Visual Thinking Strategies Example
Language: English Language Learners
Developed by Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art Education staff
in collaboration with K-State English Language Program

This unit utilizes Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to develop communication skills in language learners; specifically listening, speaking, and comprehension skills. The facilitator can also use VTS to grow English language vocabulary.

Learning Objectives:

Learners will collaboratively generate ideas to increase their comprehension and production of English through looking at art.

The discussion will provide learners with authentic opportunities to listen to target language structures (language input) and speak in original phrases and sentences (language output).

Visual Thinking Strategies

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) was originally developed as a sequential curriculum for schools by Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist, and art museum educator Philip Yenawine.

VTS uses visual art to develop critical thinking, communication, and visual literacy skills that transfer to English Language Arts, social studies, science, and math. Artworks are carefully chosen to highlight cultural diversity and understanding. Numerous school districts have reported that VTS has helped English language learners develop listening and verbal skills and build vocabulary. It has been tested worldwide by Visual Understanding in Education (VUE) and was published for use in American schools in 2000.

VTS is not art history and knowledge about art or the artist is not necessary. The discussion is based on the visual evidence provided by the image. This places viewers on an equal footing, although some participants may have knowledge that they can add to the conversation. We call them the more competent peer.

The VTS discussion is based on three open-ended questions:

- What's going on in the picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

Procedure:

Introduction to discussion by facilitator: Today we will be looking at and discussing a work of art. It will be a facilitated discussion which I will guide you through. I'd like to mention that when we talk about art there are no wrong answers! I'd like to start by giving you a few moments to quietly look at the image.

The instructor will ask a set of three open-ended questions to elicit well-thought narratives from the students as shown below (Yenawine, 2014):

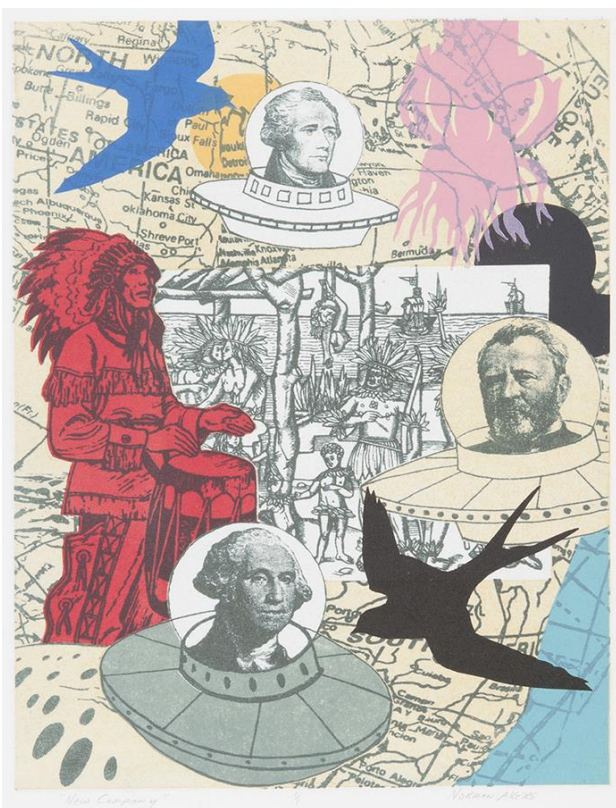   Q1: What's going on in the picture?
        Q2: What do you see that makes you say that?
        Q3: What more can we find?

In response to question 2, the students need to provide the visual evidence to support their response to question 1.

The facilitator will paraphrase after each comment made by participants. This allows them to model correct grammar and introduce new vocabulary.

Facilitation also includes pointing to things that are being mentioned. This helps language learners who may be unfamiliar with a vocabulary word, by focusing everyone on the same object.

Example:

Instructor: What's going on in this picture? (Q1)

Student 1: I see a Native American.

Instructor: You have noticed a figure that you have identified as an indigenous person. What do you see that makes you say that this figure represents an indigenous person of America? (Q2)

Student 1: Because the headdress that he is wearing reminds me of something American Indians would wear as they are often portrayed in the movies that I have seen before.

Norman Akers
Wah-Zha-Zhi (Osage Nation)/ Chaticks si Chaticks (Pawnee) born 1958, Fairfax, Oklahoma
New Company, 2011
Monoprint with gum Arabic transfer and stencil on paper
Friends Kansas Art Fund, 2012.149

Instructor: So, you are making connections between the head piece that this figure is wearing with what you have previously seen in Western films and that leads you to believe he is a Native American. What more can we find? (Q3)
Student 2: …
Continue this process until there is a good place to stop – discussions usually last about 20-25 minutes.

Choosing Images for VTS discussions:
Good VTS images are narrative in nature. Abstract art does not work well for this process. Images should also contain some measure of ambiguity to inspire rich conversations. Images from the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art can be accessed through the collections search engine at https://beach.k-state.edu/explore/collection/. Thinking About Pictures is an online interactive tool and features VTS with work in the exhibition *Inspirations: Art for Storytelling* https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1ZaF06qpsMInLeZ

Note: Artwork can be chosen that reflects vocabulary being learned. In this case, a vocabulary list can be introduced before the discussion, and students can use that vocabulary as they talk about the image. Many of the K-State ELP classes visit the museum to do a VTS discussion the week that they start art vocabulary.

"It was a pleasure to work with and collaborate with the Beach Museum of Art staff. International students in my English class responded positively to the Language Learning through Art virtual workshop by participating and developing their second language learning skills through the use of art. This is why I will continually hope to collaborate with them each semester!" - Smoky Kelly   (ELP* Faculty Coordinator/Instructor)

* Office of International Program – English Language Program
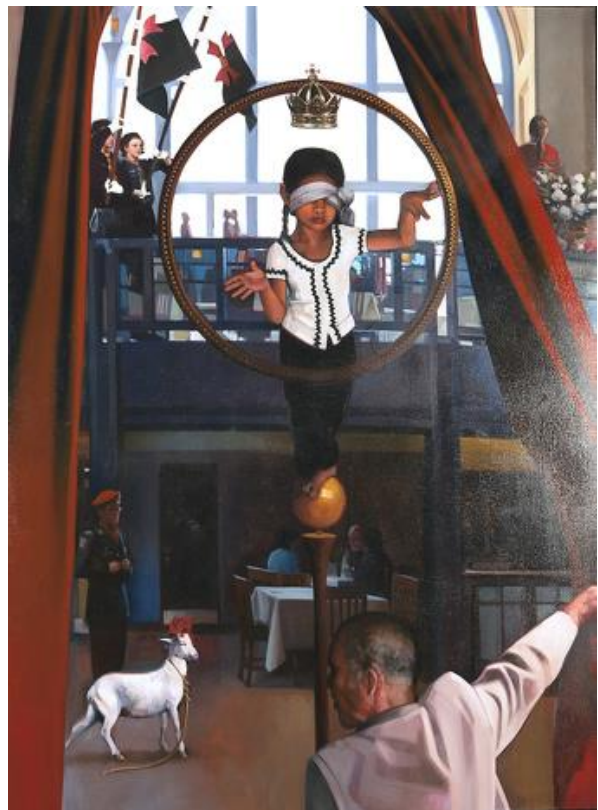
Aaron Morgan Brown
Apotheosis of the Blind Dancer, 2007
Oil on canvas
KSU, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art,
transfer from KSU College of Engineering, 2013.24