

# **Imagery: An 'I Get It' Approach to Teaching English as a Second Language**

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## **Abstract**

Imagery from technology and text readily creates an "I Get It" environment in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. By tying images to key vocabulary words, the visualization in the 'mind's eye' of students creates a gestalt for difficult concepts. The classroom in and of itself becomes a medium where students make sense of old and new experiences. The resulting discussions, writings, and other assignments bind the students into a cohesive, multicultural group of productive English language learners.

## **Introduction**

Today's English as a Second Language teacher stirs the biggest American melting pot in history. As the kettle has enlarged, the contents have dramatically changed from meat and potatoes to salsa plus dozens of other ingredients. The cook is racing around the kitchen responsible for quickly serving a sophisticated society with an acculturated dinner of productive labor. The taste testers want results. So, the ESL teacher looks for the tools and the recipes to quickly engage newly arrived immigrants in English survival and academic language.

A portion of this melting pot particularly affects teachers at Ellen Glasgow Middle School. Here more than 1,160 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders represent 56 nations and 32 languages. School-wide, 37 percent are Hispanic; 20 percent, Asian; 10 percent African American; 10 percent, Middle Eastern, and 31 percent Caucasian. Historically, 12 percent or more of the total population enrolls in a Level-A program for non-English or limited-English speakers. In-take courses at Glasgow serve more ESL students than any other middle school in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), Virginia.

During this 2000-2001 school year, approximately 140 Level-A students originate from 30 countries and speak 14 first languages. About 70 percent of this population is Hispanic. The remaining 30 percent extend from 10 percent Arabic to approximately five percent Urdu. Other first languages range in descending order from Vietnamese to Chinese, Somali, Russian, Greek, Twi, Krio, Korean, Amharic, Tagalog, and Turkish. These students were divided into 10 groups, which took mathematics, science, social studies, and two language arts courses plus all-school electives. Students were placed according to Entry Assessment Mathematics Evaluation (EAME) test scores since 'high math/low English' groups tend to move faster through the Level-A program (Tom Blain, personal communication, 2001). Mathematics strongly indicates the success a

student has achieved in prior schooling, according to the past experience of Glasgow's ESL Department.

Although grouped by math, students exit ESL programs based on Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test scores. This criterion strongly influences a Language Arts classroom. A homogenous section of Pre-Algebra transposes into a heterogeneous Language Arts class inclusive of eligible gifted, general, and special education students. Methods and materials must accommodate everyone from the phonetically challenged to students suffering severe emotional trauma. Holistically, these immigrant middle schoolers present many challenges.

This study focuses on 27 seventh and eighth graders (known as Yellow Group) who participated in the highest Level-A Language Arts class at Glasgow during the 2000-2001 school year. These Pre-Algebra students originate from 14 countries and speak 9 first languages. A majority of them live in poverty; 90 percent qualify for the free lunch program. Usually, their parents know very little English.

At mid-semester, September's class changed dramatically when nine of the original 18 members advanced to B-1. These students scored well on a G-9 DRP test as well as generating adequate English writing samples. Most of them had lived in the United States for at least one-and-a-quarter years. From B-1 and eventually B-2 Level classes, students would be mainstreamed into mathematics, science, and social studies. As their skills improved, they would be completely mainstreamed into regular classes as B-3 ESL students.

Also in January, nine more students were moved up to the highest A-1 class. Within the current group, six students had lived in the United States for eight months or less; eight had lived in the U.S. for almost two years, and three had remained in Level-A for four or more years.

## Purpose of the Study

The question is whether direct instruction using imagery related to vocabulary and text would increase the rate of English acquisition for the study group. The objective would be to prepare students as meaning-makers with a conceptual understanding of key vocabulary words. Hypothetically, students would store images and words as a series of cognitive hooks that would hasten language learning. The goal was to exit Level-A middle schoolers who functionally communicate in English and academically perform on grade level in Language Arts.

Imagery delivered through 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology changes old methods of teaching vocabulary from a sometimes-meaningless 'words-on-paper' exercise into a more meaningful experience. Today's multimedia resources provide highly accessible ways to illustrate vocabulary: 1) using imagery from videos and computer programs, such as PowerPoint presentations, and 2) creating and illustrating age-appropriate ESL materials. The lack of high-interest reading texts for ESL middle and high school students seriously hinders language acquisition. Often teachers rely on elementary age picture books that consume 10 minutes of a 90-minute block. ESL language arts teachers need varied activities that address teenagers—not elementary-aged children and pre-schoolers.

The shortage of ESL materials also causes classroom management problems and can slow language acquisition. A special characteristic of the ESL classroom is that it involves quickly-formed interdependencies among students. Newly arrived students soon learn to rely on more proficient speakers and writers. Yet interdependency can also hinder student progress when they begin to rely too much on the more proficient speakers of English.

Unlike a few trade books, imagery in PowerPoint or other technologically enriched lessons serves a classroom of any size. The images appeal to students individually as cognitive hooks for decoding and remembering a new language. By connecting imagery with textual references, it seems logical that ESL students would more rapidly acquire English.

## Review of Literature

Research shows that imagery or signs such as words, pictures, sounds, odors, flavors, acts, or objects lack meaning until someone gives them meaning (Chandler, 1995). An old Zen story about two men arguing over a waving flag describes the complexities of using imagery in the classroom.

“It’s the wind that is really moving,” stated the first man.

“No, it is the flag that is moving,” contended the second.

A Zen master, who happened to be walking by, overheard the debate and interrupted them.

“Neither the flag nor the wind is moving,” he said. “It is MIND that moves.” (Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors, 2001)

Therein lies the crux of teaching ESL. Historically, educators have tested for ‘content’ and ‘meaning’ with little regard for the student as meaning-maker. Vocabulary has been taught almost one-dimensionally as an exercise to correctly label objects, ideas, emotions, and/or events with words. Today, however, the entire process of viewing, listening, and thinking is being considered to more experientially involve students as sense-makers (Soska, 1994). A heightened awareness of how second language learners interpret signs necessitates an appreciation for the findings of some semiotics, linguistics, psychology, and educational sources.

As linguist Ferdinand de Saussure noted, if words simply named a pre-existing set of things in the world, translation from one language to another would be easy (Chandler, 1995). Instead, languages categorize the world from varied perspectives. Words may imply different connotations of ‘the same thing’ (one person’s ‘hovel’ is another person’s ‘home’); the meanings may have historically changed, or there may be no words in a language to describe certain experiences, points out Daniel Chandler in *Semiotics for Beginners*. In fact, many communication and media theorists “stress the active process of interpretation, and thus reject the equation of ‘content’ and ‘meaning’” (Chandler, 1995).

Man’s abilities as interpreter are demonstrated in how the brain perceives signs in the inner workings of the ‘mind’s eye’. By disrupting brain activity with

magnetic fields, Harvard researchers found that visual memories might be stored in the brain as mental pictures. These images rerun, like videotapes, on a sheet of tissue at the back of the head (Cromie, 1999). Stephen Kosslyn, a Harvard professor of psychology, describes how the brain recollects specific information: "To recall things like the number of windows in a house, information about the geometry of the house is unpacked from memory and sent back to the visual area. Unpacking memories is what visualization is all about" (Cromie, 1999).

Also describing imagery resulting from "total multimodal perceptual experiences," psychologist Niguel J.T. Thomas theorized that verbal thoughts can be "registered, integrated and fixed for us in an appropriate image" which then could be recalled from long-term memory (Thomas, 2001). He supports the theory of Codal Dualism in which imagery and verbal representation function on the same level within the brain. Thomas suggests that:

"Simple associative trains of imagery are liable to drift off in any direction, but if, for instance, an image representing something that particularly concerns us becomes fixed in our minds, the verbal representations which are produced are likely to remain more or less relevant to that image, until, perhaps, one of them provides a solution to the problem which the image embodies" (2001). Thus, the mind consciously retrieves images and words to scientifically explain 'reality' rather than simply regurgitating representations of experience.

Addressing these cognitive processes especially needs more attention in an ESL curriculum to replace the 'watered-down academics' of the 1980's, suggests Virginia Collier. She uses her conceptual model of 'Language Acquisition for School' to describe the sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive aspects of language learning. Based on the research she conducted with W.P. Thomas, she recommends three ways to significantly improve the academic learning of ESL students entering high school: 1) teach second language through academic content, 2) focus on teaching learning strategies necessary to developing thinking skills and problem-solving, and 3) educating staff about teaching methodologies such as activating the prior knowledge of students (Collier, 1995). With thoughtful selection, imagery has the power to fulfill academic objectives while relating a student's prior experiences to vocabulary and text (Considine & Haley, 1992).

Powerful multimedia resources also transform a classroom into a medium, that is, a delivery system of sociocultural experiences. The room itself becomes a microcosmic laboratory where newly arrived immigrants first experience life in the United States. The environment delivers highly affective messages such as acceptance or prejudice that, in turn, damage or promote language acquisition (Collier, 1995). These sociocultural processes inherent within the home, school, community, and society at large form the core of Collier's 'Language Acquisition for School' model. Other medium, suggests Umberto Eco, such as television and film for verbal, visual, auditory, and locomotive signs is likewise "charged with cultural significance" (Chandler, 1995). Multimedia imagery has become an accepted 'reflection of reality' from which "much of our knowledge of the world" indirectly derives, explains Chandler. He notes that, "we experience many things primarily (or even solely) as they are represented to us within our media and

communication technologies” (1995). Using the technologies of the “multisensory world outside of school” can “restructure our classrooms” into stimulating arenas of “active learning, information management, open inquiry, and interpretive skills” (Soska, 1994).

The following education experts also stress the value of imagery in an ESL curriculum:

- Young people learn half of what they know from visual information—Mary Alice White, a researcher at Columbia Teacher’s College (1999).
- Video applications show great promise in literacy education—Heide Spruck Wrigley, Aguirre International, San Mateo, CA (1993).
- The impact of visual communications and visual language on verbal language...(has) the power...(to evoke) spoken and written compositions—John L. Debes and Clarence M. Williams, published by the Visual Literacy Center (1978).
- Literacy begins with using real objects to set an immediate and meaningful context, gradually replacing them with photos or realistic pictures, then substituting these with more abstract diagrams or graphics—J. Ramm in *Classroom considerations: A practical guide to teaching beginning language and literacy* (1994).
- The Congress finds that—(11) educational technology has the potential for improving the education of language-minority and limited English proficient students and their families...such as multimedia, word processing, desktop publishing, email, and the World Wide Web (Crawford, 1997; Soska, 1994).

As for the success rate of multimedia methodologies, the variables in current research have created inconsistent results. Flawed studies cannot presently quantify the advantages of using specific methodologies for second language acquisition (Crawford, 1997). Some findings do show: 1) “moderate positive effect” on student performance, and 2) dramatically less time on instruction as compared to traditional methods (Soska, 1994).

## Methodology

The inspiration for this study comes from three little words—“I get it!” exclaimed by a round-eyed Arabic-speaking seventh grader. He had happily understood the term, “third-person omniscient narrator.” The image he saw was clipart of a Sherlock Holmes type character with a magnifying glass peering into a house. The house represents a short story; the Sherlock Holmes figure represents the narrator. The imagery was part of a teacher-created PowerPoint presentation to introduce Language Arts literary terms for the analysis of short stories. PowerPoint presentations, movie clips, videotaping and acting out scenarios, graphics, picture books, and text—all are part of multimedia instruction that integrates technology into an interactive classroom (Soska, 1994). This study incorporates these methods into a nonfiction unit called My



Career Project in which students create and explain a My Career book based on research about their American Dream job.

Initially, the imagery for the third-quarter Career Project was presented from the first day of school. The keystone became the classroom's new computer presentation unit with Internet access linked through a 36-inch monitor suspended from the ceiling, plus the school computer laboratories and library computers. The images were provided through first quarter classroom activities, a teacher-created poster, two teacher-created PowerPoint presentations, art class, a Washington Post career mini-page, highly illustrated trade books, and teacher-made graphic organizers and worksheets. As the project evolved, the student-made My Career books became the centerpiece imagery for the unit. The illustrated books show the gestalt of what students had achieved.

Besides an analysis of the career books, this study includes a statistical overview of student achievement, plus teacher observations and excerpts from student writing. The statistics include DRP and Grade Instructional Level (GIL) scores. The teacher's journal describes student behaviors and oral discussions. The student writings compare their changing American Dreams from the moment they first learned about immigrating to America to the reality of living here. After completing their career plans, they wrote about their new American Dream.

The groundwork for the Career Project clearly showed this would be a highly motivating unit for students. During the first week of school, the seventh and eighth graders had enthusiastically created collages with written explanations of their interests. In art class, they were totally absorbed in creating their version of Marc Chagall's "I and the Village" to illustrate their past lives in their countries combined with their interests and new lives in the United States. After a PowerPoint presentation about Martin Luther King and Caesar Chavez, they talked about their American Dream. Then, student interest particularly heightened during a short story called "The Undefeated" about a Mexican boy with a 'broken' American Dream. This story required no teacher-supplied images because it describes the poor conditions in which most of Glasgow students live.

A second PowerPoint presentation introduced the specific components of the Career Project. Besides an overview of the required assignments, the imagery and text illustrated the economic necessities of earning a high school diploma and benefits of a college degree. This information was based on *The Teenager's Guide to the Real World* OnLine (Brain, 1997). Students appeared dramatically sobered by the statistics about the buying power of minimum wages related to the costs of living independently from their parents. Afterwards, a frequent question relating to careers was, "How much money does a \_\_\_\_ make?"

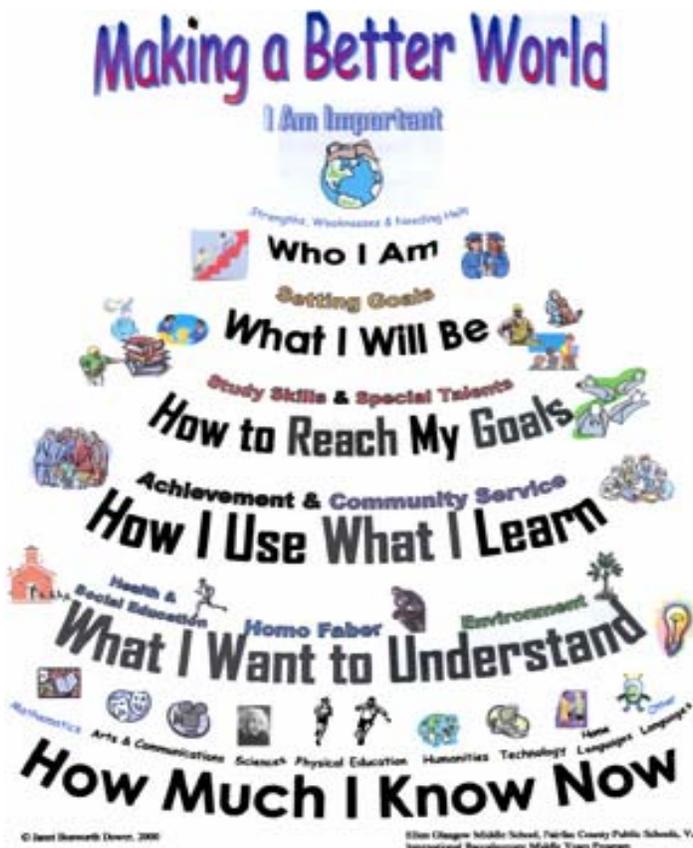
The first section of the Career Project, called a 'Character Check List', required students learn more than 35 vocabulary words and complete charts, graphs, and questions about their personalities. The images presented with the vocabulary list included acting out scenarios, references to classroom behaviors, and familiar television characters/shows, as well as the Washington Post career mini-page and trade books. Initially, the teacher guided the students through the first two charts. The subsequent graphs were completed interactively in small

groups. Finally, the students individually rated their abilities for the last handout called “Getting along with People”.

The second section of the Career Project involved small groups researching career interests on the Internet. The teacher and two librarians helped students fill out teacher-made handouts with information from the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Handbook website.

To create their career books, students used their research as the basis for paragraphs, a graph, and artwork to describe their interests, goals, and plans. Their final projects would contain all parts of a nonfiction book except an index.

As a follow-up for many lessons, a teacher-created poster called “Making a Better World” helped students visualize critical thinking processes. The poster’s imagery illustrates Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy of learning and Howard Gardner’s Seven Intelligences. Students were frequently asked questions such as, “What is your American experience?”, “What are your goals?”, and “What do you want/need to know to reach your goals?” The images also promoted student understanding of and connections between the five areas of interaction for Glasgow’s International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP)—Approaches to Learning, Health and Social Education, Environment, Homo Faber, and Community Service.



## Findings

With qualitative and limited quantitative data, this study supports a multimedia approach to teaching vocabulary. By relating images to text, ESL students comprehended, retained, and reproduced a varied vocabulary that empowered them as meaning-makers. Statistically, this study compares DRP and GIL scores for 2000-2001 students in the highest Level-A class with similarly grouped seventh and eighth graders in 1999-2000. Qualitatively, the research includes teacher observations and student writings. Vocabulary tests are excluded because these seemed to measure more about who had studied for a test rather than a student’s ability to reproduce a second language. This research focuses on the accuracy, frequency and facility with which students used new vocabulary in everyday speech and/or writing.

Quantitatively, some limited statistics seem to suggest improved achievement of 2000-2001 students from those in 1999-2000. Although many factors contribute to the process of language acquisition, the major difference between the teaching methods for these two groups resulted from the summer installation of the classroom presentation unit. The computer with Internet access linked to the 36-inch TV plus the ability to present teacher-created PowerPoint shows dramatically increased the impact of imagery related to text. Integrating the new technology into the classroom environment may have contributed to the 12 % increase in reading achievement scores this year as compared to 1999-2000. As a whole, 81% of the 27 students from the highest Level-A group during 2000-2001 achieved between a second-to-fourth grade reading level as compared to 69% of the 31 students who participated in a similar group during 1999-2000.

Comparing the DRP scores between the two groups, there was a 10% increase of students in 2000-2001 who scored above a 35 DRP versus their peers in the previous year. In 1999-2000, 24 students (77%) out of 31 with DRP scores ranging from 32-51 were transferred to B-1 from the highest Level-A group. The year began with 22 students in that group, of which 14 (64%) with DRPs ranging from 35 to 51 were promoted to B-1 classes in January 2000. The lower Level-A classes were then restructured to create a new high-level group of 18 seventh and eighth graders. By year's end, 10 (56%) of these students with DRP scores ranging from 32 to 44 qualified for B-1 instruction.

In comparison, 23 (85%) of 27 students during 2000-2001 achieved comparable DRP scores to their peers in the previous year. In the fall 2000-2001, 18 seventh and eighth graders were placed in the highest Level-A class. Of these, nine (50%) were transferred to B-1 by January with DRP scores ranging from 39 to 45. Another nine students were then advanced to the highest Level-A group. By June 2000, 13 out of these 18 students with DRP scores ranging from 33 to 51 were promoted to B-1. Two more were kept from moving into ninth grade B-1 classes because the high school had raised its entry level DRP from 35 to 40. If the standard had been the same as in the 1999-2000 school year, 85 per cent of the students would have advanced to B-1.

As hypothesized, students in the study group accurately reproduced the Career Project vocabulary in everyday speech and/or writing. The confidence levels of this year's students seemed to skyrocket. Especially, their oral skills and listening comprehension rapidly expanded. By the end of May, no interpreters were needed to help them complete a "Middle School and High School Academic and Career Portfolio" with a guidance counselor. The brochure would have been incomprehensible to them in September. In the section entitled "Career Awareness and Exploration", every student checked 'Yes' to the statement: "I can analyze abilities and interests in relation to career choices".

Increasingly, English—as the common language in the classroom--empowered the study group as independent learners. The cooperative student interactions during the last 90-minute block of the Career Project demonstrated the cumulative effect of multi-media sources on the sociocultural process. Following an established routine, the teacher assigned students jobs after briefly

reviewing each person's progress and outlining the day's objectives. Two very capable students, who had completed their career books, then circulated the room helping their peers. Four boys wrote, typed, and delivered a letter to the school principal asking him for an interview about his life experiences as an immigrant. Two girls revised the interview questions (previously written by the entire class) and typed them in the school library. With the classroom computer, another girl finished a colored graph of the projected income for her career plan. Three students wrote summary paragraphs to submit their projects for Glasgow IBMYP certification. The remaining students assembled their books after finishing the Works Cited and Table of Contents. In a corner of this busy scene, the teacher worked with individuals answering questions and assessing projects. Using the classroom as a medium had firmly established a workplace environment reflective of the "outside world." From the imagery of words, pictures, sounds, acts, and especially the career books, the students were making meaning of their lives.

Towards the end of the block, the four boys excitedly rushed back into the classroom from the principal's office. Not only the principal, but also the entire administrative staff, had interrupted a meeting to look over the boys' career projects for 20 minutes. An administrator later wrote about how proud, eager, and prepared these students were to discuss their projects and dreams for the future. Later, the whole class demonstrated competent language skills when the principal came for the interview.

By the close of the Career Project, the students also wrote fluent paragraphs that sharply contrasted with earlier writing samples. For example, one girl from Peru completed only five lines for her fall writing sample that began with: "The day more hapie de my life was go to United State..." Her spring writing sample covered more than two pages. In a rough draft for her Career Project, she wrote: "I would like to become a pediatriician. I like this job because I want to help the children in many different ways. I get to use new treatment, technology and maybe good salary. If I work many hours I can make lots of money. And I can put a center of rehabilitation for children for free."

Another girl from Honduras wrote more than four pages about her changing American Dream. In her country, she longed to be a famous "bylanguaje" singer of Spanish and English music. Once in the United States, she discovered that "...the life is hard is not easy as the one I had...". Now she plans to follow a new dream as a math teacher "...because I love how teachers work to explain to the students...I know math and I love it."

In the final paragraph of her six-page paper, a Bolivian girl ended with: "My new American dream changed my life by make me have purposes and goals for my future. It was my door to my future, and my future is to being a businesswoman."

After the Career Project, students confidently tackled almost any assignment. Without specific language preparation, they attended an eighth grade assembly in which a Holocaust survivor described her ordeal. The students returned with accurate and mostly complete oral and written reports. The paragraphs included varied vocabulary such as: encampment, ghetto,

rescued, survived, disease, murdered, escape, exterminate, and concentration. One girl's detailed report most accurately described what she had heard--"I learn from Ms. Charlene Schiff experience...the western of Poland was control by Germany...you must know two languages to survive. But the official language was Russian..."

The vocabulary from the Career Unit also carried over into the character analysis of Eliza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady." One Vietnamese boy described Eliza as having "intellect, friendliness, honesty, and self-control", while an El Salvadorian boy wrote: " She always dream with chocolates and a room far away from the cold night air. So Eliza have the ambition to learn proper English and have a better life."

Connecting imagery to text created an interesting, interactive environment for the study group. Rather than being buried in words, a second language learner could experience the illustrated content with their peers. The inclusive lessons engaged everyone, such as the lowest achieving reader in the class. This quiet girl who receives speech therapy for pronunciation problems rarely talked in class. After viewing "My Fair Lady", however, she abandoned her inhibitions to hotly debate whether Eliza should marry Freddie. Barely stopping to breathe, she found apt descriptors for Professor Henry Higgins such as 'self-centered, selfish, rude, disrespectful'. "...He no care for Eliza. He using her. He ambitious because he want prove he best phonics professor." Stimulated by her intense feelings, she had connected the vocabulary from her third-quarter Career Project with the imagery presented in the fourth-quarter drama unit.

## Conclusion

Classroom instruction without imagery misses many teaching opportunities—especially during the 'silent period' of second language learners. When English must sound like the Tower of Babel, imagery connects the middle schooler to classroom activities. A smile or a nod may be the only evidence of comprehension until the student feels comfortable enough to speak. This initial 'silent period' may last several months (Krashen, 1982). In the study group, another girl's limited paragraphs only showed some comprehension beyond her, "Yes, Miss." When she finally asked a question, she wanted to know how a \$4,000 grant could possibly be enough to pay for a college education. The direct instruction for her group during her silence had included charts and graphs regarding incomes, careers, and college costs. Studies show that "about 80 percent of words are learned as a result of direct explanation" usually by a teacher (Biemiller, 1999).

Imagery for the study group formed a shared contextual experience—a language of its own filled with referents. Students frequently alluded to pictures they had seen in PowerPoint presentations and movie clips to explain themselves. Conversely, this common language of pictures and experiences seemed to work as a mental dictionary for concepts that the students had retained. For example, a quiet 14-year-old Spanish speaker accurately illustrated Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride". His artwork demonstrated his understanding of the poem and sociocultural concepts relating to colonial life

in Boston. As he explained his work in English for his peers, the proud look on his face told another story. This El Salvadorian eighth grader obviously enjoyed and probably would remember an American Revolution story written in the genre of poetry, a standard, grade-level assignment in Language Arts.

### Implications for Further Study

Future studies using imagery related to vocabulary/text will hopefully provide educators with more effective bridges to English language acquisition. However, testers need to remember that the DRP and GIL scores alone represent the academic criteria of the U.S. educational system—not the intelligence or talent of the immigrant or the abilities of teachers. Importantly, many side benefits derive from integrating multimedia technologies into classroom activities. The resulting use of imagery reduces instructional time, as well as presents academic standards of learning in an understandable format without watering down the curriculum. Initially, the impact of these strategies may only be evident through what Collier calls “ongoing assessment using multiple measures” (1995).

Further research may also generate specific, age-appropriate materials designed for middle and high school ESL programs. With 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology, multimedia lessons can encapsulate a program of studies across the curriculum. Imagery can be used as a common language that creates a frame of reference and triggers associations with existing mental images. Future studies may identify specific imagery related to vocabulary that successfully promotes reading comprehension in an ESL classroom.

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