

**PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE VISUALS IN
THEIR ENGLISH COURSE BOOK**

**İLKOKUL ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN İNGİLİZCE DERS KİTAPLARINDAKİ
GÖRSELLERLE İLGİLİ ALGILARI**

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the students' perceptions about the visuals in their course book and the techniques employed by the teacher when using visuals to teach English. Also, it examines whether or not students' visuals-related perceptions differ significantly according to their gender and whether or not there is a significant correlation between students' age and their perceptions about visuals and the way they are used. The study included 89 fifth-year primary school students. A questionnaire was used to collect data. Findings of the study indicate that most of the students have positive perceptions about visuals in their course book and the techniques employed by the teacher when using these visuals to teach English. Another result of the study is that students' visuals-related perceptions differ significantly according to their gender. On the other hand, the correlation between participants' perceptions and their age seems to be rather weak.

Keywords: Visuals, Perceptions, English course books, Age, Gender

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı öğrencilerin İngilizce ders kitaplarındaki görseller ve öğretmenin İngilizce öğretmek için bu görsellerden yararlanırken kullandığı teknikler hakkındaki görüşlerini incelemektir. Çalışma, aynı zamanda öğrencilerin görseller hakkındaki görüşlerinin cinsiyetlerine göre farklılık gösterip göstermediğini ve yaşları ile algıları arasında anlamlı bir ilişki olup olmadığını da incelemektedir. Bu çalışma kapsamında 89 beşinci sınıf öğrencisinden veri toplandı. Verileri elde etmek için Likert tipi bir anket kullanıldı. Elde edilen bulgular öğrencilerin çoğunun ders kitaplarındaki görseller ve öğretmenin bu görselleri kullanırken başvurduğu teknikler hakkında pozitif algılara sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Elde edilen sonuçlardan bir diğeri, öğrencilerin görsellerle ilgili algılarının cinsiyetlerine göre anlamlı şekilde değişmesidir. Öte yandan, veri analizi sonucunda katılımcıların algıları ile yaşları arasındaki ilişkinin düşük olduğu ortaya çıktı.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Görseller, Algılar, İngilizce kitapları, Yaş, Cinsiyet

Introduction

In this age of high definition screens, the layout and design of materials that are employed to teach English as a foreign language has become more important than ever before. As students are now used to ultra-bright visuals in their laptops, tablets and smart phones, course books with low-quality visuals and poor layout will fail to attract their attention. Today there is an abundance of materials with various visuals used to teach English as a foreign language such as pictures on flashcards for teaching vocabulary, textbooks containing a lot of pictures, multimedia software, films and movies. It is commonly accepted that visual elements have significant influences on learning a language. That is why language teachers widely use visuals. However, it seems plausible to think that different visuals will have different effects. Depending on their complexity and attractiveness, visuals can either foster language learning or even impede it when they are used.

Earlier research provides evidence that visuals might have both positive and negative effects. For example, Chung (1994) asserted that visuals facilitate learning when a learner can interpret its meaning correctly. If the learner cannot interpret or guess the meaning correctly, the visual information may distract him or her. Schriver (1997) claimed that pictures are useful for language learning, since pictures seem to be better retainable in the memory than words. She also asserted that if pictures are just decorations for the text and do not have any meaningful relation to the text, they can be distracting. Therefore, it is important “to bring words and pictures together in harmonious ways” (Schriver, 1997, p. 411). Effects of visuals can still be different even when they are directly related to the text. Bejar et al. (2000) and Ginther (2002) mentioned the differences between two types of visuals: context visuals and content visuals. Context visuals describe the situation of conversations, such as the participants and the setting. A photo showing two girls that have a conversation can be an example of a context visual. Ginther (2002) expressed that context visuals have two basic aims. The first one is to form the place for the verbal exchange. The second one is to show how speakers get affected and change in a conversation. Content visuals consist of visuals related to the content of the verbal interaction. They may consist of photos, pictures or drawings. An example of content visual is to use a photo of a famous painter in a lecture on arts.

Obviously English course books contain a lot of visuals, but do students think that they really benefit from them? What are their feelings about visuals? In this study, the aim is to learn what students think about visuals in their English course book and the ways the teacher uses those visuals to teach English. It also examines whether or not students’ visuals-related perceptions differ significantly according to their gender and whether or not there is a significant correlation between students’ age their perceptions about visuals and the way they are used. The following four research questions are addressed in this study.

1. What are primary school students’ perceptions about visuals in their English course book?

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2. What are primary school students' perceptions about the techniques employed by the teacher when using the visuals in the course book to teach English?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference between male and female students' perceptions about visuals in their English course book and the way they are utilized?
4. Is there a significant correlation between students' age and their perceptions about visuals in their English course book and the way they are utilized?

Literature Review

Language teachers can help students learn a language by using various materials. Visuals are among the most important and most commonly used materials. They can be a supportive element for most students to learn, understand and retain knowledge; especially for those whose visual-spatial intelligence is dominant (Gardner, 1999). There are a lot of pictures in almost every English course book and they provide language teachers with invaluable opportunities in the limited classroom context. However, in order for pictures to be useful for language teaching, they should bear some qualities. They should be colorful, interesting and carefully-designed and hence attractive for learners.

Using written materials with pictures usually leads to better performance and higher achievement than giving written materials without any accompanying visuals (Mayer, 2001). When students are taught by using appropriate pictures in addition to written materials, it is reported that their learning process is usually enhanced (Levin & Mayer, 1993). Visuals can be used to teach and learn more effectively in a classroom (Joshi, 1995). In a study conducted by Vissa (1994), the conclusion was that the visual aids enhanced learning and that various materials that included visuals enabled students to keep their attention high. Language classrooms usually do not provide ample contexts for learning. As a result, language teachers try to use various materials including pictures to create contexts within the classroom (Hill, 1990). Moreover, pictures may have the function to make the class enjoyable. It is remarkable that using pictures even for additional exercises can improve the usually boring atmosphere of most language classes.

On the other hand, pictures might have some limitations (McCarthy, 1992). Pictures may not be used or they may not be sufficient to teach words in certain categories (McCarthy, 1992; Thornbury, 2004). For example, it is difficult to teach the meanings of some words such as intelligence and perception through pictures. As a result, other materials must be used to teach the meanings of such words or other materials can be used along with pictures. In some studies (e.g. Chun & Plass, 1996; Plass, Chun, Mayer and Leutner, 1998), students were given materials to read in the target language. The meanings of unknown words were given in a written format including the word in the target language and its equivalent in the native language or in another format including the word in the target language and a picture of that word.

Students were also provided with the meanings of unknown words in a different format including the word in the target language, the picture of that word and its equivalent in the native language. The conclusion was that students performed better when the meaning of unknown words in the target language were given through both pictures of the words and their translations in the native language than when just translations of unknown words were given in the native language without pictures (Chun & Plass, 1996). But, in another study when words were taught through just pictures, the result was a little worse than learning through native language translations (Plass, Chun, Mayer and Leutner, 1998). Also, a similar result was that it was not very important to pair French words with pictures or translations in the native language, because the result did not change in any of those situations (Chen, 1990).

English course books that are published nowadays contain more and more visuals and this shows that visual elements are becoming a significant part of language instruction. The connection between visualization and course books can be seen in the studies which indicate that qualitative aspects of visuals make them popular because people like colorful illustrations which depict a story, which are related to experiences they have gone through in their own life and which they can associate with events, objects, people or animals they are acquainted with (Canning-Wilson, 1999). Therefore, colorful and interesting visual materials are used both to impress and to give information. Also, these materials are attractive for both teachers and students during their learning and teaching experiences. In a research conducted by Hibbing and Erickson (2003) the thoughts of middle school students related to the significance of pictures were investigated. According to students, pictures brought more ideas to their minds and helped them comprehend the content better, which facilitated the teaching process for the teacher. Students also found pictures useful when they were shown pictures to understand the details in the text. From these reports of students, it can be concluded that pictures have the potential to make the comprehension of written materials much easier for students and that therefore they can be accepted as teaching aids for teachers as well. Although students' perceptions about visuals in English course books and the representation of variables such as gender, age and social class in course books is widely scrutinized in earlier research (e.g. Arıkan, 2005), there is a dearth of interest in how perceptions differ according to gender.

Therefore, it is important to learn and analyze students' perceptions about visuals in their course book and how the teacher uses visuals to teach English. If students find the visuals in their course book interesting, enjoyable and informative, visuals can be part of the lesson. If they are used effectively, they may bring a variety to the lesson. So, they may help break the conventional routine of English classes. It also seems worthwhile to learn students' perceptions about the techniques used by teachers when employing the visuals. Identifying whether perceptions about visuals and visuals-related class procedures differ according to gender might enable teachers to fine-tune their choice of visuals and their techniques of using them. On the basis of the feedback taken from students related to the use of visuals, implications can be drawn for teachers to make use of visuals more effectively.

Research Design

Researchers must choose the most suitable design to achieve the goals of the research (Parahoo, 2006). This study employs a quantitative research method to answer the research questions. The quantitative approach is the result of the belief that both human phenomena and variables of human behavior have the possibility to be studied objectively (Parahoo, 2006). Quantitative research method employs an established research design that plans the research question in advance and the way of data collection and analysis in detail (Robson, 2007). A questionnaire was used to collect data that can be analyzed with statistical analysis software.

Data Collection and Analysis

Parahoo (2006, p. 375) defines analysis of data as “an integrated part of the research design”. A questionnaire was used to collect data and data that were obtained were analyzed descriptively to answer the first and the second research questions. Data were analyzed with independent samples t-test statistics to find out if there was a statistically significant difference between male and female students' perceptions about visuals in their English course book and the way they are utilized and thus answer the third research question. Finally, correlational analysis procedures were utilized to answer the fourth research question. In this study, data related to perceptions of students about visuals in their course book and the techniques used by the teacher while using the visuals to teach English were tabulated and analyzed descriptively.

Participants

A total of 89 fifth-grade primary school students participated in this study. Of these 36 were female (40%) and 53 were male (60%). The youngest student was 10 and the oldest student was 12. 20 students were learning English as a third language. As the study was conducted in a large private school, most of the participants came from upper middle class families. A cluster convenience sampling strategy was utilized to select participants. Fifth-grade students in five classes in which the same English course book was used participated in the study.

Data Collection Tool

A questionnaire related to perceptions about visuals and the techniques used by the teacher while using the visuals to teach language was designed to collect data. It consisted of ten items. The items were rated on a four-point Likert scale. Four items were related to the techniques used by the teacher while using the visuals to teach English. Six items were related to the perceptions of students about the visuals in their course book. The questionnaire was written in students' native language to make it more comprehensible. Based on expert evaluation and review, the questionnaire was improved twice and each time new items were added, existing items were modified, and some items removed to prepare the most suitable questionnaire to collect relevant data. The number of the items was held as small as possible so that participant would not find the questionnaire boring. Demographic data were collected with the same questionnaire.

Class Procedures and the Course Book

Participants had 10 hours of English classes per week and about half of the time was allocated to speaking activities. The aim was to consolidate students' grammatical knowledge and vocabulary to develop their speaking skill. During the classes, students were encouraged to speak by describing pictures or by finding the differences and similarities between various pictures. To better understand the accompanying texts, students were asked to do picture-related tasks and they were expected to answer questions asked by the teacher about the pictures. Conversation on the pictures was generally started by the teacher with the aim of providing them with opportunities to speak. Questions were always graded from easy ones to more difficult ones and were related to what students learnt in the class. Students were encouraged to speak and they were given prompts by the teacher when they had difficulty in speaking or remembering the meaning of words. While students were speaking, they were not interrupted to correct their mistakes. At the end of each task, they were shortly given feedback about both their accuracy and mistakes without making any evaluative judgments about mistakes.

The English course book that was used was Fun for Flyers (second edition) written by Anne Robinson and Karen Saxby and published by Cambridge University Press. The course book was 136 pages and included 465 visuals (apart from very small ones) in 55 sections. Most of the visuals were drawings that could be accepted as context visuals. Not all visuals were relevant for stand-alone speaking activities. Therefore, 100 of all visuals that were depicting different situations or events were specifically selected for speaking activities. The visuals in the course book reflected diversity in type, shape, color and layout and they seemed to be relevant to participants' age, level and interests. Some of them were in the form of puzzles and some were put in the course book for students to paint them. The participants painted them or matched them with names or items in the book either by following instructions from the teacher or by listening to English CDs accompanying the course book. Mostly based on the texts in the course book, they were about a great diversity of topics ranging from people playing volleyball on the beach to people sleeping in a tent under a tree in the mountain. To give an example of how visuals were used, a picture showing people playing volleyball on the beach was used to teach the word 'beach', the phrase 'on the beach' and other words such as 'sand', 'sea', 'swim' etc. In another case, a picture depicting people sleeping in a tent was employed to review the Present Continuous Tense and also the prepositions.

Results

Participants' Perceptions about Visuals in Their Course Book

Descriptive analysis of survey data shows that most of the students (96,5 %) seem to find describing the objects, the characters and the environment in pictures enjoyable (Strongly Agree: 75,2 % and Agree: 21,3 %). This means that they like talking about what they see in pictures. 94,4 % of the students believe that they learn vocabulary better when they talk about pictures (Strongly Agree: 78,6 % and Agree:

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16,8 %). As for learning grammar through pictures, 83 % of the students have the belief that they learn English grammar better when talking about pictures (Strongly Agree: 55 % and Agree: 28 %), which shows that the number of students thinking that they learn grammar better through pictures is 11 % less than the number of students thinking that they learn vocabulary better through pictures. This implies that students find visuals more useful to learn vocabulary. 17 % of the students do not find pictures useful for learning grammar (Table 1).

Table 1

Students' Perceptions about Visuals in the Course Book and Related Techniques

	1	2	3	4
Describing the objects, the characters and the environment in pictures was enjoyable.	2.2	1.1	21.3	75.2
I learned vocabulary better when I talked about pictures.	1.1	3.3	16.8	78.6
I learned English grammar better when I talked about pictures.	2.2	14.6	28	55
Talking about pictures helped me develop my English speaking skill.	2	2.6	15.7	79.7
There was enough space on pages in the book for me to use.	2.6	4.3	12.3	80.8
Coloring the pictures in the book was enjoyable and informative.	12.3	7	3,5	77.3

* 1= Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= Agree 4= Strongly agree

Table 1 clearly shows that 95,4 % of the students found pictures useful for developing their English speaking skill (Strongly Agree: 79,7 % and Agree: 15,7 %). This implies that most of the students will speak English more easily as they practice speaking on pictures. There was an interesting item in the questionnaire about the space and margins on pages. 93,1 % of the students say that they agree with this item (Strongly Agree: 80,8 % and Agree: 12,3 %). Students used page margins and other spaces on pages to write English words with their Turkish equivalents and other explanations to make clarify the meaning or simply to take notes about the text. They were advised by the teacher to write or paint the meaning with crayons or color pencils.

The aim of such a strategy was to make vocabulary and explanations more accessible and give students the sense that course books can be used in more creative ways. When students opened a page, they would see colorful words and elaborations

this would enhance learning. Results showed that most of the students liked this activity. It was not surprising to see that 80,8 % of the students find painting pictures enjoyable and instructive, but 19,3 % of them did not agree with this idea (Strongly Disagree: 12,3 % and Disagree: 7 %). This shows that almost 1 out of 5 students does not like coloring pictures in his/her book.

Participants' Perceptions about Strategies of Utilizing Visuals in Course Books

As for the students' perceptions about how the teacher uses the visuals in the book to teach English, 82 % of them think that the questions asked by the teacher were interesting (Strongly Agree: 50 % and Agree: 32 %), but 18 % of them did not find the questions interesting (Strongly Disagree: 5 % and Disagree: 13 %). If we further look at the results related to the way the teacher used visuals, we see that 95,5 % of them report that the teacher encourages them to speak and 87,6 % of the students believe that the teacher asked relevant questions about the visuals in the course book. It was clear that the teacher was careful not to discourage students to speak. 92,1 % of the students believed that the questions asked by the teacher were related to what they have learnt in the class while 7,8 % of the students did not agree with this idea (Table 2).

Table 2

Students' Perceptions about the Way Visuals are Utilized

	1	2	3	4
The questions asked about visuals were interesting.	5	13	32	50
The teacher helped and encouraged me to speak about the visuals in the course book.	3.3	1.1	21.4	74.1
The teacher started with easy questions about the pictures in the course book.	5.6	6.7	20.2	67.4
Questions about visuals were related to what I had learnt in the class.	2.2	5.6	14.6	77.5

* 1= Strongly disagree. 2= Disagree. 3= Agree. 4= Strongly agree.

Gender and Perceptions

T-test results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between male and female students' perceptions about visuals in their English course book and the way they are utilized (Table 3, $t = -3.069$, $p = 0.003$). Obviously, female

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students' perceptions were more positive than those of male students, for the mean score was 3.73 for females and 3.48 for males. However, as the highest score on Likert scale was 4, it can be concluded that perceptions were mostly positive.

Table 3

Independent Samples T-test Results and Group Statistics for Gender and Perceptions

Gender	N	Mean	sd	t	p
Male	53	3.48	0.45	-3.069	0.003
Female	36	3.73	0.29		

Age and Perceptions

The correlation between the participants' perceptions and their age is $-.218$ (Table 4). This result indicates that the relationship between students' age and their perceptions is weak and that as the age increases, perceptions tend to be less positive concerning the visuals in the course book and the techniques employed to utilize them. Low correlation between the two variables might have resulted from the fact that the range of participants' age was too narrow. The youngest participant was ten and the oldest one was 12. Although the correlation is weak, it is still significant ($p = 0,04$) and is functional in the reverse direction, which means that younger students tended to have more positive perceptions about the visuals and the process of using them as language learning objects.

Table 4

Correlation Between Age and Perceptions

		Perception	Age
Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	$-.218^*$
	Sig (2Tailed)		0,04
	N	89	89
Age	Pearson Correlation	$-.218^*$	1
	Sig (2Tailed)	0,04	
	N	89	89

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Implications and Discussion

The findings of this study suggest several implications for teaching English to young learners. Visuals in course books can be part of language instruction if language learners have positive feelings about visuals and the way visuals are utilized. Of course, a whole lesson cannot be based just on visuals in a course book, but both teachers and students have the possibility to benefit from visuals. Also, visuals may bring variety to the language teaching and learning process. They may break the conventional routine of English classes. They can make the lesson more enjoyable and useful for both teachers and learners if they are employed effectively. However, both learners and teachers should devise better strategies of using pictures in the process of language learning and teaching. The findings of this study are parallel to those of previous studies about visuals concerning the fact that when written materials are accompanied with pictures, students learn more effectively than when only written materials are employed (Mayer, 2001). Using appropriate pictures along with written texts makes the learning process dynamic and memorable (Levin & Mayer, 1993; Joshi, 1995). Also, the findings of this study may be important for designers of language course books. They should consider students' perceptions related to visuals while preparing or designing language course books. More interesting, funny and informative visuals that depict situations or events should be included in English course books and teachers' guides should include instructions about how to make use of visuals in course books more effectively. Moreover, teachers should take students' gender and age into account when using visuals in the course book.

Conclusion and Future Research

This study probed into the perceptions of fifth-grade students about visuals in their course book, the techniques used by the teacher when utilizing visuals, the relationship between students' age and their perceptions about visuals. It also examined whether or not students' visuals-related perceptions differed significantly according to their gender. Findings of the study revealed that most of participant students had positive perceptions about visuals and the techniques employed by the teacher when using the visuals to teach English, that the correlation between students' age and their perceptions was low, and that there was a statistically significant difference between male and female students' visuals-related perceptions. As is stressed in the literature review, this does not mean that visuals are always useful for language learning of young learners; they can even be harmful if the message they convey and the layout is not clear and the teacher does not use appropriate techniques. That is why students' having positive attitudes towards the visuals in their course book and the way they are utilized is so crucial. Findings of the present study do not reflect the effects of visuals in course books on students' achievement in language learning. It should be noted that the foci of the study was students' perceptions about visuals in their course books, the visuals-related techniques used by the teacher, the correlation between students' perceptions and their age, and a comparison of male and female students' perceptions.

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This study has several limitations. The most important limitation is that the range of participants' age was too narrow. The youngest participant was 10 and the oldest participant was 12. Also, the cluster sampling strategy of the study is a limitation, because the participants had similar characteristics. Future studies can focus on possible effects of visuals in course books on students' language proficiency. Also correlational studies should be conducted with participants reflecting a wider range of age and level of proficiency. Future research can also focus on teachers' perceptions and their practice of utilizing the visuals in English course books.

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