current case study aims to examine the effectiveness of visual media on EFL learners' vocabulary retention. In this research, the students' self-evaluation of the effectiveness of using visual media in English class on their vocabulary learning was reported after the teaching treatment with YouTube videos as key visual media.

The research took place at a foreign language center at Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) in the second semester of 2023-2024 academic year. At this school, English is a compulsory subject for all students and the school has provided all enough facilities for English teaching and learning.

#### 3.2 Sampling and Participants

Convenience sampling was used because the researcher was able to gain access to the available group of students at the university. After screening the previous English final test scores, the researcher decided to include 300 first non-English majors. However, 53 students refused to complete the questionnaire and there were 7 faulty questionnaire samples. The finalized group of participants included 240 students (91 males/ 149 females, 37.9%/62.1%). Most of them were aged 19 (107 respondents, 44.6%). Most of them had been studying English for 6 to 8 years prior to the survey (113 respondents, 47.1%).

**Table 1** Demographics of the Participants

Variables		N	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	91	37.9
	Female	149	62.1
Age	18 years	73	30.4
	19 years	107	44.6
	20 years	44	18.3
	21 years	16	6.7
	Over 21 years	0	0



<b>English learning experience</b>	Below 3 years	12	5.0
	3-5 years	91	37.9
	6-8 years	113	47.1
	9-10 years	18	7.5
	Over 10 years	6	2.5
<b>Total</b>		240	100

### 3.3 Research Instrument

An online questionnaire, based on Google Forms, was delivered to the students in week 12 of the semester, after the course of English 2. It aims to investigate the students' perceptions of visual media use for English vocabulary learning in class and the reasons for the effects of the English class.

In terms of the structure and content, it was adapted from the study by Pham et al. (2023), who investigated the university students' perspectives on using visual media for English learning. To adapt the questionnaire of the current research, the content of the questionnaire was re-phrased and shortened. There are two parts: Part 1 for the personal information (gender, age, and English learning experience) and Part 2 for the students' perceptions of using visual media for English learning. Part 2 includes a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There are 5 single items. Item 1 aims to collect the students'

perception of visual media use for word meaning demonstration. Item 2 aims to collect that for word memorization. Item 3 aims to collect that for the students' ability to use words in contexts. Item 4 aims to collect that for the students' ability to learn vocabulary interestingly. Item 5 aims to collect that for the students' ability to improve vocabulary learning strategies. One open-ended question is given after the scale to get further responses from the students. The last question, which is a multiple-choice question for multiple responses, aims to collect the students' perspectives on the reasons for the perceptions.

### 3.4 Teaching Material and Procedure

The study employs one coursebook named "Personal Best: A2 Student's Book". All students received the same teaching procedure in 12 weeks. Prior to this course, the students were instructed to learn English vocabulary via wordlists only. They were asked to study key words in each unit, presented in lists, including key words, part of speech, Vietnamese equivalents, and short example sentences. No visual media was used. In the current class, the teacher employed coursebook-based visual aids (i.e., photos, pictures and videos) to present word meanings and deliver vocabulary practices. A sample lesson plan is reported in the following example.

**Table 2** A Sample Lesson Plan

Unit	Step	Activities	Aids
Unit 2: Work and Play	vocabulary presentation (10 minutes)	- watch a video about work and leisure activities - match the photos with correct key words - word meaning explanation	video photos
	vocabulary practice (20 minutes)	- watch the video and answer comprehension questions - watch the video, look at the photos and complete short sentences - look at the photos and complete short sentences, using the learned words	videos videos and photos
	vocabulary production (10 minutes)	- look at the picture and make a short interview to friends	pictures

### 3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was carefully proof-read by an invited expert before the actual implementation. Then the final questionnaire created on Google Forms was sent to the students via a barcode shared in class in the final week after 12-week teaching treatment. The question content was translated into Vietnamese to

facilitate students' reading comprehension. SPSS (Version 27.0) was used to analyze the findings.

In terms of the internal consistency reliability, the Likert scale obtains an adequate Cronbach's alpha value ( $\alpha = 0.664 > 0.6$ ). All "Corrected Item-Total Correlation" is above 0.3 and all "Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted" is lower than the overall Cronbach's alpha value.



**Table 3** Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Visual media in class helps me visualize word meanings better.	15.13	4.804	0.379	0.629
Visual media in class helps me memorize words better.	14.87	4.585	0.388	0.625
Visual media in class helps me use words in contexts better.	15.07	4.593	0.381	0.628
Visual media in class helps me learn vocabulary more interestingly.	14.85	3.916	0.512	0.563

Visual media in class helps me improve vocabulary learning strategies.	15.08	4.411	0.425	0.608
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#### 4 Findings and discussion

##### 4.1 EFL Learners' Perception of Using Visual Media in Class

After the course, most students affirmed that using visual media is useful for their vocabulary learning. In particular, it motivates them to learn English vocabulary (Item 4:  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.869$ ). The second highest figure belongs to the usefulness for word memorization (Item 2:  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.762$ ). The third one is the usefulness for word application into contexts (Item 3:  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.766$ ). The fourth one is the usefulness for vocabulary learning strategy improvement (Item 5:  $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.785$ ). The fifth one is the usefulness for word meaning visualization (Item 1:  $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 0.691$ ). No further responses were added by the students.

**Table 4** Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Visual media in class helps me visualize word meanings better.	240	3.62	0.691
Visual media in class helps me memorize words better.	240	3.88	0.762
Visual media in class helps me use words in contexts better.	240	3.68	0.766
Visual media in class helps me learn vocabulary more interestingly.	240	3.90	0.869
Visual media in class helps me improve vocabulary learning strategies.	240	3.67	0.785
Valid N (listwise)	240		

##### 4.2 The Reasons

The reasons for the positive perceptions were clarified in the fifth question of the survey. The most remarkable reason is that visual media are more interesting than coursebook (Item 4: 196 students, 81.7 % of cases). The second highest figure belongs to the fact that visual media are eye-catching and memorable (Item 2: 194 students, 80.8

% of cases). The third highest figure belongs to the fact that they have different learning aids (Item 1: 157 students, 65.4 % of cases). The fourth highest figure is the inclusion of interactive and extensive practices (Item 3: 155 students, 64.6 % of cases). The fifth one is the inclusion of different senses used for vocabulary learning through visual media (Item 5: 103 students, 42.9 %).

**Table 5** The Reasons for the Positive Perception

	Responses		Percent of Cases (%)
	N	Percent (%)	
They have different learning aids (sounds, images, etc.)	157	19.5	65.4
They are eye-catching and memorable	194	24.1	80.8
They provide interactive and extensive exercises	155	19.3	64.6
They are more interesting than coursebook content	196	24.3	81.7
They support the use of different senses for vocabulary learning	103	12.8	42.9
Total	805	100.0	335.4
a. Group			

### 4.3 Discussion

The results revealed that the students appreciated the benefits of visual media for their vocabulary learning. This finding agrees with all previous studies. There are several reasons. Firstly, their vocabulary learning motivation is higher [5-7, 10, 13]. Thanks to different multimedia learning environments, visual media can encourage students to learn vocabulary enjoyably. Secondly, word memorization and use in context are facilitated [3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11]. Thirdly, some explained that vocabulary learning via visual media is useful because these aids help demonstrate word meanings more vividly [19]. The combination of sounds and images stimulates the use of different senses for language learning. Fourthly, visual media can provide effective learning environments for vocabulary applications in skills [20]. The current study used the available visual media sources for vocabulary learning. This environment facilitates the application of students' vocabulary knowledge into listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

In detail, apart from Munir [3], Ebrahimzadeh [4], Kabooha and Elyas [5], Nguyen and Boers [6] and Duong et al. [10], the current finding does not demonstrate the perceived benefits of specific online or technology-enhanced visual media for EFL vocabulary learning, due to the distinct research objectives and contexts. While those studies confirmed the advantages of available technology-enhanced media like cartoon films [3], "digital video game" [4], YouTube [5], TEDTalk [6], and TELLs [10], the present study sheds light on the usefulness of visual media available in the coursebook.

Also, the present study is different from Abbas et al. [7], Han, and Niu [8], Yawiloeng [9], and Ngo and

Doan [12] as these studies proved the improvement in vocabulary learning gains thanks to effective visual media. The present study does not contribute any statistical evidence on the real improved vocabulary knowledge but the students' perceptions of such advantage of visual media.

### 5 Conclusion

The current study highlights the benefits of visual media for vocabulary learning, claimed by the student respondents. They are (i) the enjoyable learning environment, (ii) the ability of convenient word memorization, (iii) the ability of convenient word meaning visualization, (iv) many opportunities of word use in context, and (v) the improvement in vocabulary learning strategies. The reasons for these benefits are (i) interesting content, (ii) eye-catching and memorable content, (iii) different learning aids, (iv) the combination of different senses for language learning, and (v) various vocabulary practices.

The research has two main shortcomings. First, only one online questionnaire was used collect the students' answers about their perceptions. This could lead to the inadequacies of the research findings. Second, no statistical evidence on students' improvement in vocabulary learning gains after course. There were no specific vocabulary tests administered in the course, so the conclusions were not drawn from real quantitative measures. Therefore, future research can bridge those gaps by including more research instruments, namely focus group interviews, observations, and vocabulary tests.

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## Hiệu quả của việc sử dụng phương tiện trực quan trong dạy từ vựng cho sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh tại Trung tâm Ngoại ngữ Trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành

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**Tóm tắt** Bởi vì sự cần thiết và thách thức của việc học từ vựng Tiếng Anh, người dạy thường có khuynh hướng tìm kiếm kỹ thuật sư phạm hiệu quả. Bài nghiên cứu này nhằm khảo sát tính hiệu quả của việc sử dụng phương tiện nghe nhìn trong việc dạy học từ vựng tại Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành. Một tập hợp gồm 240 sinh viên không chuyên Anh hoàn thành bảng khảo sát trực tuyến để khẳng định quan điểm của họ về việc sử dụng phương tiện nghe nhìn trong lớp học từ vựng. Kết quả cho thấy những lợi ích sau đây: môi trường học thú vị, khả năng ghi nhớ từ vựng tốt hơn, chiến lược học tập được cải thiện, nhiều ngữ cảnh thực hành từ vựng, và minh họa ý nghĩa từ vựng một cách tiện lợi. Những lý do được đưa ra bao gồm nội dung thú vị, dễ nhớ, nhiều minh họa, bài tập tăng cường và có tính tương tác, và sự khai thác nhiều giác quan. Kết quả nghiên cứu có thể được áp dụng vào việc dạy từ vựng Tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Nguyễn Tất Thành. Nghiên cứu này có thể đóng góp cho nghiên cứu trong quá khứ vì kết quả miêu tả chi tiết rằng phương tiện nghe nhìn khai thác từ giáo trình có thể hỗ trợ việc học từ vựng của sinh viên và củng cố động lực học tập.

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