



21st Century Language Teaching Conference 2024

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Visual Voices: Exploring English Learning Through Students' Drawings

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Abstract

This ongoing study investigates the attitudes of university students who are not majoring in English toward learning English. A visual research approach was adopted as visual methods have become increasingly common for exploring how individuals perceive and navigate their worlds beyond verbal expressions (Mannay, 2016). The visual data in the current study are students' drawings created in response to a prompt that asked them to draw what image they had of learning English and of English as a language. In addition, participants provided written interpretations of their drawings to clarify their intended meanings, thereby reducing the risk of researcher misinterpretation of the visual data (Kalaja, 2020). The study involved 40 female university students majoring in humanities and social sciences. At the time of data collection, conducted during the fall semester of 2023, participants were in their second, third, or fourth year. Over one-third were also enrolled in a teacher training program for Japanese as a foreign language.

Most participants seemed to have positive images of English as a global language. Most of the collected drawings of learning English depicted people, including figures representing the participants themselves, textbooks, and notebooks. The drawings also revealed the students' memories of learning English in high school, studying for entrance exams and other tests, memorizing vocabulary, and struggling with grammar.

The Beginnings

People have expressed themselves through drawings and paintings for thousands of years, including drawings and paintings created by people who lived in pre-literate societies. Some paintings and engravings date back as far as 50,000 years ago, and this prehistoric rock art, which includes paintings, drawings, and carvings on cave walls, can be found on every continent (Davidson & Nowell, 2021). Well-known rock art sites still attract visitors today, for example, in Europe, which has hundreds of rock art locations (Council of Europe, n.d.).

Some of these drawings and paintings show how people who inhabited these caves lived and what they did, depicting, for example, interactions between humans and humans and animals

(Davidson & Nowell, 2021). Beyond the representational purpose of recording daily life, some of the parietal art probably served ritualistic purposes (Lewis-Williams, 2002), which points to the complex meaning of these works. Rock art has been described as universally human (Davidson & Nowell, 2021), and this human tendency to express themselves through visual arts indicates that visual expression is one of the fundamental aspects of human communication that transcends time and cultural boundaries that continues to this day. This could suggest that people have always used visual mediums to document their experiences and share ideas, emotions, and stories in ways that words alone may not fully capture. Given this long-standing significance of visual expression, there are multiple reasons for incorporating visual methods and analysis in research nowadays. The sections below provide more information about the use of drawings and paintings in healthcare and research in recent years.

Visual Methods

Art, such as drawings and paintings, as a means of expression can reveal insights that are difficult to convey through words alone, which is why visual data can be helpful in various kinds of research. Non-linguistic approaches can give “access and represent different levels of experience” (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 547). In clinical psychology practice and research, drawings can be helpful tools in assessing clients’ emotional states and unconscious thoughts. For instance, researchers may ask participants to draw specific things (like a person, family, or tree – e.g., in the tree test to detect depression or cognitive disorders [Gu et al., 2020]) to gain insight into their perceptions and emotional responses. Furthermore visual methods have been used as a therapeutic intervention in art therapy, reportedly with positive outcomes (Maddox et al., 2024; Uttley et al., 2015), and people create art to express and process their emotions, traumas, and experiences. Art therapy using visuals has also been successfully combined with cognitive-behavioral therapeutic treatments (Rosal, 2018).

Visual methods used in sociological, healthcare, and education research are varied. For example, Abrahams and Ingram (2013) utilized plasticine modeling to research the identities of local, working- and middle-class students at two universities in the United Kingdom. The participants expressed their identity by creating something tangible that represented their existence outside school, in the local community and inside the university. The researchers used the student-created plasticine models in in-depth discussions with the students demonstrating how visual methods can facilitate deeper reflections on personal and social identity.

Guillemin (2004), on the other hand, used drawings in a study with adult female patients who, although hesitant at first, actively engaged in the research and showed multiple aspects of their experiences with illness and generated and exchanged knowledge about their medical conditions. An

important component of this study, too, was the verbal component – the participants’ explanations of their drawings. Guillemin (2004) pointed out that drawings allowed the researcher to explore the research matter more broadly and deeply than if the only medium of exploration had been verbal. Similarly, in Gauntlett’s (2007) study, 14-15-year-old participants’ drawings were used to uncover their ideas about lifestyle and gender, but instead of interviews, the participants completed a questionnaire. The researcher found that the participants “provided emotionally reflective responses, revealing a more sensitive side that other studies of young masculinities have tended to attract” (p. 123), and participants’ reflections can be therapeutic for them (Gauntlett, 2007). This finding suggests another potential benefit of using participant-generated visuals in research. “The drawing process [might have given] more *time*” and less constraint to the participants to reflect and provide “nuanced thoughts” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 125).

In sum, images are used in social science research because they can reveal some social insights that are not as easily accessible otherwise (Banks, 2018), and visual approaches have the potential to evoke an emphatic understanding of the ways in which other people experience their worlds (Mannay, 2016). These are also the reasons visual data are used in the current study.

Research using visual methods in language education has also been conducted worldwide, involving different languages and diverse learner populations. For instance, Niemelä (2024) researched language ideologies among elementary school students involving the Finnish language and found symbols of national Finnish identity (e.g., Finnish flags) and contrasting representations of Finns and “foreigners” in children’s drawings. In recent years, several studies have utilized visual data to explore the lives and experiences of multilingual individuals (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018; Kalaja, 2020).

Kalaja and Pitkänen-Huhta (2018) suggested the start of a visual turn in language education research. Studies in their special issue used various visual methods to investigate learners’ beliefs, identities, multilingual practices, and language learning and teaching experiences across diverse contexts. Similarly, in the edited volume by Kalaja and Melo-Pfeifer (2019), contributors from around the world presented empirical research using visual methods, such as drawings and photographs, to explore multilingualism. These studies reveal the complexity of living, studying, and working with multiple languages, demonstrating the potential of visual methods to enrich language education research.

In Japan, a Jungian exploration using visual metaphors and drawings alongside written descriptions to uncover implicit beliefs about English learning among Japanese university students offers an alternative to traditional questionnaire-based methods (Suzuki, 2015; Suzuki & Childs, 2016). The participants were science and technology majors who entered university in 2014. Most were male

(121 out of 126). The study found that learning for them was a largely solitary process focused on textbooks and notebooks and that many participants had negative feelings toward learning English.

In universities in Japan, English classes can be compulsory or elective subjects, and in most universities, students are required to take English for one or two years. English is also a part of many university entrance exams. It is, therefore, important to understand how these learners perceive English and how they feel about learning it. To address this the present research inquiry focuses on exploring students' perspectives on learning English and their perspectives on the English language.

Method and Participants

The present study uses visual data as a lens for understanding English learners' perceptions of English and their experiences studying it. Visual methods, shown to enrich data collection and enhance the validity and depth of data (Glaw et al., 2017), provide insight into participants' emotional and cognitive experiences to help explore complex, sometimes subconscious, aspects of students' attitudes and experiences.

It can be argued that the nonverbal character of the visual method allowed the participants not to be concerned about their use of words to express their feelings and thoughts. At the same time, the participants were also encouraged to express themselves verbally by adding short written descriptions and explanations of their drawings (as per Kalaja's [2020] suggestion) in Japanese.

Data collection for this research phase took place in the fall semester of the AY 2023/2024. The participants were 40 female students from a private women's university in their second, third, or fourth year. They majored in Japanese literature, economics, communication, and international relations. More than one-third of them were also enrolled in the training program for teachers of Japanese as a foreign language. The participants received information about the purpose of the research and signed informed consent forms.

The participants received an A4 sheet of paper to draw on. The instructions in Japanese invited them to (1) draw their image of the English language and (2) draw their image of learning English, and to write in brief the reasons for their specific drawings. The participants could use pencils and pens of any color. The participants could also respond digitally by using a Google document where they could insert pictures they searched online or created on their own. This approach aimed to reduce intimidation or self-consciousness about drawing skills (as suggested by Abrahams & Ingram, 2013) and to allow students to express themselves visually in a manner they felt most comfortable. Only three participants chose this option.

Results and Discussion

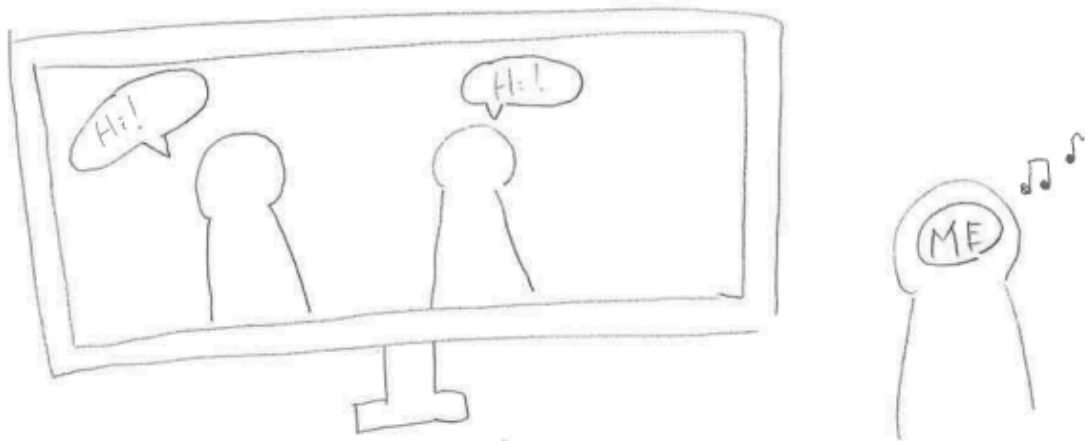
I followed the steps outlined in Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework (2013, 2022) to analyze the responses. The drawings and accompanying written descriptions were treated as complementary data and analyzed together. Preliminary analyses indicate the following findings:

1. Perceptions of the positive value of English in general or in students' present and future lives
2. Emotional responses to learning English,
3. Challenges in their language-learning journey.

Most visual and verbal responses regarding English feature alphabet letters, words in English (e.g., greetings), figures that appear to be of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and representations of global connections through communication between people or through various media. One student shared a photograph of a popular American singer (Bruno Mars) she found online, whereas another included a picture of a globe surrounded by English letters. Below (figures 1 to 6) are examples of participants' hand-drawn depictions of English. Figure 7 is a digital image. The descriptions below the images are translations from Japanese.

Figure 1

Image of English 1 (Second-Year Japanese Literature Major)



Description: foreign dramas, *akogare* [admiring/aspiring/yearning/being attracted to], being cool.

Figure 2

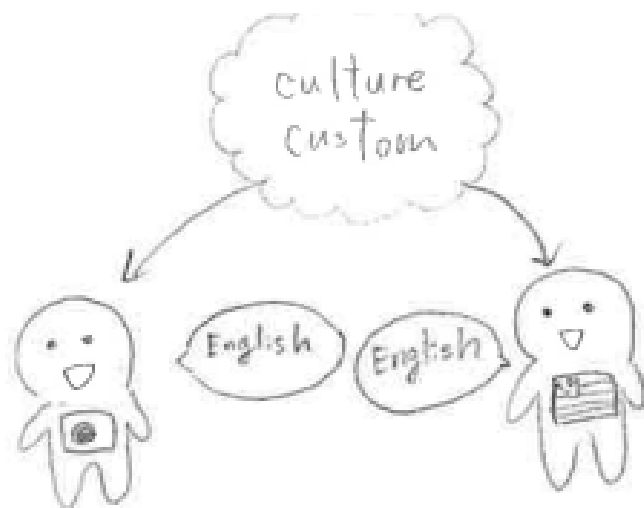
Image of English 2 (Third-Year Communication Studies Major)



Description: I have an image of various people from all over the world who can enjoy speaking [with one another] overseas or in Japan. I feel that people who use English as a common communication tool appreciate “freedom.”

Figure 3

Image of English 3 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Description: Exposure to people from different cultures and countries.

Figure 4

Image of English 4 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Figure 5

Image of English 5 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Figure 6

Image of English 6 (Second-Year Japanese Literature Major)



Description: I have an image of people other than those from America and England gathering together. They do not seem much connected with the real native [English speakers].

Figure 7

Image of English 7 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Reason: I think that English is like a black box. The reason why is when I speak English, I could not imagine what they would say back to me. So my heart is pounding as if I touch inside the black box. (Originally written in English)

There were many depictions of various people, including figures representing the participants themselves (“me”). Global connections supported by the use of English as a common language are represented through drawings of maps, flags, and the globe. Handshakes, hugs, and figures holding hands represent friendship and connectedness between people from various ethnic groups. Occasionally, what appears to be the Japanese people and Japan’s flag were in the pictures and symbolized the participant’s national identity and their home country. In most cases that was in relation to either the United States or the rest of the world that was connected with Japan through English. These findings seem consistent with Suzuki’s (2015) and Suzuki and Childs’ (2016) findings, even though their participants were male, first-year university students, and their majors differed from the current study’s sample’s majors. Similarly to Niemelä’s (2024) results, many students in the current study also drew flags or a map of Japan to indicate how people in Japan are English users or to indicate that they are non-native English speakers.

Two exceptions among the drawings that conveyed positive ideas are Figures 6 and 7. In Figure 6, the student draws lines between different categories of English speakers. She seems to see English as a Lingua Franca that connects non-native English speakers, but the same language acts as a divider between what she labels “real native [speakers]” from the Inner Circle and the rest. Figure 7 seems to show anxiety about speaking English in real life because of uncertainty about the interlocutor’s English. Although the other participants did not draw similar images, it is important to note that the two images depict arguably negative feelings about English in such a small data sample.

The figures below show several responses regarding learning/studying English. Most drawings included books or notebooks and pens and depicted putting effort into learning reading and writing. Most images convey feelings of frustration and difficulty.

Figure 8

Image of English 8 (Second-Year Japanese Literature Major)



Description: I wrote a lot when I studied for the entrance exam.

Figure 9

Image of English 9 (Second-Year Japanese Literature Major)

理由を簡単に書いて下さい。



Description: Frustration. It feels like it will never end, not until the end of my life.

Figure 10

Image of English 10 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Description: Hard but happy. It is hard and difficult, but it is also enjoyable. [English] widens your world [broadens your horizons].

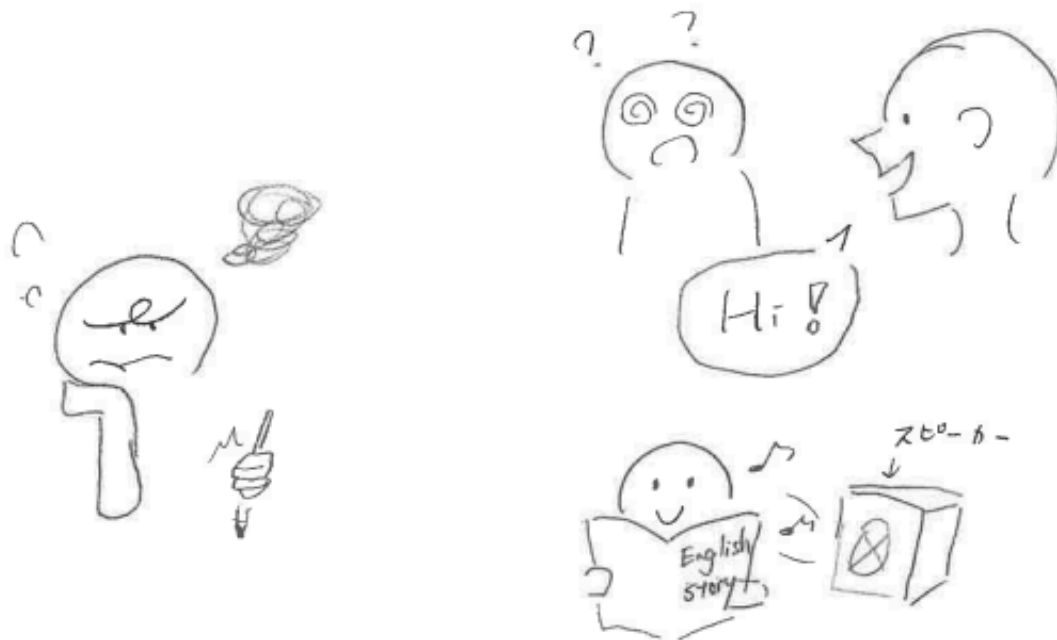
Figure 11

Image of English 11 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Figure 12

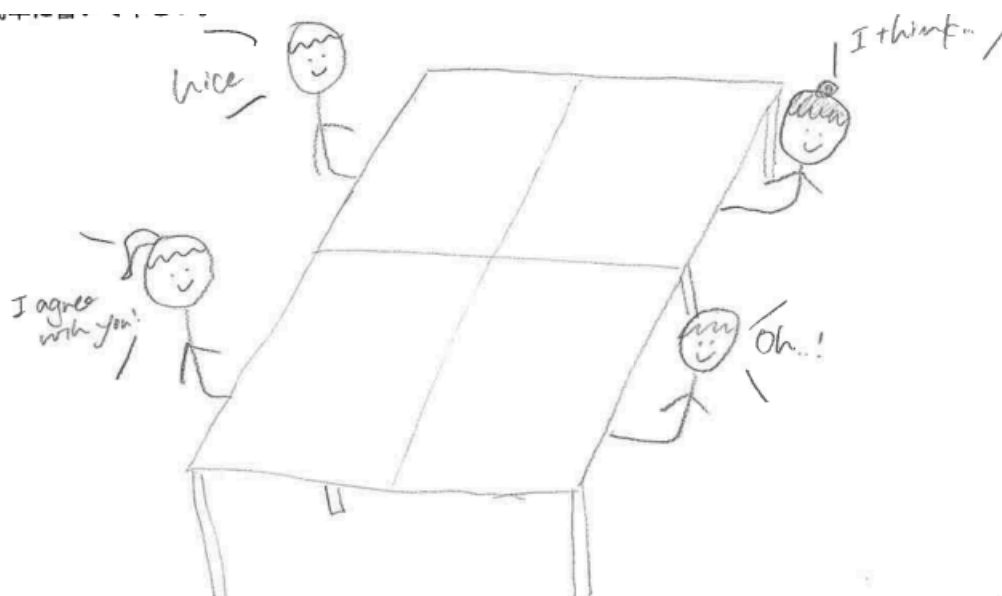
Image of English 12 (Second-Year Communication Studies Major)



Description: Memorizing various things is hard, but once you can read and write in English, it is fun.
Listening, too!

Figure 13

Image of English 13 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Description: I remember having discussions with everyone in class. It is true that most of the time I studied in the classroom, sitting at my desk and facing the blackboard, but I remember enjoying in-class activities.

Figure 14

Image of English 14 (Second-Year International Relations Major)



Description: It feels like there's always someone better at English than you are, making learning English seem like an endless climb up Mount Everest.

Although most of the participants were second-year students who were still taking compulsory English classes in university, they seemed to draw images of their past learning experiences. For example several students drew pictures of studying for entrance exams and mentioned the exams in their written responses. Although negative images of excessive and endless effort and frustration (i.e., sweat, grimaces, comparison with more proficient others) were also common, a few students expressed feelings of accomplishment and enjoyment regarding being able to use English.

Some students drew or wrote “the four skills,” but most images focused on reading and writing skills, including spelling and grammar. Five students drew different activities. One remembered singing in English at the start of class and drew two students singing. Two students drew pictures of people speaking in English, and one drew a classroom where students enjoyed discussing in English (Figure 13). These findings are also in line with those of Suzuki (2015) and Suzuki and Childs (2016), whose data also included drawings of English study as a predominantly solitary activity. Close to ten years

after Suzuki's research, commonalities among university students in Japan, regardless of their gender and major, are noticeable.

Next steps

This study explored perceptions of English and learning English held by a group of female students majoring in humanities and social science. The study also contributes to the body of literature demonstrating how visual approaches help reveal emotional aspects of foreign language learning. As this is ongoing research, in the fall semester of the AY 2024/2025, I plan to collect more data, this time including English majors and first-year students. In the future, I plan to investigate students' linguistic habitus and bilingual identity expressed through drawings complemented by written and interview responses.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the students who participated in this study. Their contributions are invaluable.

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