

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words Approach to Teaching English: Integrating Mind Maps in ELT

Manar Dahbi

English Department

Staff Development & Research in Higher Education Unit.

Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fes, Morocco

Abstract

With the growing emphasis recently on developing organizational and thinking skills alongside language ones, visual tools such as mind maps are being increasingly employed in English language teaching. Many studies have demonstrated that when students use mind maps they tend to be motivated and thus better assimilate information and complete complex tasks. The aim of this paper is to discuss the different types and uses of such learning devices. It also demonstrates based on evidence from the literature how mind maps as effective tools that teachers can use to enhance learning, attend to various learning styles, make instruction student-directed rather than teacher-led, and ultimately generate excitement and promote students' engagement. The paper concludes with some literature-based guidelines that EFL teachers need to follow in order to effectively implement mind maps in their classrooms. These are mainly instructions on teacher instruction stages, and the precise point of implementation and how it influences the degree of effectiveness.

Keywords: concept maps, English language teaching, graphic organisers, mind maps.

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1. Introduction

One of the problematic areas for students is the manner in which textbooks are written. Very often course books are written above their level and lack explicit organization of concepts. This is where mind maps come to the rescue. According to Drapeau (1999:5) a mind map is a visual display that depicts the relationships between facts, terms, and or ideas within a learning task. Willerman & Mac Harg (1991:705) add that mind maps are also referred to as knowledge maps, concept maps, story maps, cognitive organizers, advance organizers, graphic organisers or concept diagrams .

Research shows that mind maps, make content area information more accessible as well as memorable to students. These are visual tools that help English language learners understand and organize information. The use of these tools can generate excitement and enthusiasm toward learning. Therefore, they appear to be a beneficial instructional strategy to help students learn more effectively and retain learned information longer.

Bellanca (2007: 11) maintains that teachers can use mind maps to reinforce learning, assess learning at multiple checkpoints, and identify misunderstandings of concepts. In fact, mind maps can be used before, during, and after instruction. Besides, learning environment settings for using them vary from individual use, to partners, to small groups, to centres, and to whole class environment. Teachers can use these organizers to brainstorm ideas, to activate prior knowledge, to remain focused on content material, to present findings from an investigation, to confirm existing knowledge, and to review at the end of the period or week of study. Graphic organizers are also valuable in any activity which requires the use of critical thinking .

2. Types and functions

Graphic organizers come in many different forms. Merkley& Jefferies (2001: 350-357) provided the following sampling of the different types and uses of graphic organizers:

2.1 Use number more professional than stars A Descriptive or Thematic Map works well for mapping hierarchical relationships.

2.2 Organizing a hierarchical set of information, reflecting super ordinate or subordinate elements, is made easier by constructing a Network Tree .

2.3 When the information relating to a main idea or theme does not fit into a hierarchy, a Spider Map can help with organization .

2.4 When information contains cause and effect problems and solutions, a Problem and Solution Map can be useful for organizing.

2.5 A Problem-Solution Outline helps students to compare different solutions to a problem.

2.6 A Sequential Episodic Map is useful for mapping cause and effect.

2.7 When cause-effect relationships are complex and non-redundant a Fishbone Map may be particularly useful.

2.8 A Comparative and Contrastive Map can help students compare and contrast two concepts according to their features .

2.9 Another way to compare concepts' attributes is to construct a Compare-Contrast Matrix .

2.10 Continuum Scale is effective for organizing information along a dimension such as less to more, low to high, and few to many .

2.11 A Series of Events Chain can help students organize information according to various steps or stages .

2.12 A Cycle Map is useful for organizing information that is circular or cyclical, with no absolute beginning or ending .

2.13 A Human Interaction Outline is effective for organizing events in terms of a chain of action and reaction.

3 . Evidence for effectiveness as a learning enhancement

The literature supports the use of mind maps to facilitate and improve learning outcomes for a wide range of learners. In fact, numerous studies confirm the benefits of using such graphic organizers in the classroom in terms of helping students develop and process information. In this respect, Ellis (2004:1) emphasises that they help students to process information as opposed to memorizing and stressing facts. This is because graphic organizers are structures or templates that help students understand the relationships between concepts rather than just memorizing isolated, non-contextualized bits of information. Also, spatial arrangements depicting the information's structure reduce the cognitive demands on the learner. The learner does not have to process as much semantic information to understand the information. This is one reason why mind maps are "such powerful devices for students with language based learning disabilities" (Ellis, op.cit: 2 .(

Mcknight (2010: 5) argues that when content is illustrated with diagrams, the information can be maintained by students over a period of time. First, because organizers portray knowledge in a meaningful way, which helps bring clarity to ideas as connections are made. As a matter of fact, having a way to organize ideas, facts, and concepts graphically facilitates effective student retention. Also, graphic organisers help students separate what is important to remember from not essential information.

Many students are visual learners, thus, a visual approach to brainstorming or organizing information is essential. As such, Horton, et.al (1990: 12-14) believes that mind maps appear to be a valued approach to utilize in teaching and learning. They help students generate mental images to go along with information and create graphic representations for information. Organizers also offer an entry point into complex material for visual learners, increase comprehension and retention, and can be used with all students ranging from gifted to those with mild cognitive disabilities.

Learning to think is an essential skill needed in education today. Educators often use teaching methods where students are passive learners. Difficulty arises when students must make meaning out of information taken from a book, video, or a lecture. When students interact with content, it is important that they actively construct meaning. To do this, students must be active thinkers during the learning process. Drapeau (2008:12) emphasizes that students are required to think in multiple directions when they use mind maps. Hence, learning becomes rather an active and meaningful process.

Mind maps offer support when new information is presented and previously learned information is reviewed. Ausubel (1963:15) believes that the appropriate organizer can help students form relationships between previously acquired knowledge and new concepts. This linkage process seems to be precisely what students need for learning to take place because it helps them store and retrieve the knowledge in their long-term memory .

Jitendra (2002: 23-28) points out that students are more likely to become strategic learners when they use mind maps. Reading and writing skills, communication skills, and analytical, critical, and creative thinking skills are all subject to improve when students use such graphic organizers. Students with learning difficulties need strategies to help them achieve success. These students must have information presented in a clear, concise, and organized form if they are to make progress in content area classrooms. Gagnon & Maccini (2000:1-22) emphasise that mind maps

have great potential for students with learning disabilities because they provide extra support to guide them to focus on the important information and learn how to organize it.

In sum, the literature stresses that mind maps help clarify and organize information, which leads to students being active in the acquisition of conceptual knowledge. Teachers also use this teaching resource to develop lessons and link new concepts with existing knowledge. Besides, graphic organizers combine both the linguistic and non-linguistic modes of learning. In most cases, this dual-presentation (visual representation accompanied by auditory explanation) is considerably more powerful than either approach alone, and hence leads to the ultimate goal of effective learning for students. Ultimately, concept maps allow for more than just content acquisition. In fact, students learn also processing skills, patterns for organizing information, critical thinking skills, and communication skills .

4. Implementing mind maps in the EFL classroom

McKenzi (1997: 2-4) emphasises why in the past tense and previous ones in the present, be consistent that most examples, in the literature, that outline the inefficacy of mind maps invariably point to inadequate teacher instruction as the key in the failure of these tools to achieve any noticeable results in student achievement. By and large an effective teacher instruction model includes explicit and detailed instructions and independent practice by the students with feedback wherever necessary. The teacher should also determine and establish a purpose for which the graphic organizer is being used. All these three elements – instruction by the teacher, practice by the students, and feedback from the teacher – are inextricably linked. Failure at one of these stages will negate the benefits of using the tools .

Bellanca (op.cit: 2) points out that visual displays can be successfully implemented at several phases of the instructional cycle. They may be introduced as advance organizers, before the learning task, or as post organizers, after encountering the learning material. Positive outcomes have been reported when graphic organizers are used as both advance and post organizers. However, the precise point of implementation does appear to influence the degree of graphic organizers' effectiveness. Merkley & Jefferies (op.cit:350-357) report from a study that the point of implementation is a crucial factor in determining the magnitude of improvement in learning outcome. When graphic organizers were used as a pre- activity, average effect sizes were small. In contrast, graphic organizers used as a follow-up yielded somewhat higher improvement in learning outcomes. Thus, efforts to improve learning outcomes may be more successful when mind maps are introduced after the learning material.

5. Conclusion

The literature supports the assertion that mind maps are valuable instructional instruments that improve learning no matter the cognitive ability or learning style of the learner. When students use these organizers, they tend to be motivated and thus better assimilate information and complete complex tasks. So, it is important that educators make a concerted effort to use this method to cater for individual differences, abilities and preferences. However, the effectiveness of instruction will depend on teachers' skills and knowledge in the development and use of these visual tools. Maximum gains can only be derived if teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to use the strategy.

Moreover, this strategy provides instant feedback. As a result, teaching can be modified to suit the learners' needs and so allows educators to be reflective. Also, the use of mind maps in the classroom can lead to positive gains for students. It moves instruction from teacher-directed to

student-directed as students learn how to construct meaning themselves. Consequently, it is incumbent on educators to use such strategy that will not only maximize engaged time but also develop independent learners .

Finally, since students learn best through a variety of ways, teachers need to vary their teaching to help promote student excellence. Using graphic organizers to teach English is an effective approach to assist students' learning .

About the Author

Dr. Manar Dahbi holds a Ph.D in Applied Linguistics. She teaches English for business, English for computer engineering, and translation at the National School of Applied Sciences. She has also an extensive teaching experience as an EFL secondary school teacher. Her main fields of interest include: action research, teacher training, and ESL assessment.

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