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Principle Ideas of Visible Thinking in Teaching English in Kazakhstan

Abstract. *Visible thinking is a consistent, flexible and methodical approach to the organization of the educational process, allowing teachers to integrate the development of students' thinking with the study of the materials. Currently, most foreign language teachers are unable to make full effective use of visual learning tools. For this reason, they often serve as decorations, rather than a tool for developing students' language and thinking skills. As a result, this article examines key issues of using visual materials based on the principles of visible thinking in teaching English, proposed by experienced teachers from various backgrounds. Hence, a sociological survey was conducted among teachers in Kazakhstan, as well as interviews with teachers from Turkey and Kazakhstan. The survey offered questions that allowed delving into practical ideas and recommendations on the use of visible thinking in teaching English. The main results showed that images are the most effective material among other visual means in teaching English. Moreover, the article contains recommendations on how to integrate this approach in the English classroom under the principles of visible thinking.*

Keywords: *visible thinking, visual aids, structuring task, creative thinking, critical thinking, teaching English*

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Introduction

A person begins his/her mental path in life with the use of visual concepts. But the traditional education system directs its main efforts to the development of abstract-logical thinking while visible thinking remains in its infancy. At the same time, we receive most of the information about the world around us through vision. Visible Thinking (VT) is vital for a person. Every day, with the help of visible thinking, we add up a lot of pictures: we bring together the distant, we see similarities, we share the close, we oppose, we generalize, and we form a whole. We all do this without even touching visible objects. This is how we create the visible world and the image of our life. This is the relevance of the current study.

Today there has been a transition from traditional values to innovative ones. In the new paradigm, a "successful person" is a personality complex that includes talent, developed imagination, creativity, and the ability to plan and see each phenomenon in perspective, in development. The development of creative imaginative thinking creates prerequisites for the formation of such a personal complex.

Using visual aids in teaching in general terms is an easy and at the same time complex process to implement in a classroom setting. In the given article, we try to answer to the common questions of teachers in applying them in their classroom with the help of the Visible Thinking approach. For this reason, this topic cannot be clarified only by quantitative analysis, as we also include a qualitative method of research. Initially, we conducted a survey with teachers, then we interviewed the teachers to get the extensive answer to the questions. The survey included 11 questions classified into 3 groups (introductory, subject-related questions and ideas on adapting the materials into VT). Then the interview was held with experienced university and school teachers from Turkey and Kazakhstan who assisted to create a practical guide for their colleagues, who have the intention to try a new approach to their teaching.

This study is aimed to answer the common questions of teachers in applying visible thinking in the classroom and to give a brief recommendation on how to integrate it easily into the classroom.

Literature review

According to the paper “Understanding Student Differences” by Richard Felder and Rebecca Brent, 65% of people in the world are visual learners, which proves the benefits of visuals in education [1]. However, why do we miss our valuable chance to use it effectively in the classroom? The author of the book “Making Thinking Visible” and forerunner of the Visible Thinking approach Ron Richhart also pointed out that “Classrooms are too often places of tell and practice” rather than think and speak [2]. By analyzing all these ideas, we tried to make our classroom more visible thinkers and found the approach “Visible Thinking” by Harvard University.

Visible Thinking is an innovative approach that focuses on how teachers can stimulate learners’ understanding of material, independence and engagement. One of the fundamental ideas in Visible Thinking is to foster students’ thinking by “externalizing” it while they engage with content, by making it visible [3].

Unfortunately, when we ask teachers to define thinking that should be taught in their classroom, we receive this frequent question: “Do you mean Bloom’s taxonomy?” Bloom established a sequence of 6 objectives that are based on lower and higher-order thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation [4]. However, it is worth noting that thinking doesn’t always follow this sequence and knowledge can be obtained from any objective mentioned above. Accordingly, vivid examples of this view can be found in our everyday life. A little boy paints with watercolour and doesn’t even know what will happen if he mixes some colours. After mixing red and yellow, unexpectedly he observes an orange colour. Here, after applying the knowledge, he analyzes what happened in the end.

Apart from Bloom’s taxonomy, there are numerous tasks in the language learning process that don’t require students to think and therefore do not result in understanding. Completion tasks, filling out gaps, and tasks for ordering and corresponding are implemented constantly in English classes. Consequently, teachers select what is essential or not and teach only those themes. As a result, learners get used to completing tasks automatically and don’t even have a chance to stop and think. Due to this, Visible Thinking is an aid not only in language learning but also in thinking in the target language [5].

Based on the previous studies in visible thinking in teaching across Kazakhstan, it is worth noting that it was applied even in teaching technical sciences to schoolchildren such as math to make the “complex” concept easy. Making thinking and understanding visible promotes simplicity, clear structure, and completeness, as well as the accessibility of the presented material to a greater extent [6].

Now it is clear what thinking in the classroom means and we start to question: “How to make thinking visible?”, “What stages does it have?”, etc. There are 4 components to making thinking visible: questioning, interpretation, listening and documenting.

1. Questioning –teachers question during the class, but frequently through using Bloom’s taxonomy. Most of them are monotonous and simple. Perhaps, educators should approach questioning differently.

2. Interpretation- another component of Visible Thinking. Interpreting visual material requires practice and a certain amount of time. This phase needs learners’ input and output. Initially, students see and receive the visual, but later decode it orally or in a written form drawing on their ability and level of thinking. Decoding runs through observation, critical thinking and involving prior knowledge of individuals. Prior experience is essential there, as the more knowledge they have, the more things they can easily interpret [7].

3. Listening – the third component of the Visible Thinking approach. If teachers can listen to students talk, they can learn about student thinking. Both teachers will ask questions during the class, but they usually have different results. The reason is that one teacher keeps silent and continues the class when students respond with short answers and seem to be guessing, while the second one asks open-ended questions and listens to them. No doubt, listening to students’ responses attentively demonstrates our respect for them and helps to fight fears in the classroom which brings us to become interested in the following day’s topic.

4. Documenting – the last part in Visible Thinking. There are many ways to collect student thinking: notes on a whiteboard, photographs of students’ work, audiotapes or recordings of classroom discussions, students’ independent work, etc. However, it should be noted that not only teachers, but students are responsible for documenting and keeping their work. If a student saves his/her work, the progress can be seen at the end. Sharing this documentation with colleagues can assist in facilitating a rich discussion about learning and teaching innovatively.

However, it is important to note that to advance student learning, documentation must include more than simply capturing the learning. Students must be able to use the documentation to reflect on and monitor their progress. Thus, it is strongly recommended to keep the portfolio or save each student’s work separately in Google Disc.

The Visible Thinking approach is a conceivable way of teaching English through the use of our everyday classroom visual materials. It is beneficial both for enhancing the language level and developing students’ thinking skills. Here, we should mention that students improve the acquisition of knowledge and content, even memorizing, when they think through some information. Developing other soft skills, such as open-mindedness, attention to evidence, and imaginativeness can be organized in this way [8].

Methodology

Methods and Procedure

The present study provides the frequent questions of teachers in using the Visible thinking approach in the classroom, the possible ways to solve them and recommendations created by us according to the results survey and interview. The main questions that we focused on in our paper:

1. What kind of visual materials are effective and favorable for teachers?
2. How and what type of thinking do most teachers promote in the classroom?
3. How can visual materials and assignments be arranged to have students think?

The work on studying the ways of using the strategy of Visible Thinking in teaching English was organized by us into two stages. At the stage of studying the history of the issue, methods of the theoretical level were used – study and generalization, and content analysis. As a result of studying the existing experience, the basic concepts of the study were determined – Visible Thinking strategy and its main stages.

To collect data, empirical level methods were used – a survey and interview. At this stage, we initially conducted the survey in Google form with 28 teachers. The survey included 11 questions: 9 closed questions and 2 open-ended questions that required you to draw your conclusion or perception. Those questions were classified into 3 groups in their type (general, subject-related and ideas on adapting the materials into VT).

Then, we discussed some questions from the survey in detail with 5 participants among them via Zoom.[9]. The videos are recorded with the permission of both sides to get a precise variant of their speech. Finally, based on the processed data, conclusions and recommendations were formulated.

Participants

The participants of the survey were 28 teachers, working in various educational institutions, including schools, universities and educational centres in Astana. Most of the respondents were female teachers from schools aged over 30 with big experience (see Table 1). In terms of the interview, we conducted individual online meetings with 5 teachers, who also participated in the survey. Two of them are male professors at Ataturk University, Turkey and others are young female English tutors working in one of the educational centres in Astana. The number of participants less than 30 is explained by the fact that the length of the paper is expected to be short and the authors conducted further interviews for exploring the topic deeply. A detailed description of the survey participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1

The data about participant teachers in the survey

Participants						
Gender		Age		Job		
Female	Male	18-30 y.o.	Over 30 y.o.	School teacher	University teacher	Language centre tutor
22	6	11	17	18	3	7
28		28		28		

Discussion

Main constituents of the Visible thinking approach. In applying the Visible Thinking approach in the classroom, we have to take into account the following elements that were investigated in our study and reflected in the part “Results:

The meaning of thinking. What is thinking for the teacher in the classroom? After collecting the data on this topic, we identified 3 main perceptions of thinking: asking Wh-questions, applying Bloom’s taxonomy, and problem-solving individually or in groups [10]. Asking Wh-questions does not require special preparation of teachers and it is a straightforward way of asking students to think by “why”. Following Bloom’s taxonomy is also seen as one of the main sources to rely on in terms of developing students thinking in the classroom. Its main focus is on moving from simple to complex in doing different tasks related to the topic. Problem-solving, in the form of debate or case study, can also be observed as a way of enhancing thinking in the lesson.

Visual aids. Visual material is the main element for implementing the Visible thinking approach, however, we have a wide range of visuals available in the classroom which led us to confusion. Pictures and videos are the simplest and most commonly used visual aids in the classroom [11]. Another group of visual aids include traditional means of visual materials such as posters, flashcards, paper handouts and stickers. The last group includes PowerPoint presentations and mobile apps which are becoming an indispensable part of our lesson. It should be admitted that even though blackboards and posters are outdated for most educational institutions, they shouldn’t be fully eliminated from the learning process. The developers of the Visible Thinking approach have also suggested the routine “Chalk Talk” that can be implemented with the help of posters and possibly also on the blackboard [12]. As an example of how to use this approach, we suggest you look through the Visible thinking activity called “Chalk talk”. Its main aim is to think and answer silently on posters in groups. Group members read each other’s opinions, comment and if necessary, ask questions to the participants. Students should be given questions

relevant to their study. For instance, if your topic is “Emotions and Feelings” you can ask the question “What ideas, feelings and emotions are associated with the school?” Accordingly, the responses will include new vocabulary, interesting ideas and warm collaborative games in the classroom.

Types of thinking to promote in the English classroom. Almost all teachers aim to develop their students’ various types of thinking. Among them, the most widespread is critical thinking. It may include creating a fictional story, practising creative writing, sharing a speech, creating your activity, etc. [13]. It is also a great chance for sharing your experience and imagination. Following, analytical thinking has a vast impact on the English classroom. Drawing on the obtained information, analytical thinking is analyzing the facts, comparing them and solving problems logically with the help of “filling the gap”, finding the headline, ordering, etc. [14]. Critical thinking is also promoted in the English classroom through drawing conclusions, realizing contradictions, distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information, interpreting pictures, etc. Overall, all of them are applied in English classrooms in certain situations.

Questioning stages for implementing Visible thinking in the classroom. Based on all the received information, we identified 3 stages of integrating thinking and visual aid in the classroom. Everything passes from easy to complex and starts from simple comprehension questions.

1. Comprehension questions: questions such as “What is happening?”, “Where is he?”, “What is he doing?” in the picture etc. They may seem not to involve thinking, but it requires comprehending and interpreting the image.

2. Reasoning questions: after interpreting the general information, reasoning questions will appear. They are more complicated than comprehensive questions. Surprisingly, these questions have no right answer and are aimed at making students think deeper.

3. Predictions and questions related to student’s experiences. Then, the questions move on to predictions that are more required. In this part, students apply critical thinking and are expected to answer the following questions: “What happened previously?”, “What will happen next?”, etc. All answers should have arguments and evidence before sharing them publicly.

Structuring the homework assignment to make students think. Homework is also an important part of the Visible thinking approach. While giving the assignment, to think through visual material, teachers should take into account all these elements:

1) It should have an aim and learning objectives. Do not forget about the aim while restructuring the assignments.

2) Assignments should be interesting and engaging. Assignments can be creative or problem-solving. However, they should meet learners’ expectations and levels.

3) It should force students to search more on certain topics. Thinking is not only about creating something but about being able to use and analyze already existing materials.

4) It should have a beginning or introduction in the classroom. The assignment cannot be given on a topic, not familiar to students; therefore, there should be given at least handout materials on the new topic. Books or articles can also be considered as visuals.

5) Don’t make assignments big, it is better to break them down into manageable steps. When you start applying creative thinking in your classroom, make several tasks on improving your creative thinking skills. Let them start with the simplest one.

6) Assignments should contribute to keeping students interactive. Thinking individually is common. However, reflecting on situations from different viewpoints enriches students’ understanding and develops their social skills alongside the thinking skill itself.

7) Help students not be afraid of making mistakes. Criticizing students from the initial stage of thinking probably discourages them. That’s why most educators advocate not focusing on their mistakes but on their achievements.

Results

The results combined both the oral answers from the interview and survey results from Google Forms.

Result 1. Asking Wh-questions is the most common way to have students think in the English classroom in Kazakhstan.

According to Figure 1, approximately 61 % of respondents voted for all the answers mentioned above. It was followed by the answer by asking wh-questions during the class, which necessarily means that Wh-questions are a widespread and straightforward way of promoting thinking. Only 1 participant (4%) chose to apply Bloom’s taxonomy as a means of thinking process in the English classroom.

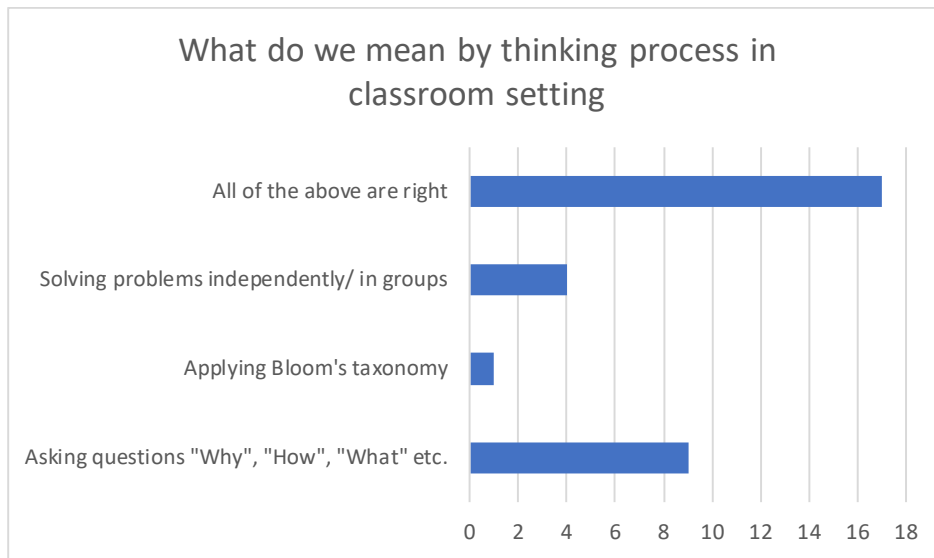


Figure 1. Participants’ vote on the meaning of the thinking process in the classroom

Result 2. Images and videos are mainly used as visual material in teaching English in Kazakhstan (28%).

This question is made up as a multiple-choice question in Google form, where participants can choose 2 or more answers. According to Figure2, the second place after photos and videos stood boards, posters, handouts and presentations making up 24% and 22% each. Finally, the use of mobile applications and flashcards/stickers got the least vote among all by not exceeding 15%.

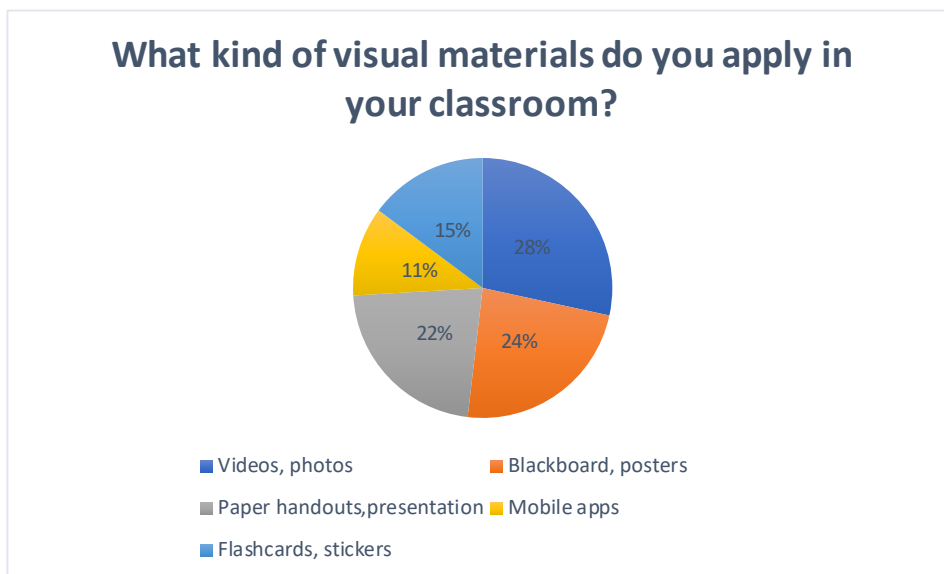


Figure 2. Types of visual materials in the classroom

Result 3. Teachers are interested in promoting types of thinking, especially creative thinking in English classes.

After data analysis, it became evident that all teachers are keen on promoting types of thinking. In addition, creative thinking is supported more among others making up over 70%. Based on Figure 3, analytical thinking has a vast impact on the English classroom followed by creative thinking. Last, but not least, critical thinking was chosen as a type of thinking developed in the English classroom (see Figure 3).

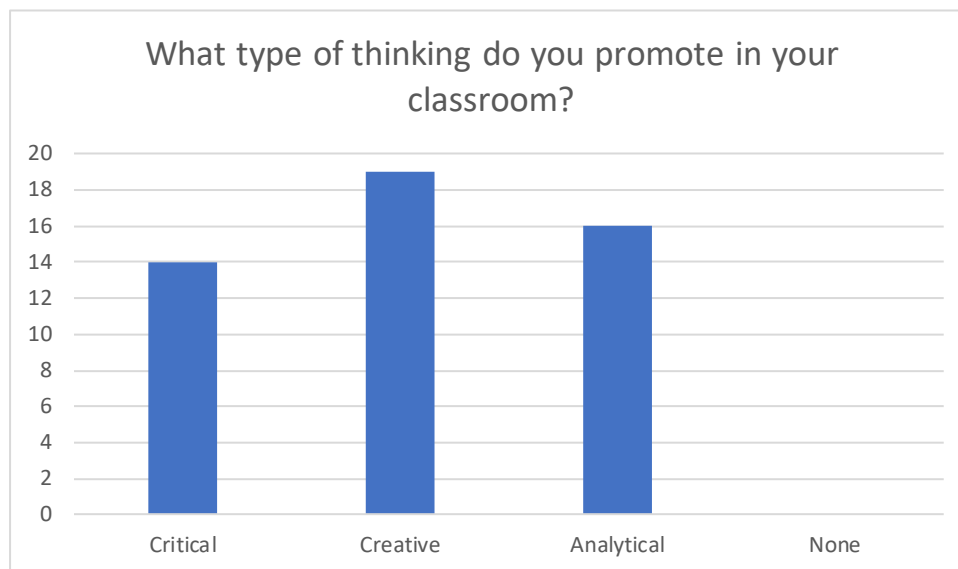


Figure 3. The types of thinking promoted in the classroom

Result 4. Most participants of our study think that it is possible to develop thinking with visual aids and already apply this approach without realizing it.

Based on the results of Question 9 in the survey, 61% of educators deem integrating the thinking and visual materials possible and rated it 5 out of 5. Subsequently, 32% state that it is almost possible, while no one agrees that it is impossible.

The results of question 10 in the survey show that about 70% of the participants often apply VT in their classroom (see Figure 4). Asking questions such as “why” based on the image, applying Bloom’s taxonomy, problem-solving and all other tasks based on thinking are considered as VT. Subsequently, 30% of the responders admit that they use it only sometimes. However, there is no teacher that never applied visual material and asked questions according to it. To sum up, all teachers use it at least from time to time.

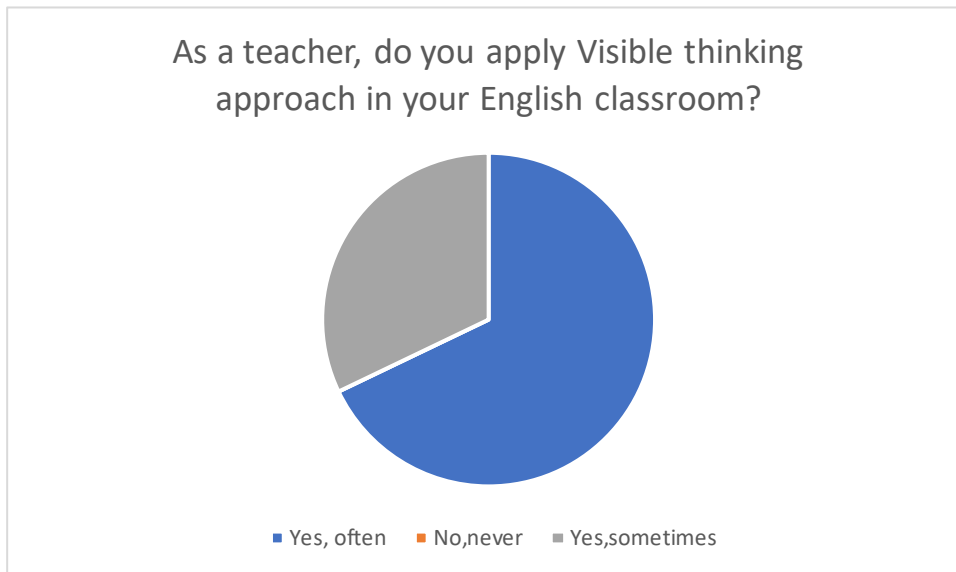


Figure 4. Percentage of teachers applying the Visible thinking approach

Result 5. There are 3 stages of using and adapting classroom materials into Visible thinking: comprehension questions, reasoning questions, predictions and questions related to students' experiences.

The results derived from the interview included ideas on adapting classroom materials into Visible Thinking. Based on all the received information, we identified 3 ways of implementing it: comprehensive questions, reasoning questions, predictions and questions related to student's experiences. It also consisted of one more question on structuring the assignment to build students' thinking, which is already discussed in the "Discussion" part.

Conclusion. The main principles in the Visible Thinking approach integrated lessons are identified and interpreted due to the teachers' responses in the survey. The conducted survey responses are derived from experienced practicing teachers, which makes the answers more concrete.

The main findings of our research demonstrated that teachers think positively about the Visible thinking approach and most of them already apply thinking required tasks while showing the visual materials in the classroom. Moreover, pictures and videos are found to be the most common and effective visual aid to make students think and develop their language skills. We also received the answer to what is meant by thinking in the classroom, which included critical, creative and analytical thinking. Creative thinking by writing creatively the ending of the story to make an interesting speech on the given topic is the most favorable among other thinking skills for English teachers. Finally, taking into account the stages of questioning from simple to complex and sticking to your language aim and level of students are equally important in implementing this approach.

Here is a brief *recommendation* for implementing the Visible thinking approach in your classroom:

1. Identify the meaning of thinking for your class. One day you can just ask Wh-questions, or you can give a certain case study or problem to solve. On another day you can make the tasks based on Bloom's taxonomy.

2. Select the visual material. As the research showed, pictures and videos are the most effective aids in the classroom. Find the photos, short videos or artwork related to your topic.

3. Think on your own about what type of thinking you should focus on or mix them. Critical, creative and analytical thinking skills are equally important to students. Please, prepare the corresponding task to visual material depending on your choice in developing one type of thinking. For instance, prepare a list of questions where students look at the photo/video and

critically make up the questions related to it. For creative thinking, they can predict the end of the video or the history of the photo/image.

4. Do not forget the simple steps to have students think easily. Start with comprehension questions, then move on to reasoning and the prediction, based on their previous experience while observing the photo/image.

5. For a complete implementation of Visible Thinking, structure the home task to make students think, not copy from the textbook.

In conclusion, in this paper, we have examined the common questions of teachers in integrating visual materials and tried to solve them with the help of surveys and interviews. Thanks to them, we made our brief recommendation to efficiently work with the visual material.

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Қазақстанда ағылшын тілін оқытудағы көрнекі ойлаудың негізгі идеялары

Аңдатпа. Визуалды ойлау – бұл мұғалімдерге оқушылардың ойлау қабілетін дамытуды оқытылатын материалды зерттеумен біріктіруге мүмкіндік беретін оқу процесін ұйымдастырудың дәйекті, икемді және әдістемелік тәсілі. Қазіргі уақытта шет тілі мұғалімдерінің көпшілігі көрнекі оқыту құралдарын толық пайдалана алмайды. Осы себепті көрнекі оқыту құралдары көбінесе оқушылардың тілдік және ойлау қабілеттерін дамыту құралы емес, безендіру ретінде қызмет етеді. Осы негізде, мақалада әртүрлі жұмыс тәжірибесі бар мұғалімдер ұсынған ағылшын тілін оқытуда визуалды ойлау принциптері негізінде көрнекі материалдарды қолданудың негізгі мәселелері зерттеледі. Осы мақсатта Қазақстан мұғалімдері арасында әлеуметтік сауалнама, сондай-ақ Түркия мен Қазақстан мұғалімдерімен сұхбат жүргізілді. Сауалнама аясында ағылшын тілін оқытуда визуалды ойлауды қолдану бойынша тәжірибелік идеялар мен ұсыныстарды тереңдетуге мүмкіндік беретін сұрақтар ұсынылды. Негізгі нәтижелер кескіндердің ағылшын тілін оқытудағы басқа көрнекі құралдар арасында ең тиімді материал екенін көрсетті. Сонымен қатар, мақалада визуалды ойлау принциптеріне сәйкес ағылшын тілі сабақтарында осы тәсілді қалай біріктіруге болатындығы туралы ұсыныстар берілді.

Түйін сөздер: көрнекі (визуалды) ойлау, көрнекі құралдар, тапсырмаларды іріктеу, сыни ойлау, креативті ойлау, ағылшын тілін оқыту.

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Основные идеи визуального мышления в преподавании английского языка в Казахстане

Аннотация. Визуальное мышление – это последовательный, гибкий и методичный подход организации учебного процесса, позволяющий педагогам интегрировать развитие мышления обучающихся с изучением преподаваемого материала. В настоящее время большинство преподавателей иностранных языков не могут в полной мере эффективно использовать наглядные средства обучения. По этой причине они часто служат декорациями, а не инструментом развития языковых умений и навыков мышления обучающихся. Вследствие этого в данной статье изучаются ключевые вопросы применения наглядных материалов на основе принципов визуального мышления при обучении английскому языку, предложенных педагогами с разнообразным опытом работы. С этой целью был проведен социологический опрос среди учителей Казахстана, а также интервью с учителями из Турции и Казахстана. В рамках опроса были предложены вопросы, позволяющие углубиться в практические идеи и рекомендации по использованию визуального мышления при преподавании английского языка. Основные результаты показали, что изображения являются наиболее эффективным материалом среди других визуальных средств в преподавании английского языка. Более того, в статье содержатся рекомендации о том, как интегрировать данный подход на уроках английского языка в соответствии с принципами визуального мышления.

Ключевые слова: визуальное мышление, визуальные средства, структурированное задание, креативное мышление, критическое мышление, преподавание английского языка.

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