DEFINING DOCUMENT DESIGN FOR TESOL PROFESSIONALS

What is document design?

This chapter focuses on building background knowledge about design and demonstrating its importance in effective teaching practices and materials development. Here we refer to the fields that have informed English language teaching (ELT) document design, particularly those that address the visual appearance of a product. We also introduce the various terms that include the word “design,” such as graphic design, document design, and information design, and explain the role of visual design in communication. An understanding of the underlying aspects of design will provide you with a simple and firm framework for your thinking about the visual look of your materials. You can clearly see why visual design matters.
White (2002) has a simple way of defining the term “design.” He states that “to design means to plan. The process of design is used to bring order from chaos and randomness. Order is good for readers, who can more easily make sense of an ordered message. An ordered message is therefore considered good design” (p. 1). He further adds that “the design process expresses significance” (p. 3). In other words, design “makes information accessible and appealing” (p. 3). The appearance, depending on how well it’s crafted, opens up or closes the information you communicate.

Doesn’t the design process described by White resemble your experiences with lesson planning? Don’t you bring order from chaos and randomness in your planning of English language lessons? Driven by a teaching goal, you seek order and flow in your lessons to help your learners acquire English. You seek ways to make language accessible and appealing to your learners by applying principles of effective language instruction. In visual design, authors seek ways to make information accessible and appealing to users by applying principles of effective visual design. As lesson planning can influence the quality of language learning experience, visual design can influence the quality of experience with materials.
Defining Document Design

Exploring design more specifically, terms such as “graphic design,” “document design,” and “information design” emerge. They refer to three distinct fields of practice, yet they overlap and share similar objectives. According to Ceazar (2015), “Graphic design, also known as communication design, is the art and practice of planning and projecting ideas and experiences with visual and textual content. The form of the communication can be physical or virtual, and may include images, words, or graphic forms.” The definition is similar to that of Golombisky and Hagen (2010), who say that “Technically, ‘graphic design’ refers to a plan for organizing visual objects in space…. The key ideas are ‘plan’ and ‘organize’ for the purpose of ‘communication.’ If you were writing a speech or research report, you would make an outline to organize your ideas in a logical and effective order. In graphic design, you organize all your elements from copy (text) to visuals (pictures) in a logical and effective order” (p. 6). You encounter graphic design in different types of media ranging from posters and book covers to product packaging and pictograms. It brings effective communication and attractive aesthetics together, occupying a creative, artistic niche.

Document design, on the other hand, is defined as “the act of bringing together prose, graphics (including illustration and photography), and typography for purposes of instruction, information, or persuasion. Good document design enables people to use the text in ways that serve their interests and needs” (Schriver, 1997; pp. 10–11). It is about “creating clear visual patterns that help readers see the relationships between different pieces of information” (Kimball & Hawkins, 2008; p.18). It involves various types of text documents in business, medicine, industry, and so forth. It focuses on readers and their ability to process information.

The term “information design,” then, refers to “the practice of presenting information in a way that makes it most accessible and easily understood by users…. In its most sophisticated forms, it helps users understand complex data by organizing and simplifying data and information in ways they can quickly grasp” (Society for Experiential Graphic Design, n.d.). Information design helps to deliver data in a comprehensible, highly visual manner. Infographics provide a grand example of these efforts.

If we simplify and synthesize all the definitions, we see that the primary objective of all three areas of design is communication. The purposes for the communication vary slightly, but they always involve careful planning and use of words/text, typography, and graphics. The visual tools support the organization and structure of information, show relationships, and make the material accessible, pleasant looking, and easy to understand. The overarching goal is to give users, in your case language learners, a positive experience with the materials so that they respond well to them.
COMMUNICATING WITH VISUAL LANGUAGE

Learning about design involves learning a language that helps better communicate ideas. Golombisky and Hagen (2010) compare visual language to the English language. As in English, where rules and conventions enable us to communicate successfully, rules and conventions also apply in visual communication. Basic proficiency in visual language will make you a more successful communicator and allow your learners to better understand and navigate your materials with ease. You can be creative in using visual language as you are in using English, yet you need to understand why you are creative and what you want to achieve. If you break the rules, you should know why you do so.
Golombisky and Hagen (2010) add that “all design is related through the expression, ‘Form follows functions.’ Good design results from a partnership between ‘form’ as art and ‘function’ as utility” (p. 2). Simply said, the purpose of the material shapes its look, which corresponds with the message it communicates. Notice the parallel with lesson planning again: the purpose shapes the process—it’s as simple as that. In fact, Samara (2014) says that good design doesn’t include anything that doesn’t contribute to the composition or meaning. He sums it up by saying that design is about communicating not decorating (p. 13). He also claims that “one of the designer’s most important tasks is to give information an order that allows the viewer to navigate it. This order, called the ‘information hierarchy,’ is based on the level of importance the designer assigns to each part of the text” (p. 170).

As a materials developer and designer, you need to consider the function of a particular material and then accordingly identify proper visual language to communicate its contents (more on rhetoric in chapter 3). Although the aesthetic approach is important, considering the nature of language learning environments, the functional approach should drive your decision-making process. You want your learners to comprehend the structure of the document/material they have in hand and navigate it successfully for the purpose of learning or getting information. They have a limited mastery of English, and anything that can scaffold their learning is of high value (more on the importance of effective design in ELT materials in chapter 2).
Example: Look at Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 to see how design matters. Consider the audience and purpose of the first graphic. Is the design presented learner friendly? Does it give any visual cues to learners to support and guide their interaction with the material? Now look at the second graphic. Consider again audience and purpose. Do the visual cues make the material more accessible? Which graphic better matches the purposes of the teacher?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mum</th>
<th>baker</th>
<th>cloudy</th>
<th>January</th>
<th>thin</th>
<th>tiger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bread</td>
<td>three</td>
<td>dangerous</td>
<td>church</td>
<td>orange</td>
<td>firefighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pear</td>
<td>Next to</td>
<td>hippo</td>
<td>between</td>
<td>thirteen</td>
<td>hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>snowy</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>mechanic</td>
<td>opposite</td>
<td>biscuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>cheese</td>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>playing golf</td>
<td>supermarket</td>
<td>she</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swimming</td>
<td>eleven</td>
<td>shirt</td>
<td>parrot</td>
<td>egg</td>
<td>cinema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in</td>
<td>uncle</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>banana</td>
<td>nurse</td>
<td>fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foggy</td>
<td>tall</td>
<td>hundred</td>
<td>funny</td>
<td>aunt</td>
<td>carrot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>her</td>
<td>library</td>
<td>rice</td>
<td>windy</td>
<td>thirty</td>
<td>grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giraffe</td>
<td>skiing</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>cousin</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>behind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pilot</td>
<td>apple</td>
<td>station</td>
<td>under</td>
<td>snake</td>
<td>basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sunny</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>twelve</td>
<td>crisps</td>
<td>tennis</td>
<td>bike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>big</td>
<td>frog</td>
<td>lemon</td>
<td>shop</td>
<td>rainy</td>
<td>grandpa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cross out words from these categories:**
- family members
- fruit
- weather
- places in the town
- animals
- food words
- jobs
- numbers
- months
- sports
- adjectives
- prepositions

**List here words that you haven’t crossed out:**
Cross out words from these categories:

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- WEATHER
- FRUIT
- JOBS
- PLACES IN THE TOWN
- ANIMALS
- MONTHS
- SPORTS
- PREPOSITIONS
- ADJECTIVES
- NUMBERS
- FOOD

List here words that you haven’t crossed out:

- Mum
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- tiger
- bread
- three
- dangerous
- church
- orange
- firefighter
- pear
- Next to
- hippo
- between
- thirteen
- hot
- Thursday
- snowy
- March
- mechanic
- opposite
- biscuits
- December
- cheese
- Dad
- playing golf
- supermarket
- she
- swimming
- eleven
- shirt
- parrot
- egg
- cinema
- in
- uncle
- April
- banana
- nurse
- fat
- foggy
- tall
- hundred
- funny
- aunt
- carrot
- her
- library
- rice
- windy
- thirty
- grapes
- giraffe
- skiing
- teacher
- cousin
- July
- behind
- pilot
- apple
- station
- under
- snake
- basketball
- sunny
- August
- twelve
- crisps
- tennis
- bike
- big
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- lemon
- shop
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Each document conveys a different initial impression, and users likely create an immediate opinion about it: “I like this” or “I don’t want to read this.” This experience differs little from the well-known power of first impressions made by people. We evaluate others in just a second based on nonverbal clues—on what we see. Involuntarily and unconsciously, we give into our initial judgments of people (which are sometimes hard to overcome) and let them influence our perceptions. What impressions do you want to create for your learners or other audiences? How do you want your learners to perceive your materials? Do you want the look of the materials to be an obstacle in the learning process or an effective tool for encouraging language acquisition? For English language educators, these questions are no-brainers. Conveying the right impression through the visual language of your materials might be more challenging than answering these questions, but we hope the upcoming pages offer the tools to meet the challenge successfully.