

VTS for English Language Learning

By Katie Kramer Dempsey, Center for Intercultural and Multilingual Advocacy



What is VTS?

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching method that incorporates “open-ended yet highly structured discussions of visual art, significantly increasing students’ critical thinking, language and literacy skills along the way” (www.vtshome.org). VTS emphasizes a student-centered approach to the inquiry process, thus promoting students’

interest in making discoveries, expressing their own ideas, and respecting the viewpoints of their peers. The method helps students create meaning between their visual and cognitive thought processes, and as a result, they are able to enhance language development through verbal articulation. It is highly effective for engaging students as active participants, inspiring them on a range of topics, and promoting meaningful conversations. Collaboratively developed by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine in the 1980s (Kilpatrick, 2010), the use of the VTS method has proven successful for all students, from high achievers to those with special needs.

How is the VTS method facilitated?

Using carefully selected pieces of art to facilitate discussion, teachers ask students questions to help strengthen their critical thinking skills as well as their verbal development. What emerges is a natural conversation that allows students to express themselves using art as the catalyst. It is the teacher’s responsibility to pose three essential questions in each VTS discussion. These include: “What is going on in this picture?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can we find?” (www.vtshome.org). In addition, the teacher paraphrases students’ responses in a neutral manner, points to the areas that students mention, and links and frames any comments made. The students are asked to carefully look at the various works of art, talk about what they see, provide evidence to support their responses, and consider many different interpretations as they listen to the views of others. One of the key components to VTS is the recognition that *there are no right or wrong answers*; all perspectives are valued and all responses are considered valid.

Why is VTS beneficial for English language learners?

VTS is a very appropriate and successful method to use with ELLs for a number of reasons. First, the method is compatible with sheltered instruction of English, as it

supports students as they begin to develop tiered vocabulary, access prior knowledge, collaborate in groups, and engage in scaffolded activities (www.cultureandliteracy.org). Also, within the framework of VTS, “paraphrasing and linking are very empowering strategies that strengthen students’ sense of self and of uniqueness of their voice” (Lannes, 2012). Through the act of paraphrasing, the teacher has an opportunity to further discuss new words or concepts with the students. Teachers should be encouraged to write this new vocabulary on a large piece of paper during the VTS discussion so that students are able to connect the meaning of the words to their written form (Lannes, 2012).

Although VTS can be used with ELLs of all ages, it has been shown to greatly improve the English proficiency of adult learners. As Lannes (2012) explains, “Art addresses rich and complex life issues that adults can relate to, even if they lack the language to fully communicate their interpretations. Given the nature of VTS’s open-ended questions, students can have different entry points to a work of art and find an opportunity to address issues relevant to them.” VTS discussions provide students with an engaging, comfortable environment in which they might feel more apt to take risks. They are able to share their knowledge and personal experiences, even if it means utilizing body language until they feel liberated to speak openly.

It is also important to note that VTS discussions challenge students to employ higher order thinking skills, to think abstractly, and to make inferences. According to Lannes (2012), “Those skills are then supported by the development of lower order thinking skills, such as vocabulary and grammar. Adults respond and engage first through the VTS discussion and the teacher then uses scaffolding strategies that specifically build the lower order thinking skills” (Lannes, 2012). By tapping into students’ natural ability to visualize and communicate, especially through critical observation and creativity, VTS is built on supporting a successful second language acquisition process.

Sources:

CALTA. Retrieved May 29, 2012 from www.cultureandliteracy.org

Kilpatrick, J. (February 13, 2010). Creativity in the classroom. *Education News*. Retrieved May 29, 2012 from http://www.educationnews.org/ed_reports/52488.html




Lannes, P. (April 24, 2012). *CALTA21: An initiative that uses VTS with adult English language learners*. Visual Thinking Strategies newsletter. Retrieved May 31, 2012 from <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs038/1101617897087/archive/1109780033558.html>

Visual Thinking Strategies <http://VTShome.org>

MARIANNA KISTLER
BEACH
MUSEUM OF ART

FREE admission and parking - 14th & Anderson

Tues., Wed., Fri. 10-5 | Thurs. 10-8 | Sat. 11-4 | 785.532.7718 | beach.k-state.edu

 /BeachMuseumofArt |  @beachmuseum |  /beachmuseum