Book Review

A Review of *Creating Visually Effective Materials for English Learners*

Reviewed by Nancy C. Elliot, University of Oregon

Kleckova, G., & Svejda, P. (2019). *Creating visually effective materials for English Learners.* Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

Editors' Note: ORTESOL would like to thank TESOL Press for providing this book free of charge.

Design is not just aesthetics, nor is it merely careful planning. An effective, well-designed classroom document that facilitates communication results from the creator following certain principles of design and considering several specific visual elements. However, not many language teachers have a background in the visual arts. Luckily, English teacher Gabriela Kleckova and design teacher Pavel Svejda, both of the University of West Bohemia, Plzen, Czech Republic, have collaborated to give the world of English teachers an eight-chapter eBook that guides the reader through the basics of graphic design and how these elements support better language learning.

The book is divided into three sections. "Into" contains two chapters that define and give an overview of graphic design, build some background knowledge, and demonstrate its importance to English language teachers. The three chapters of the second section, "Through," present six principles of design, key visual elements relevant for designing documents, practical tips, and examples of well-designed materials. Finally, "Beyond" gives the reader three chapters on planning and applying the principles, learning from the examples of poor design, and designing specifically for digital media. The end materials include planning checklists, a glossary of 31 terms, an overview of figures grouped by type of example, and a useful bibliography of 37 works about graphic design, screen reading research, and educational materials development.

In Part 1"Into," Kleckova and Svejda explain the value of good graphic design to learning and processing language. Good design will guide the reader through the material, while poor design will be an obstacle to accessing the material; the authors demonstrate this with examples of poorly-designed and well-designed versions of the same documents. The reader quickly notices that with the better design, a learner can navigate through the material easily, identify important items, group similar information together, and see the relationships between different sections.

Moreover, the document will be more accessible and cause the reader to respond more positively to the material.

Part 2 of the eBook, "Through," is a quick course in visual design as applied to creating documents. Six key design principles are covered here. *Hierarchy* shows the reader what is important, where to go next, and how the information is organized. *Contrast* helps the reader figure out the material's organization, while *alignment* guides the eye where to go and helps the reader make connections. *Similarity* and *proximity* show the reader what is related. Finally, *repetition* guides the eye, gives cohesion, and eases navigation. These things start to happen even before the language is decoded.

Because the teacher-designer needs basic visual elements to put into effect the above six principles, Kleckova and Svejda then introduce the elements of space, typography, graphics, color, and layout. The amount of information is not overwhelming, and the authors continue to provide pedagogical validation for each design element. One example is margin space: It makes the page inviting, allows room to take notes, frames the text, and affects the length of text lines. The optimal line length for readability, the authors inform us, is 50-80 characters, or 7-12 words per line. A line that is too long or too short is more difficult for the reader to process; either it is harder to track the end of one line to the beginning of the next (too long), or the break in the text is too frequent and therefore disruptive (too short).

In Part 3 "Beyond," the final chapters take us from principles to practice, detailing the process of making four sample types of materials step by step: worksheet, assessment, assignment page, and flier. There are plenty of sample documents in Part 3, first to illustrate steadily improving versions of the same document, and then in a chapter devoted entirely to identifying pitfalls. Readers of the eBook are asked to scrutinize 12 examples of flawed documents and identify common mistakes the authors have listed, such as 'poor cuing for navigation,' 'too many visual elements,' and 'limited space for learners' answers.' In the final chapter, a few design principles specific to screen reading are laid out, involving such elements as typeface, color, and contrast.

One of the most common tasks of a language teacher is sitting down at the computer to create classroom materials. No doubt many teachers would take the extra time to improve the finished product if they knew why and how. Kleckova and Svejda show just how to make those materials more effective by giving us a clear, concise crash course in graphic design and providing useful examples and activities for practice. Along the way, they convincingly document why good design leads to many favorable outcomes for the learner. A lone critique of this eBook is that many of the pages have little text and the right margin is nearly three inches wide, with the result that readers viewing it on a screen may become confused navigating the half-blank pages. The actual design is quite artistic and interesting, but the 122-page document was noticeably easier to read when this reviewer printed it out.

Author

Nancy Elliott is an ESL instructor at the University of Oregon. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in linguistics and German from the University of Kansas and her PhD in linguistics from Indiana University, specializing in phonology and sociolinguistics. Nancy teaches listening, speaking, and pronunciation in UO's Intensive English program.