

# **FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING AND ACADEMIC LANGUAGE THROUGH VISUAL IMAGES: A HANDS-ON APPROACH**

# Our Context: St. Olaf

- Small selective liberal arts college (3,000 students)
- College mission emphasizes “global perspective”
- Four-semester foreign language requirement in French / German / Spanish (three in LCTLs)

What's your context?

# From foreign languages to Content and Languages Across the Curriculum and back

- *Traditional Communicative FL Methods (non-major)*
  - In lower levels: Self-referential (myself, my community, my life)
  - Emphasis on oral communication
  - Sentence-level discourse
  - Novice-Intermediate Low proficiency targets
  - Academic Content is not the focus (practice language functions, grammar, and vocabulary, “primary discourse” topics (Gee, 2011))
  - Students do not expect “serious” academic content

## Definitions: CBI

- Presents FL through content
- Content may range up into the ACTFL Advanced level but sustained with the linguistic functions of Novice through Intermediate Mid
- Instructors are generally FL experts with various degrees of SLA/pedagogy expertise
- Instructors are generally experts in FL literature, linguistics, or comparative literature
- Students do not expect “serious” disciplinary content (Challenge)
  - (example: “Here is a llama, his name is Bill”)

# Definitions...

- *FLAC/CLAC/CLIL (many models)*
  - ▣ Present content through language
  - ▣ Instructors tend to be content experts with varied degrees of FL SLA/pedagogy expertise (different delivery models)
  - ▣ Instructors tend to be disciplinary experts
  - ▣ Students expect “serious” disciplinary content
  - ▣ Students’ proficiency levels vary (depending on program)

# Activity I

- We are going to examine rural life in [COUNTRY X] from the perspective of the discipline you teach.
- What would your students associate with “rural life”? What vocabulary, concepts would they bring to the task?
- What challenges would the phrase “rural life” perhaps present?

How students visualize “a farm”

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# IMAGE of Midwestern Farm

# Why images are our starting point...

- We observed students struggling to visualize and analyze cultural content of L2 readings
- Students were interpreting content through a C1 frame of reference
  - e.g., rural life through lens of Midwestern dairy farm
- To help them widen the lens, C2 images can replace their “created” visualizations of the C2
  - First step in developing a more appropriate frame of reference for processing a variety of texts



# Activity II

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- What kinds of images would help your students put the topic of “rural life” in a more accurate context for your discipline?

Examples of farmsteads in Latin America

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# Two IMAGES of farms in Latin America

# Our own journey using images

- Originally, images as a way to contextualize vocabulary (“farm”, “bread”)
- We realized images were content dense
- *But, how to help students extract cultural content?*
  - ▣ Need to provide language to express content in Spanish
- Then we saw images as objects to study in themselves
- Led into the inclusion of other texts and images

# Our Third Semester Curricula in Spanish 231 (developed from lessons learned in FLAC)

- Majority of incoming students place into third-semester Spanish
- Features a cognitively challenging teaching approach
- Goals and objectives are congruent with those in other academic courses
- Assignments require students to transfer features of their L1 “secondary discourse/s” and use their Spanish language skills to implement higher-level thinking skills
- Content-based curriculum in Spanish: Course focus is “Intercultural Connections: The U.S. and the Spanish-Speaking World in a Global Community”

# Students entering third-semester Spanish at the minimum:

- Have developed academic language and some secondary discourses in the L1
- Can construct simple self-referential declarative sentences in the present tense and can recognize past tense in Spanish
- Are moving beyond recombination of memorized material (they are entering Intermediate level of the ACTFL guidelines)
- Do not necessarily have a cultural framework appropriate for analyzing complex phenomenon in the L2 about the C2

# Our Approach I: From “better” images to “better” thinking and talking about images

- Students use their L2 to:
  - think critically about their own cultural assumptions
  - compare and contrast artifacts of the C2 culture
  - reflect critically on underlying values and practices
  - learn (gradually) to convey their analysis through more nuanced lexical items and more complex syntactic structures
  - start to understand cultural narratives/perspectives by analyzing visual and textual evidence from a number of sources

# Our Approach II

- Includes multiple levels of analysis to develop more nuanced understanding of students' home culture
- Embeds Intentional practice with academic language into analytical activities
- Positions images as one point of entry into a web of other texts and images
- Students learn to test hypotheses about images by comparing evidence from multiple texts

# Images in the CLAC classroom

- Point of entry (provide a bridge from FL learning to disciplinary learning)
- Create an “alternative reality” and a context for disciplinary texts
- Entry point but not necessarily an end point
- “Content-dense” (allows for analysis through a disciplinary lens)
- Embed them in a wider “network” of data, other images, texts from various genres, etc. (discipline specific)



# What types of images...

- "Content-rich images" ...to contextualize course readings
- Images sufficiently complex in cultural content so as to support students' production of multiple interpretations based on each image
- Images as objects worthy of examination in themselves with regard to point of view, intended audience, etc.

# Analysis of images within a context

- Process starts with description, analysis, and reflection about home culture
- Continues with detailed description and analysis of the cultural/disciplinary relevance of image
- Sequence of instruction presents images linked to other images or texts (challenging the urge to turn one image into a monolithic statement)
- Step-by-step approach leads to understanding of a larger cultural narrative over an extended sequence of instruction

# Activity III

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From your disciplinary perspective, what does this group of 4 images from Peru evoke?

How could they relate to your field?

Given our approach, how could you “repackage” these images?

## Four IMAGES From Peru:

1. Indigenous women planting potatoes
2. McDonald's billboard
3. Urban scene with colonial and modern buildings
4. Llama walking on the road

# The Challenge for FL and CLAC: Developing “Secondary Discourses” in the L2

- *Cognitive Dimension*: Students bring experience with higher-order thinking skills in the L1 to the college-level L2 classroom
- *Linguistic/Textual Dimension*: Students may not have the L2 to carry out higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating
- *Cultural/Disciplinary Dimension*: Students tend to interpret L2 cultural and disciplinary concepts through an L1/C1 lens
- *In the Classroom*: We need to create the conditions for students to develop a “secondary discourse” (Gee, 2008) — the language for doing academic work in the L2 and to “apprentice” students into different *communities of practice* (science, math, history, language arts) [and get them] to talk and think like experts from those communities/disciplines (Zwiers, 2008: XIV and XVI)

# Academic Language

- “...academic language is the set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts.” (Zwiers, 2008: 20)
- *Functions of “academic language”*: complexity, higher-order thinking, and abstraction (Zwiers, 2008: 23)
- Primary /Secondary Discourses (Gee, 2011)

# Some features of “academic language” (adapted from Zwiers 2008)

- Evidence
  - ▣ Supports ideas with evidence
  - ▣ Requires language to deal with abstractions, ideas, and concepts
- Audience
  - ▣ Takes reader into account
  - ▣ Registers appropriate for speaking to unfamiliar persons
  - ▣ Registers for writing in a variety of contexts
  - ▣ Language that follows conventions of institutions or disciplines

# Some linguistic features of academic language (adapted from Zwiers 2008)

Figurative expressions:

*shed light on the subject*

Modals (“could”, “should”, etc.)

Qualifiers: (“Generally; presumably; theoretically; etc.”)

Subordination in long sentences

*The data suggest that \_\_\_\_\_*

Impersonal expressions: use of passive voice (in English)

*Peasants were oppressed by the landlords*

Nominalization (verbs/adjectives → noun phrases)

*Protestants rejected the idea that the Pope was infallible  
→ The Protestant rejection of papal infallibility*



## Bricks and Mortar

- **Bricks** are the discipline-specific technical words. Can be concrete (e.g. “French Revolution”) or abstract (e.g. “capitalism”)
  - FL and CLAC classes may fall into the trap of over focusing on the bricks (teaching and testing disciplinary vocabulary)
- **Mortar...** “are general utility words that hold the content-specific technical words together... used across a variety of domains that mature users use to communicate complex thoughts” (Zwiers, 2008: 22)

## Activity IV: *Food, Family, and Nutrition around the Globe:*

**Step 1.** Food & Nutrition: What should Americans (British, French, German, and Japanese) eat? Based on these images and your discipline (if appropriate) what conclusions would your students draw from them?

**Step 2.** What do Americans (British, French, German, and Japanese) really eat? Compare these images with the ones you looked at in step 1. What conclusion would your students draw from this comparison?

# Activity IV...

**Step 3.** *Going beyond the images:* What additional images or texts would your students need to contextualize these images? What types of “bricks and mortar” would your students require to carry out a descriptive and an analytical task?

How would analyzing the images as texts in themselves change the initial analysis?

# Activity V

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Images from the Conquest of Mexico  
(indigenous perspective)

(See handout)

# This approach has allowed us to...

- move away from a communicative self-referential curriculum has allowed us to:
  - ▣ Push students to view Spanish as a place to develop academic language
  - ▣ Help students see themselves as language and culture specialists
  - ▣ Help students transfer skills from other courses to the L2
  - ▣ Help students develop a “secondary discourse” in the L2
  - ▣ In other words, to develop the cultural thinking skills through an L2 that are needed to become liberally educated adults living in a global world

# For more information...

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