

This article was originally published in *TESOL MW IS Newsletter*.

Kleckova, G. (2005). Using ELT Text Design to Navigate Students. *TESOL MW IS Newsletter*, 18(2).

Using ELT Text Design to Navigate Students

By Gabriela Kleckova, e-mail: gabriela_kleckova@yahoo.com

Have you ever had to repeat your instructions about locating information in students' language textbooks too many times? If you are like me, you must have had some frustrating moments when you told your students to go to a certain page and activity in their texts, and 5 minutes later you realized that they were still looking for the activity. You probably thought that they either weren't paying much attention or didn't understand your instructions. It might not have occurred to you that the problem could be with the way the materials were designed.

Although the first two causes of the frustration are serious and important, the issue of problematic design is often overlooked. Schriver (1997) wrote that "poor design may not only prevent people from accurately making sense of products and documents, but also influence people's ideas about themselves" (p. 211). In other words, poorly designed ELT texts can not only discourage learners from using these texts, but perhaps also negatively shape the way they see themselves as language learners. Consequently, their second language acquisition could be hindered by this experience.

Current ELT texts employ a variety of visual elements to better serve their educational purposes. Compared with texts from years ago, these elements are much more abundant. They include illustrations, photographs, tables, lines, use of space to color, and other elements. (See Kostelnick & Roberts [1998] for a thorough discussion of visual language elements.) With this extensive use of visual language elements, there is a higher risk of problematic design that can impact how ESOL learners access and master the content of their materials. For example, multiple visual elements such as pictures, text boxes, and a colored and/or shaded background on the same page can compete for students' attention and draw their attention away from the information that they are seeking. In other words, overdoing a visual system and making it too complex may result in the attention of the user being drawn to the visual system rather than the verbal system (Gribbons, 1992).

Much research has been done on the design of documents such as computer manuals. This research shows dramatic differences in the usability of print material depending on how it is designed and laid out on the page. For example,

Kostelnick and Roberts (1998) wrote that "a well-designed field enables readers to glide effortlessly through the text; a poorly designed one makes their work hard" (p. 188). Similarly, Schriver (1997) stated that "with a well-designed grid, we can make the hierarchy and the internal relationships of the text visible, giving readers signals about the intended structure and meaning" (p. 342). Moore and Fitz (1993) also stated that the visual design of a document defines how easily the user gets to the text and moves through it.

The process of materials development is such a complex one that requesting designs that are, among other things, absolutely user friendly, aesthetically appealing, and economical in the sense of meeting production cost constraints might be too idealistic. (This doesn't mean that those characteristics shouldn't be aspired to and expected from materials creators.) A more pragmatic, realistic, and immediate solution is at hand when teachers modify their instructions. Specifically, to help students overcome instances in which visual cueing becomes misleading and overwhelming, teachers (who already know where things are located in the textbook) should provide clear and specific instructions for navigating the text. For example, the teacher might tell the students the name of the section as well as approximate location of the sought information in their texts. Also, as it is well known that pictures, which are plentiful in most ELT texts, are the first thing that students notice on a page, instruction can make use of these big attention grabbers to enable students to locate a specific section. For example, learners could benefit from instruction that says that a section is located "on the left of the picture with goats" rather than an instruction that says to locate Exercise 5. In other words, when using ELT texts that teachers or language learners find visually overwhelming or confusing, language teachers can identify major visual stimuli and use those as cues for locating sections in the text rather than the cues (numbering, lettering, etc.) provided by the design of the text.

References

- Gribbons, W. M. (1992). Organization by design: Some implications for structuring information. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 22(1), 57-75.
- Kostelnick, C., & Roberts, D. D. (1998). *Designing visual language: Strategies for professional communicators*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Moore, P., & Fitz, C. (1993). Gestalt theory and instructional design. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 23(2), 137-157.
- Schriver, K. A. (1997). *Dynamics in document design*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.