



Can Using Visual Images Enliven Teaching and Learning Within Closed Doors?

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Confinement to the home during the coronavirus pandemic changed teaching-learning dynamics for primary schoolers in Bangladesh and beyond. Early reports about homeschooling suggested that both parents and children experienced exhaustion and boredom. This qualitative study aimed to understand the workings of this newly evolved teaching-learning system and find whether visual images played any role. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of three parents and three children. Twenty-nine significant statements were found, and six themes surfaced from them. Findings indicate that using visual images led to enjoyable learning amid lockdown. Parents also used them to engage their children with textual matter. Moreover, the study found that if parents had the time and could set aside their other responsibilities, they could break through the conventional teaching and learning spell that their children disliked. When that happened, the teaching-learning process shifted from its traditional, rigid form, where homework was the focus, to a playful, activity-based, and friendly form where visual images, games, and music prevailed.

Keywords: visual literacy, book design, homeschooling, teaching-learning process, education in emergencies

Introduction

When we humans are confined to our homes under the foreboding uncertainty of a fatal infectious disease, history suggests it changes us in ways that challenge the very essence of what makes us human (Cunningham, 2009; Kohn, 2008; Oldstone, 2020). Reporting the bubonic plague in England in 1665 (Moote & Moote, 2006), Defoe (2010) wrote about plague-stricken mothers who had murdered their children in *A Journal of the Plague Year*. However, as M. Hossain (2020) and Zahid (2020) found, the nature of this phenomenon was somewhat insipid for many Bangladeshis. The developing zeitgeist had too little background to remember plagues and pandemics (Shahnawaz, 2020); or because period television serial like *Ayomoy* (Chowdhury, 2018; Department of Films and Publications, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011) that depicted the menace of smallpox epidemic was broadcast nearly three decades earlier in 1990 (Ahmed, 1990; Ghosh, 2014); or the internationally well-circulated ghastly photo of a young Bangladeshi girl infected with smallpox was relatively inaccessible to the populace (James Hicks & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, United States, 1973). Nevertheless, Bangladesh grasped the reality of a

pandemic on March 18, 2020, effectively closing its schools and educational institutions (M. T. Hossain, 2020).

A nationwide lockdown changed how Bangladeshis operate their daily lives overnight—necessarily knighting the housebound parents as teachers of their schoolgoing child or children. This gave rise to an unprecedented teaching-learning system, involving parents as teachers with their child or children as learners, along with textbooks and inadequate teaching-learning materials, often lacking pedagogical support (Awal, 2020). Although online learning began to emerge, for Bangladesh, the extent of the digital divide and existing digital poverty rendered online learning a luxury for many (Alamgir, 2020; Asjad, 2020; Menon, 2020; Tithila, 2020). The novel difficulties faced by the Bangladeshi parents in homeschooling their children were also true for parents in other parts of the world. Mathers (2020) and Ritschel (2020) described the case of many parents in the United Kingdom who were unable to homeschool their children satisfactorily. Huffman (2020) reported the same in the United States, as did Duffy and Kent (2020) in Australia. All in all, the pandemic-forced teaching-learning model was found to be “exhausting” or “impossible” (Mandel, 2020, para. 1).

On the other hand, a significant number of studies have found that visual imagery actively aids in the teaching-learning process (Bobek & Tversky, 2016; Dondis, 1973; Elkins, 2008; Newman & Ogle, 2019; Paivio, 1990, 2007; Plotnik

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& Kouyoumdjian, 2013; Serafini, 2014). Nevertheless, understandably, most of the available data did not consider teaching and learning in quarantine, behind closed doors. This asked for a deeper insight into how a present-day pandemic has influenced teaching and learning, or schooling, in the modern context. After all, as Nobel laureate, Orhan Pamuk puts it, “today we have access to a greater volume of reliable information about the pandemic we are living through than people have ever had in any previous pandemic” (Pamuk, 2020, para. 18). By speaking with both parents and the children, this study aimed to understand the dynamics of this emerging teaching-learning system and find if visual images were able to invigorate its so-reported deadening nature.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon visual literacy theory (Dondis, 1973; Elkins, 2008; Newman & Ogle, 2019; Serafini, 2014) and dual coding theory (Paivio, 1990, 2007), both of which provide essential frameworks for understanding how meaning is constructed and apprehended through visual and verbal modes. Dondis (1973) defines visual literacy as the capacity to construct, recognise, produce, and interpret visual messages in ways accessible to all individuals, irrespective of formal training. She contends that this form of literacy has become an urgent educational priority in the technological age, asserting that just as the printing press necessitated widespread literacy in verbal forms, the proliferation of visual communication demands a parallel competence in visual forms. Serafini (2014) likewise explains visual literacy as “the process of generating meanings in transaction with multimodal ensembles, including written text, visual images, and design elements, from a variety of perspectives to meet the requirements of particular social contexts” (p. 23).

Paivio (1990, 2007) theorises the cognitive foundation of this process, positing two distinct but interrelated symbolic systems: a nonverbal system specialised in processing imagery and a verbal system specialised in language. According to this framework, learning and memory are more effectively supported when information is presented through both channels, enabling dual encoding and retrieval. Newman and Ogle (2019) similarly identify visual literacy as the ability to understand visual information and employ visual modes to communicate ideas, grounding their view in semiotic and dual coding theories. Drawing from semiotics, they argue that meaning emerges through culturally embedded signs—gestures, images, sounds, actions, objects, and words—which acquire significance only through prior knowledge and cultural frames. In alignment with Paivio’s theory, they advocate for the concurrent use of verbal and visual input, emphasising its cognitive benefits, particularly the activation of both cerebral hemispheres and the efficiency of visual processing.

Methodology

This qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews with three homebound parents and three children, conveniently sampled, over the phone. They were interviewed over a period of five weeks, from mid-August to mid-

September 2020. Semi-structured interviews were selected, as the pandemic necessitated an organic and flexible approach to collecting meaningful data. As Tracy (2020) said,

Such an approach encourages interviewers to listen, reflect, adapt to ever-changing circumstances, and cede control of the discussion to the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews may occur during a slow point of field-work, over a meal or drink—or they may be planned for a specific time. The advantages of semi-structured interviews are that they allow for more emic, emergent understandings to blossom, and for the interviewees’ complex viewpoints to be heard without the constraints of scripted questions. (p. 158)

Likewise, convenience sampling was used to find eager participants during the pandemic, following the point made by Saumure and Given (2008) that “individuals who are the most ready, willing, and able to participate in the study are the ones who are selected to participate” (p. 124).

Since lockdown prevented face-to-face conversation, interviews were organised over the phone. Block and Erskine (2012) found that “there are distinct advantages when researchers use this data collection medium, such as providing researchers with flexibility and access that is unavailable through traditional methods” (p. 437). Drabble, Trocki, Salcedo, Walker, and Korcha (2016) also found telephone interviews to be viable and valuable methods for collecting rich qualitative data. This study also followed their recommendations to avoid various pitfalls associated with this method. Multiple short breaks were taken to create a relaxed atmosphere for the interviewees.

The interviews with the parents were conducted in Bangla and began with broad questions, such as how the pandemic had influenced their lives or how teaching-learning activities were conducted during the quarantine. They were followed by specific questions about using visual images from textbooks or other sources and whether they played any part in the teaching-learning process. The questions were primarily open-ended, with some closed-ended questions asked to clarify certain positions or beliefs held by the interviewees. The questions were crafted and asked cautiously to minimise the risk of leading or objectionable questions.

The interviews with the children were conducted adopting the works by Platt (2016). She declares,

Even from young ages, children can provide rich and accurate information about their lives. They can also help to tell us which questions we should be asking them. But there are specific issues to consider when carrying out research with children in order to obtain the most accurate and meaningful information about their lives, attitudes and perspectives. (p. 4)

Her age-specific checklists were followed to collect information from the children. The interviews were conducted in Bangla and in the presence of the children’s parents or carers. The questions were broken down and asked piecemeal. Specific short questions related to the children’s experience, such as “How do you feel about the images in your textbook?” or “What is your favourite image?” were asked.

All the parents interviewed were female. The researchers tried vainly to find at least one male parent to interview. However, much like the notion of “Kyoiku Mama” (Ellington, 2009, p. 196) or “tiger mother” (Chua, 2011), and as Ferdous (2020) maintains, the researchers found mothers to be the foremost person in helping their primary school-going children with studies at home, quarantine or not. Regarding the participating mothers’ age, two mothers in this study were in their mid-thirties, and one was in her early forties. Before lockdown, two of them were working mothers, and one was a stay-at-home mother. All mothers completed graduate or higher degrees and helped with their children’s studies even before the lockdown. All of the mothers’ household income was categorically middle-to-high.

As for the children who were interviewed, two were male, and one was female. One was in second grade, another in third grade, and the third in fifth grade. Two of the children attended government primary schools in Dhaka, and another attended a private English-medium school in Chattogram. All the children were from middle- to high-income households. The parents and children interviewed in this study were unrelated to each other.

Ethical Considerations

This study scrupulously followed the fourth edition of the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* by the British Educational Research Association (2018). Informed consent was obtained from the participating parents and guardians. The participants were also instructed that they might withdraw at any moment without providing a reason. They were also informed that they would be given pseudonyms in all the documents pertinent to the study. Each participant was informed in advance that the call would be recorded using a mobile application (“Catalina Group Limited,” 2020) to enable word-for-word transcription.

Data Analysis

The study analysed the data using Colaizzi’s seven-step phenomenological method (Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015). The method called for “familiarisation”—the first step—where transcribed interviews were reviewed several times, ultimately gaining a complete understanding of the data. “Significant statements” were then identified from every transcript. “Bracketing” the researchers’ “presuppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced”, the identified significant statements were then thoroughly pondered over to “formulate meanings” from them. The fourth step, “clustering themes”, involved assembling the recognised meanings into themes. Then, by integrating all the themes, the researchers developed “full and inclusive descriptions” of the phenomenon. For the penultimate step, the comprehensive descriptions were distilled into concise statements. In the seventh and final step, the researchers returned to the interviewees for corroboration.

Research Trustworthiness

The study employed a triangulation approach to ascertain its trustworthiness. As stated by Johnson and Christensen (2019), triangulation “is a validation approach based on the search for convergence of results obtained by using multiple investigators, methods, data sources, and/or theoretical perspectives” (p. 284). An independent investigator observed the interviews in this study, and the interpretations from those interviews were discussed with the participants for verification. “Continual self-awareness and critical self-reflection by the researcher on his or her assumptions, biases, predispositions, and actions, and their impact on the research situation and evolving interpretations” (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 283) or reflexivity on the researchers’ part was also ensured, and cross-checking the information reached “convergence” (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, p. 283).

Findings

The interviews were transcribed verbatim in Bangla. Perusing these six interviews resulted in 29 significant statements, and from these statements, formulated meanings were established to be apportioned into clusters. The clusters identified six themes, which were subsequently translated into English. They are as follows: (a) enjoyable learning, (b) engagement with lessons, (c) images and arts education, (d) parental time and methodological tensions, (e) influencing imagination and relating experience, and (f) textbooks. The themes are further described with some verbatim quotations, as Corden and Sainsbury (2006), also cited by Bryman (2016), found that verbatim quotations illustrated points, gave voice to the participants, provided evidence, and deepened readers’ understanding.

Theme 1: Enjoyable Learning

Interviewees discussed the impact of images in encouraging enjoyable learning experiences. The teaching-learning experience became pleasant and amusing when images were introduced. The participating mothers thought that, as the children were homebound all the time, the home gradually became a place that was hard to define for them—“Was it a home?” or “Was it a school?”—“The children were definitely perplexed after a while into the lockdown,” one mother said. Another mother said that picture books, games or plays and “snuggling” provided the only “refuge”. The respondents said the images accompanying the lessons were “a fun thing” rather than “a study thing”. One mother stated,

Textbooks with illustrations are just splendid! I see my kid’s books today and think that if I had these types of colourful books in my school days, I bet it could have helped me a good deal in enjoying my lessons. I remember my early textbooks as being so drab and colourless. I’m very happy that my kid can read such illustrated textbooks.

A second-grader confidently expressed that images helped her in remembering the rhymes by saying,

I love looking at the pictures (in the books)! My favourite book is *Chorar Chobi* (a book of nursery rhymes [Dutt, Basu, & Dutt, 1950], the title means “pictures of rhymes”). I love all the pictures, and I can recite all the rhymes!

Theme 2: Engagement With Lessons

The number of lessons studied decreased during the lockdown, but engagement was found to be lacklustre. One mother specified that her child usually had to prepare three or four lessons each day before lockdown; these days, her child would “touch” only two lessons, and even then, mindfulness is not strongly present. Images helped in this situation. One mother noted,

Now and again, when my child would not exhibit the impetus to study or prepare a lesson, I would tell my child (showing an image from the textbook of the corresponding lesson), “Here’s a beautiful picture, isn’t it beautiful? What do you see here?” My child would beam up and try to make sense of the picture. Sometimes my child would be on point, sometimes kind of on point, or occasionally off the mark. This event, however, would enrich my child’s understanding of the lesson at hand; as a result, my child would be more attentive and engaged.

Another mother thought that images acted as a bridge between the teaching-learning process and the lesson or text. She reported,

I always show complementary images when I’m teaching a lesson. I never forget about them. I think lessons with no companion images often become the least understood by the children. With images, making sense of the lesson is an open-and-shut case.

The fifth-grader explained that images made him more eager about the text. He expressed,

I don’t like it when there are no images (in the textbook). I like it when there are many colourful images. I feel a “speed” (the child actually used the English word “speed”) reading the text, when there are images. It makes the reading easier and more fun.

Theme 3: Images and Arts Education

The participating mothers also focused on arts education in relation to the role of images in the teaching and learning experience during the lockdown. The respondents said this oft-overlooked curricular subject was a “boon” when the teaching-learning environment became “toxic”. With lockdown, mothers said they were handling more household responsibilities and chores, so they would occasionally leave their children to draw. The mothers posited that images in the textbooks and their children’s drawings had a strong correlation. One mother said,

My children are very much into drawing. The images in the textbooks provide many sources for them to draw inspiration from. When they see any images while reading a particular chapter or lesson, they always look forward

to drawing the picture. This also helps them with arts education, a subject included in the curriculum.

Theme 4: Parental Time and Methodological Tensions

The lockdown restructured the academic day, creating conditions for a different quality of teaching and learning. With the pressures of rigid school schedules and homework removed, parents reported having more time to engage their children in educational activities they perceived as stimulating. Children echoed this, consistently associating their most enjoyable learning experiences with visual aids. Yet this expanded time introduced a central tension: although opportunities for playful, engaged learning increased, parents often struggled to use the time effectively. Many reported reverting to rote methods, which frequently made learning “miserable” for their children. This tendency arose from two main challenges: a belief that rote learning was necessary for particular subjects and a lack of knowledge about alternative strategies. Mothers described difficulty sustaining a positive learning atmosphere, citing the psychological strain of the pandemic and increased domestic responsibilities as barriers to maintaining the mindset needed for creative teaching. In this strained context, visual images drawn from textbooks and online sources emerged as crucial support. They offered a practical means for parents to bridge the gap between available time and pedagogical uncertainty, enabling them to create what they referred to as an “appropriate learning environment” despite emotional and cognitive fatigue.

Theme 5: Influencing Imagination and Relating Experience

Focusing on the routine nature of being confined to the home, which one mother termed “imprisonment,” the participating mothers stated that they believed it hindered their children’s creativity and imagination. The mothers expressed that they found visual images to be one of the active stimulants in kindling imagination and creativity. One mother talked about how her child drew the entire family on a “magic carpet” à la Aladdin (Kreider & Baker, 2015), a picture book that her child had. When the mother asked her child why they were on a magic carpet, her child replied, “Because if we are flying, we cannot catch coronavirus!”

The mothers reported that the imagination was brought on by some sort of reality that the children experienced. In one case, a mother discussed a particular drawing that inspired her child, who was drawn to an image of a water fairy from her Bangla textbook (Alam, Haque, Haque, Begum, & Khan, 2013). However, her child drew the water fairy with a face mask.

Theme 6: Textbooks

All mothers agreed that textbooks are an essential part of the teaching-learning process. They opined that the quality of the images was directly related to the quality of the textbooks. The mothers thought that the English-medium textbooks were years ahead in terms of the quality of images used and the quality of print. One mother posited that the colours in

the English-medium textbooks were more “bright” and “attractive”. One child expressed that on multiple occasions, she found some of the images in her textbooks to be blurry and unintelligible (seemingly resulting from misprinting).

Discussion

Findings associated with the themes of enjoyable learning and lesson engagement suggest that these outcomes resulted directly from the application of visual literacy (Dondis, 1973; Elkins, 2008; Newman & Ogle, 2019; Serafini, 2014) and dual coding theory (Paivio, 1990, 2007), frameworks which proved especially salient under the extraordinary conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic imposed prolonged confinement that many families experienced as a form of psychological and physical “imprisonment,” conventional teaching-learning dynamics in Bangladesh were disrupted in ways that forced a reconfiguration of educational responsibility. With schoolteachers abruptly removed from the instructional equation, parents—largely untrained and unsupported—were compelled to assume the primary role in their children’s education (Rahman, Intensive District Approach to Education for All Project, & UNICEF Bangladesh, 2004).

Within this context, integrating images with text has become an effective pedagogical strategy and an essential tool for navigating a transformed learning environment. The use of visuals appeared to reduce cognitive load, facilitating more efficient processing and comprehension, which, in turn, sustained engagement and created conditions for enjoyment. One mother’s observation that lessons without images were “the least understood” lends strong support to the theoretical alignment. Similarly, a second-grade child who recalled every rhyme from an illustrated book illustrates the mnemonic and cognitive efficacy of dual coding, just as a fifth-grader’s remark that images made reading easier and more enjoyable underscores the benefits of activating both verbal and non-verbal channels. These examples, though occurring in the domestic sphere, affirm the principles of Paivio’s (1990, 2007) theory.

At the same time, the mothers’ use of visual images, drawn from textbooks and online sources, not only served as cognitive scaffolding but also contributed to an affective and imaginative atmosphere, which several described as playful and enjoyable. This affective turn is consistent with visual literacy theory (Dondis, 1973; Elkins, 2008; Newman & Ogle, 2019; Serafini, 2014), particularly in the way children engaged with visual signs to construct meaning from multimodal ensembles. The drawings of a water fairy wearing a face mask or a family on a magic carpet reflected not simply artistic expression, but an interpretive act wherein cultural and personal experiences (such as the pandemic) were actively reconfigured through visual language. These moments exemplify the theory’s assertion that meaning is created through situated, multimodal engagement—a process made even more visible under conditions of crisis.

As the parents adjusted to their new pedagogical roles, many came to value images not merely as instructional aids but as catalysts for sustained attention and relational

connection. One mother’s systematic use of images during lessons illustrates a deliberate pedagogical strategy, while others noted that their use of visuals increased significantly during lockdown. In this way, the crisis intensified the need for multimodal communication and sharpened parental awareness of its effectiveness. The mothers’ emphasis on arts education, combined with reports that textbook illustrations prompted children to draw, further substantiates the reciprocal relationship between interpreting and producing visual material—a core tenet of visual literacy.

The wartime-like conditions of the pandemic, frequently described as such by scholars (Carbonaro, 2020; Krishnan, 2020; Rose & Lough, 2020), provide a critical backdrop for understanding why visual strategies assumed such significance. In this respect, the findings resonate with established practices in emergency education. For example, the Norwegian Refugee Council’s early-level textbooks, developed for wartime contexts, foreground visual images as essential conveyors of meaning (Petrakis & Gounaridou, 2017). One spread of a Greek-Arabic textbook designed for Afghan and Yemeni asylum seekers in Greece prominently features illustrations as the primary medium for textual interpretation. These precedents reinforce the view that visual strategies are both cognitively advantageous and necessary in contexts marked by disruption and distress.

However, the findings also indicate, to some extent, that the efficacy of visual strategies is contingent upon the quality of the image. Several parents reported that textbook visuals were inconsistent, with some images appearing blurry or unintelligible. From the standpoint of dual coding theory (Paivio, 1990, 2007), unclear images compromise the activation of the non-verbal channel, weakening the integrative processing that underpins memory and understanding. Within visual literacy theory (Dondis, 1973; Elkins, 2008; Newman & Ogle, 2019; Serafini, 2014), such images impair the interpretive process itself, as reading visual signs requires a threshold level of clarity and definition. Comparable findings were reported in a previous study (Hussain, Hossain, & Sadek, 2017; Hussain, Hossain, & Rahman, 2018) conducted by one of the present researchers, further underscoring the barrier that poor-quality images pose to cognitive and interpretive learning mechanisms.

It is worth noting that several participating parents expressed relief that their children were not attending school during the pandemic, suggesting that some families may perceive a regular school day as a strain. This sentiment stands in contrast to findings reported by Wong (2020) concerning American parents, who often exhibited greater anxiety over school closures. The Bangladeshi parents in this study may have demonstrated a more protective posture, which, combined with their adoption of multimodal teaching strategies, reveals a distinct cultural approach to caregiving and education during crisis.

Study Limitations

Constrained by the pandemic, the respondents of this study were not a diverse group of individuals. This is a

limitation as Allmark (2004) posited that qualitative research required a “representation of diversity” (p. 185). This finding is also in line with the results of Cohen, Phillips, and Palos (2001). They concluded that when there was scant research on a topic, a diverse group of respondents was suitable for qualitative enquiries.

Selection bias and volunteer bias can be considered as the other limitations of this study. Although a convenience sampling technique was employed to recruit participants for the study, the ongoing pandemic made it very challenging nonetheless. When using a convenience sample, selection bias is a potential concern (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004). There is also a possibility of volunteer bias—the respondents who volunteered to participate in the study may differ in some way from those who could not participate (Salkind, 2010).

Conclusion

In her book *The Unprocessed Child: Living Without School*, Fitzzenreiter (2003) writes, “A child does not have to be motivated to learn; in fact, learning cannot be stopped. A child will focus on the world around him and long to understand it” (p. 233). She wrote about how she brought up her child through “unschooling” and how her child discovered and learned topics of her own preference (see Dickerson, 2019; McGrath, 2010, for the term “unschooling”). However, it is for sure that the “world” in her quotation was not the same “world” that a child confined to this global pandemic experiences. The seemingly “unstoppable” learning should never be something that the child does not or cannot enjoy. In these desperate times, parents were found to be able to ensure just that—through visual images, singing and dancing, playing games, and, among other things, through loving each other. Desperate times do not always call for desperate measures.

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