

10 - Helping Them See from Caregiving Perspectives: Visual Image Training in English Language Pedagogy for Nursing Students and Other Learners

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Abstract

The present study showcases the potential of visual image training to improve English language proficiency. While the study focuses on Japanese undergraduate nursing students in EFL courses, the benefits of visual image training extend to many other students preparing to work in caregiving and service fields. Visual image training asks students to cultivate their abilities to “read” the emotional and physical states of patients—through focused classroom observation of “case studies” involving characters in videos (feature films and television series) and in imaginative literature. In such ways, visual image training enriches not only communication competencies but also the empathy and cultural sensitivity essential for holistic nursing practice. For learners and teachers, visual image training is an emerging and promising approach in English language pedagogy. Visual image training can improve the communication skills of nursing students as providers of effective patient care. It can also help many other students prepare to work in a variety of service disciplines.

Keywords: visual image training, communicative competence, critical thinking, empathy, cultural sensitivity, holistic and interactive teaching and learning

1. Introduction

The present study explores the potential of visual image training to significantly improve the English language proficiency of EFL students, particularly Japanese nursing students and others preparing for caregiving professions. Visual image training involves developing the ability to “read” the mental and physical states of patients through practice in analyzing visual case studies drawn from videos (feature films and television series) and imaginative literature. This method not only enhances students’ diagnostic and communication skills but also fosters empathy and interpersonal sensitivity, which are key components of holistic nursing practice.

The integration of visual image training into English language pedagogy represents a shift towards more holistic and interactive teaching methods. Traditional language teaching often emphasizes grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition in isolation. By contrast, visual image training situates language learning within the context of meaningful, emotionally resonant interactions. Such an approach not only improves linguistic proficiency but also encourages the development of critical thinking, empathy, and cultural sensitivity—skills that are essential for success in many service-oriented professions (Brown, 2007).

Moreover, visual image training aligns with contemporary trends in education that emphasize multimodal learning, including the use of various media forms to deepen understanding. Feature films, television series, and literary works offer rich, layered narratives that students can analyze, discuss, and reflect on, providing a more engaging learning experience than traditional language exercises. Research shows that multimodal learning improves both language acquisition and emotional engagement, making it a powerful tool for language teachers (Stein, 2008).

The integration of visual image training into English language pedagogy is promising for both learners and educators. By focusing on visual case studies, students sharpen their interpersonal

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communication skills as they learn to interpret the emotions and the non-verbal cues of patients more effectively. For nursing students like mine--Japanese undergraduates taking required courses in English as a foreign language--visual image training aligns with the practical demands of patient care, improving students' abilities to communicate and empathize with patients from diverse backgrounds.

Beyond the healthcare field, visual image training holds great promise for students in many service disciplines, helping them develop communication skills necessary for effective engagement with clients and colleagues across many domains in business, education, and other fields. As an emerging pedagogical tool, visual image training offers an innovative approach to language learning that bridges the gap between linguistic competence and the interpersonal skills vital in professions involving caregiving and service to others.

The present study argues that visual image training is a method with considerable potential for enriching both the language proficiency and the caregiving abilities of students preparing for service-oriented careers. By blending language learning with attention to emotional intelligence and cultural literacy, visual image training improves the overall effectiveness of language teaching and learning in contexts that prioritize human connections and caregiving.

Video is an ideal medium for visual image training. Much like literary works, feature films and television series present scenes of men and women struggling with the problems of life. Such drama provides learners with models that help them cultivate their skills in communication, critical thinking, and empathy. For nursing students, videos with health care themes offer dynamic, emotionally charged scenes of interactions between nurses and patients and between professional colleagues that offer rich learning opportunities.

Nursing education scholar Brent W. Thompson advocates the use of videos specifically in nursing courses. Thompson (2016) notes the effectiveness of video in representing scenes of emotional drama, notably in patient care situations that can help nursing students develop empathy:

Showing movies and videos has long been part of nursing education but the introduction of streaming videos simplifies their use. Videos can convey psychomotor skills, emotional situations, and patient care situations better than any other media (Edmonds, 2013). Streaming videos help engage students and encourage critical thinking (June, Yaacob, & Kheng, 2014). Videos are particularly useful for addressing learning objectives in the affective domain (May et al., 2013). A video of a patient relating an experience with a disease can help students learn empathy for others. (Thompson, 2016, pp. 871-872)

Videos in the classroom have many uses across a range of subject matters and pedagogical purposes. In nursing English courses, well-selected videos can represent models of empathy that can, in turn, inspire empathy in the hearts of the viewers themselves. Such videos provide much for learners to reflect on as they pursue their professional goals (Dryden et al., 2024, pp. 11).

The present study considers several ways in which visual image training can improve both language learning and overall professional preparation for many students, with attention here to students of nursing. As already noted, videos present models of patient-caregiver interactions, even non-verbal exchanges. Films and television series with medical themes often depict behavior from which nursing student can learn to read patients and even colleagues through their body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues. Teachable moments in such videos, which can be replayed many times, help nursing students learn to function effectively in real health care settings, where patients may not always communicate verbally.

Furthermore, video image training has the pedagogical potential to deepen students' cultural sensitivity. Videos that depict patients and caregivers from diverse cultural backgrounds help nursing students develop an understanding of how cultural beliefs and practices affect health care. Such observations promote cultural competence, which is vital to promoting respectful and individualized care in the nursing field but also in many other areas of human relations and service in the business world and in education.

Moreover, video image training provides models and opportunities for students to develop the interpersonal skills of empathy and compassion. Videos with medical themes present complex ethical dilemmas that allow nursing students to explore decision-making processes in high-stress situations. These scenarios give students opportunities to reflect on professional ethics, patient autonomy, and the balancing of medical treatment with compassionate care. Videos with emotionally charged

narratives allow students to step into the shoes of patients and caregivers, fostering empathy and compassion. Skilled navigation of such emotions is crucial in nursing, where understanding the patient's experience can lead to more compassionate care.

Through close observation of selected scenes in feature films and television series, students can practice critical thinking and decision-making. Videos for nursing students may portray complex medical cases that encourage students to apply their knowledge to assess patients' needs and take appropriate measures. Moreover, films and TV series may depict medical teams working together, offering examples of interdisciplinary collaboration. Nursing students can observe how health care professionals from different fields communicate and work towards a common goal in patient care. Videos that focus on patient narratives help nursing students understand the emotional and psychological impact of illness and hospitalization. Deeper understanding of such situations can help nursing students appreciate the patients' experiences and lead to a more patient-centered approach in nursing practice.

Visual image training aligns with recent trends in education that emphasize the importance of multimodal learning, i.e., the use of multiple forms of media and communication to enhance understanding. Visual images—whether from videos, paintings, or literary works—provide rich, multi-layered texts that students can discuss, analyze, and interpret. Visual image training not only helps students improve their language skills but also encourages critical thinking and deeper comprehension of human behavior. While the principal focus of the present study is on nursing training, visual image training has considerable potential to improve skills in language learning and human relations for students in many other fields.

2. Analyzing Patient Behavior and Non-Verbal Communication

As already noted, visual image training encourages students to cultivate their ability to read the mental and physical states of patients by analyzing case studies drawn from videos and literature. For nursing students, an immersive approach in visual image training develops clinical and interpersonal skills essential for effective patient care while fostering empathy, cultural sensitivity, and linguistic competencies. By engaging with visual narratives that mirror real-life patient-caregiver interactions, students enhance their communicative abilities and prepare to provide holistic care.

The challenges faced by Japanese undergraduate nursing students in EFL courses are multifaceted, as such students must not only master medical terminology but also develop the ability to communicate clearly and compassionately with patients from diverse backgrounds. The many demands beyond traditional language learning require an approach that surpasses ordinary grammar and vocabulary knowledge by including extralinguistic skills like emotional intelligence and cultural awareness. Visual image training satisfies these many demands by creating an immersive environment, most effectively through videos, in which students can practice reading non-verbal cues—facial expressions, body language, and tone—while engaging with fictional but realistic scenarios that mirror patient-caregiver interactions.

The ability to communicate effectively with patients is critical in nursing, where misunderstandings can have serious consequences. Visual image training equips students with the skills needed to communicate clearly and compassionately with patients from diverse backgrounds. Munro et al. (2007) asserted that communication in nursing is not only about the exchange of information but also about creating “an emotional connection with the patient, which fosters trust and promotes healing.” Visual image training helps students develop this emotional connection by teaching them to interpret non-verbal cues and respond with empathy, skills that are particularly valuable when language barriers exist.

Furthermore, visual image training encourages active learning, which has been shown to improve language retention and communication skills (Prince, 2004). Rather than passively memorizing vocabulary or grammar rules, students actively engage with the content by analyzing characters' emotions, motivations, and actions. This process encourages deeper cognitive processing, which in turn improves language acquisition and fluency (Richards, 2006). By focusing on both verbal and non-verbal communication, visual image training helps students become more effective communicators, capable of managing the complex interpersonal dynamics in health care settings.



Well-made feature films and television series with medical themes show a range of communication styles between patients, families, and health care providers. Students can observe both effective and ineffective communication and reflect on how to improve their own patient interactions. For example, in *The Doctor* (Haines, 1991), the protagonist is an outwardly successful surgeon who is nevertheless impersonal and emotionally distant with his patients and even with his own family. When the doctor is diagnosed with laryngeal (throat) cancer, he is thrust into the position of a patient in ways that involve a painful role reversal. The film offers insights into the ways that patients' emotions, moods, and body language shift when they feel vulnerable or misunderstood, helping students grasp the need for empathy in caregiving situations.

The doctor in Haines (1991) undergoes cancer treatment administered by a specialist who is also impersonal and emotionally distant. Being on the receiving end of professional coldness forces the doctor to reevaluate his entire medical practice, in which, he realizes, empathy had been largely absent. Later, as a cancer survivor, the doctor shows his inner transformation in the ways that he trains his medical interns. He has them role-play patients, then assigns them various illnesses and orders tests to make them feel the patients' experiences themselves. In such ways, the doctor atones for his past professional shortcomings by encouraging his interns to develop empathy and compassion for the patients they will treat one day.

By dramatic contrast, in *Patch Adams* (Shadyac, 1998), Robin Williams portrays a real-life medical doctor named Hunter Doherty "Patch" Adams who uses humor and empathy to connect with patients. (The real Adams also organizes volunteers around the world to dress as clowns and entertain children in orphanages and patients in hospitals.) While the film touches on a variety of conditions treated by general medical practitioners, some issues for specialists are presented, including cancer and mental illness, specifically depression and suicidal ideation, as well as patient care in hospitals. Through this film, students learn to appreciate the importance of active listening, with attention to tone, body language – and especially humor – in creating trust and rapport with patients.

In nursing and many other fields of caregiving and service, communication is not just about the exchange of information; it is about creating meaningful and respectful connections with clients, patients, or others. Visual image training helps students develop the skills needed to interpret emotional and cultural cues, making them more effective communicators and more empathetic professionals.

3. Enhancing Cultural Sensitivity

In addition to fostering empathy, visual image training deepens students' sensitivity to cultural differences, an increasingly important skill in today's globalized health care environment. Cultural sensitivity refers to the ability to recognize and respect cultural differences, including communication styles, values, and behaviors (Kirmayer, 2012). For Japanese nursing students in EFL courses, cross-cultural communication is essential to their future careers, as breakdowns in communication due to cultural misunderstandings can cause major errors in patient care.

Visual image training sharpens cultural sensitivity, a critical skill for nurses working in multicultural environments. As health care becomes increasingly globalized, the ability to understand and respect cultural differences is vital. Visual case studies from films, television episodes, and literature offer a rich resource for exploring cultural narratives and ethical frameworks that may differ widely from students' own backgrounds. By engaging with diverse perspectives, students can expand their worldview, improving their capacity to deliver care that is both linguistically and culturally appropriate.

In effect, visual image training operates as a form of intercultural communication training. It exposes students to a variety of communication styles, behaviors, and social norms through the characters they study. Such exposure is particularly valuable in health care, where miscommunication due to personal and cultural misunderstandings can have serious consequences. For example, a patient's non-verbal cues or tone may differ based on their cultural background, and the ability to recognize these subtleties is crucial for effective care. Visual image training enables nursing students to become more adept at recognizing and interpreting these signals, thereby minimizing miscommunication and improving patient outcomes.

Visual case studies drawn from videos and literature provide rich opportunities for students to engage with diverse cultural perspectives and explore ethical frameworks that may differ from their own. By analyzing how characters from different cultural backgrounds interact and communicate, students are better equipped to understand and manage cross-cultural dynamics in real-world health care settings. This intercultural training helps prepare students to provide culturally competent care, which has been shown to improve patient satisfaction and health outcomes (Betancourt et al., 2002).

Videos that tackle broader societal issues—such as health care access, inequality, and medical ethics—can prompt discussions about the social determinants of health and the broader impact of health care policies. For example, *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019) portrays a family keeping a terminal cancer diagnosis secret from their elderly grandmother, a practice common in some Asian cultures. Students can discuss cultural differences in communication about illness and death and how they might manage such differences as health care professionals.

Two other notable feature films offer students examples of profound medical problems and opportunities to reflect on them. *Awakenings* (Marshall, 1990), based on the book of the same title by the eminent neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks, features patients in a prolonged catatonic state who are treated with an experimental drug. The patients suffer from encephalitis lethargica (also known as “sleeping sickness”), a condition that left them in a catatonic state for decades; the drug, L-Dopa, is administered to temporarily awaken the patients. Nursing students can discuss the clinical reasoning behind the treatment decisions and consider the potential risks, benefits, and ethical concerns involved in such trials. The second film, *John Q* (Cassavetes, 2002), highlights the challenges of health care access and insurance in the U.S. health care system. A young boy needs a heart transplant to survive a life-threatening heart condition, but medical insurance coverage complicates his eligibility. Nursing students can discuss the implications of such barriers to patient care and consider ways for healthcare professionals to advocate for patients in difficult circumstances.

Of the many television dramas that deal with medical issues, *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, et al., 2005–present) is a long-running television series that regularly shows surgeons, nurses, and other health care professionals collaborating on patient cases. Students can reflect on the importance of teamwork and how to handle conflict or communication breakdowns in a clinical setting. Various diseases and conditions appear throughout the series, including trauma injuries, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, heart disease, liver failure, surgical complications, and rare medical syndromes. Each episode tends to focus on a different medical case or condition, providing students with an immense range of health care issues to consider.

4. Practicing Empathy and Compassion

Japanese students in nursing education programs in Japan face unique challenges in their health care education that require some coursework in English. The students must not only master complex medical terminology but must also navigate cross-cultural communication and build rapport with patients. Traditional language teaching methods often focus on grammar and vocabulary in isolation, but visual image training integrates language learning with real-world applications, offering a more holistic and dynamic approach to education. The visual image training method encourages students to engage with visual and emotional cues to make themselves more effective communicators in diverse, multicultural contexts.

One of the most significant benefits of visual image training is its ability to foster empathy. Empathy is fundamental in nursing, and ideally students become caregivers who can provide patient-centered care. Through the analysis of characters in feature films, television episodes, and literary works, nursing students encounter a variety of emotional states and behaviors that reflect real-world patient experiences. This interaction allows students to practice interpreting emotions and responding compassionately, helping them prepare for the complexities of patient care, where empathy is key to establishing trust and building rapport.

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is a foundational skill in health care, enabling caregivers to provide patient-centered care that respects individual, emotional, and cultural differences (Stepien & Baernstein, 2006). Through the analysis of characters in videos and literature, nursing students are exposed to a wide range of emotional states, behaviors, and ethical



dilemmas that mirror real-world patient interactions. Students develop the ability to interpret non-verbal cues—such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice—which are crucial for understanding patient needs and emotions (Vogel et al., 2018).

By practicing empathy through visual case studies, students learn how to respond compassionately to patients, preparing them for the complexities of clinical practice. Research shows that healthcare professionals with higher levels of empathy tend to have better patient outcomes and report higher job satisfaction (Hojat et al., 2011). Visual image training supports the development of these empathetic skills while simultaneously enhancing language proficiency. Classroom discussions that follow the analysis of visual case studies allow students to practice linguistic structures while engaging with emotional content, reinforcing both language learning and emotional intelligence (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983).

Some videos highlight the emotional toll that health care work can take on providers, offering insights into the importance of self-care and stress management. Students can learn how to balance personal well-being with professional responsibilities. In one such film, *My Sister's Keeper* (Cassavetes, 2009), a family deals with a child's leukemia diagnosis, offering a lens into family dynamics, grief, and emotional stress. The film focuses on a young girl with acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL) and the ethical dilemmas posed by the very existence of her sister, who was conceived to be a genetic match to provide donations for treatments such as bone marrow transplants. Students can discuss how to manage their own responses to such complicated ethical issues as well as how to provide empathy for both patients and their families during emotionally charged life-altering illnesses.

Several other films present images of the emotional trauma of extreme medical conditions, giving students opportunities to consider the patients' perspective. For example, *Still Alice* (Glatzer & Westmoreland, 2014) follows the progression of early-onset Alzheimer's disease from the patient's point of view. The film follows the protagonist, a linguistics professor, as she experiences the early symptoms and progressive decline caused by Alzheimer's disease. Nursing students can discuss the importance of patient-centered care and the role of empathy when dealing with the tragic course of degenerative illnesses that attack both the body and the mind of patients.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975), the authoritarian style and emotional detachment of the passive-aggressive Nurse Ratched contrasts dramatically with the need for compassion in nursing. The story takes place in a mental institution and depicts a range of such mental health disorders as depression, acute anxiety, and schizophrenia. The film also addresses the controversial use of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and lobotomy. The many difficult health care issues raised in this film can spark students' discussions about emotional resilience and stress management in less-than-ideal circumstances, both for patients and for themselves as future caregivers.

Wit (Nichols, 2001), a film about a Stage-IV cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy, exposes students to ethical questions around end-of-life care, informed consent, and the emotional toll on both patients and caregivers. As the protagonist, a professor of English, undergoes aggressive treatment for advanced ovarian cancer, she reflects on life and death and her interactions with healthcare providers. Students can analyze patient-caregiver interactions and debate how best to manage care decisions with empathy in such emotionally fraught situations.

5. Conclusion: A Promising Future for Visual Image Training in Language Pedagogy

The films and the television series mentioned in the present study cover a wide range of medical conditions and issues, offering nursing students a wealth of case studies for learning about patient care, medical ethics, and the emotional impact of various diseases. With videos on medical themes integrated into their training, nursing students can develop a range of skills—from clinical judgment and communication to empathy and cultural sensitivity. Analyzing characters, plots, medical scenarios, and ethical choices from such videos offers students creative, engaging, and reflective ways to prepare for real-world challenges in health care. Visual image training provides valuable tools that bridge theoretical knowledge and practical patient care.

The present study investigated the transformative potential of visual image training as a pedagogical method for improving English language skills in EFL courses for Japanese undergraduate

nursing students preparing for careers in caregiving. Visual image training, which uses “case studies” from films, television series, and literature, asks students to analyze the mental and physical states of fictional characters who are sometimes based on real people. Students experience simulations of future professional life that cultivate crucial interpersonal skills—notably the abilities to read people and situations—for effective communication and patient care. By engaging with diverse visual narratives, nursing students observe models of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and linguistic competencies that provide models of holistic caregiving.

Through contextualized learning, visual image training becomes a powerful tool for improving language learning and acquisition. With language practice linked to images that reflect real-life situations and emotions, students may find it easier to internalize new vocabulary words and technical terms. In a classroom setting, guided discussions about video and literary characters’ emotions, ethical dilemmas, and interpersonal dynamics help reinforce language structures while improving students’ ability to communicate with greater precision and appreciation of nuances. Visual image training integrates cognitive learning with emotional engagement, internalizing the language-learning process for learners, making learning more meaningful for them and increasing the likelihood that learners will retain what they learned.

While the present study has focused on nursing education, the benefits of visual image training extend beyond clinical care to encompass many service-oriented fields, including social work, counseling, hospitality, and education. Visual image training helps students prepare for careers in social work by developing the skills needed to provide compassionate care (Bride, 2007). Visual image training can help business and service-industry students anticipate the emotional and psychological needs of their clients. Similarly, for education students, visual image training fosters a more inclusive learning environment that improves learners’ ability and willingness to communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, (Gay, 2002). In short, visual image training equips learners in many fields with the ability to manage complex interpersonal situations, interpret emotions accurately, and communicate effectively across cultural borders.

Students preparing for careers in social work or in service industries can benefit from analyzing characters in videos and literary works who exhibit psychological distress or trauma. Visual image training helps students in many fields learn to identify signs of emotional and mental health issues and prepare appropriate responses, all while refining their English language skills. Similarly, those preparing for careers in education can use visual image training to better understand student behavior, making it easier to address diverse learning needs in multicultural classrooms.

The integration of visual image training into English language pedagogy marks a shift towards more holistic and dynamic teaching methods. Traditional language teaching tends to emphasize grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition, often in isolation from real-world applications. By contrast, visual image training situates language learning within the context of meaningful, emotionally resonant interactions, making the process more engaging and relevant to students’ future professional roles. In effect, visual image training confirms an intuition that many teachers have -- that the optimal situation for language learners is to be so deeply engaged in activities which interest them that they forget they are learning a language.

Visual image training offers long-term benefits, too. By blending visual analysis with language instruction, educators can provide a comprehensive learning experience that prepares students for the complex, interpersonal demands of their future careers. Visual image training is not just a language teaching method; it is a pathway to developing well-rounded professionals who can communicate effectively, demonstrate empathy, and manage the nuances of intercultural interactions with confidence and sensitivity.

As the demands of health care and other service-oriented professions continue to evolve, so too must the preparation of students for these roles adapt to changing times. Visual image training offers an innovative and effective way to enhance English language proficiency while simultaneously developing the interpersonal and affective skills essential for the caregiving and service professions. By immersing students in visual narratives that reflect real-world patient-caregiver dynamics, visual image training enriches learners’ abilities to communicate with empathy, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. In short, visual image training forms a bridge between language acquisition and empathy in ways that make learners more effective and successful communicators.



The findings of the present study suggest that visual image training can play a pivotal role in the future of language education, particularly in fields where communication and caregiving intersect. As an emerging pedagogical approach that closes the gaps between language acquisition and emotional intelligence, visual image training holds promise not only for nursing students but also for learners in a wide range of service disciplines--equipping them with the language and interpersonal skills needed to succeed in their careers in an increasingly diverse and globalized world.

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