

Pragmatic roles of visuals in ELT textbook

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Introduction

For novice language learners, visual images are particularly useful to comprehend the texts (Hadley, 2001) and ELT textbooks for beginner-level learners are full of visuals. This study explores the visuals associated with speech acts introduced in 5 beginner-level internationally used commercial ELT textbooks and 7 textbooks used in Japanese upper secondary education to determine how these visual elements can be used to convey information about pragmatics. The data analysed in this study show the participants’ power relations and social distance along with interpersonal intensity depicted in the visuals as well as how language use is presented according to visualised contextual information.

Methodology

- The average number of visual images per page in each textbook was calculated to compare the frequency of visuals in relation to the amount of language information across the textbooks.
- The visuals images involving contextual information in each textbook were identified focusing on narrative process of the ideational meta-function of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotic theory.
- The number of visuals with contextual information involved in each speech act was counted.
- Categorisation of visual images according to participants’ power relations and social distance was made based on the figure below:

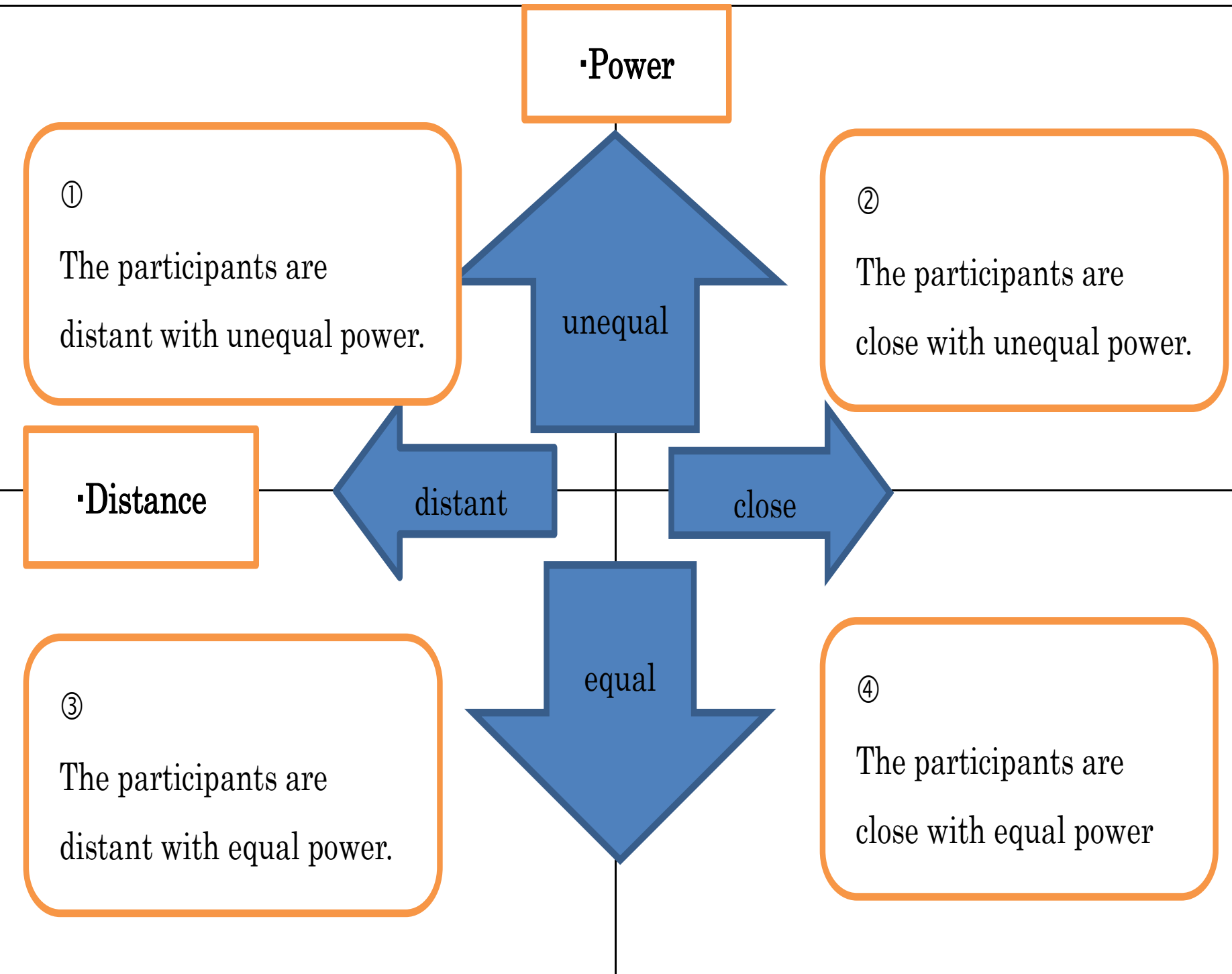


Fig. 1: Categorisation of visual images according to power relations and distance

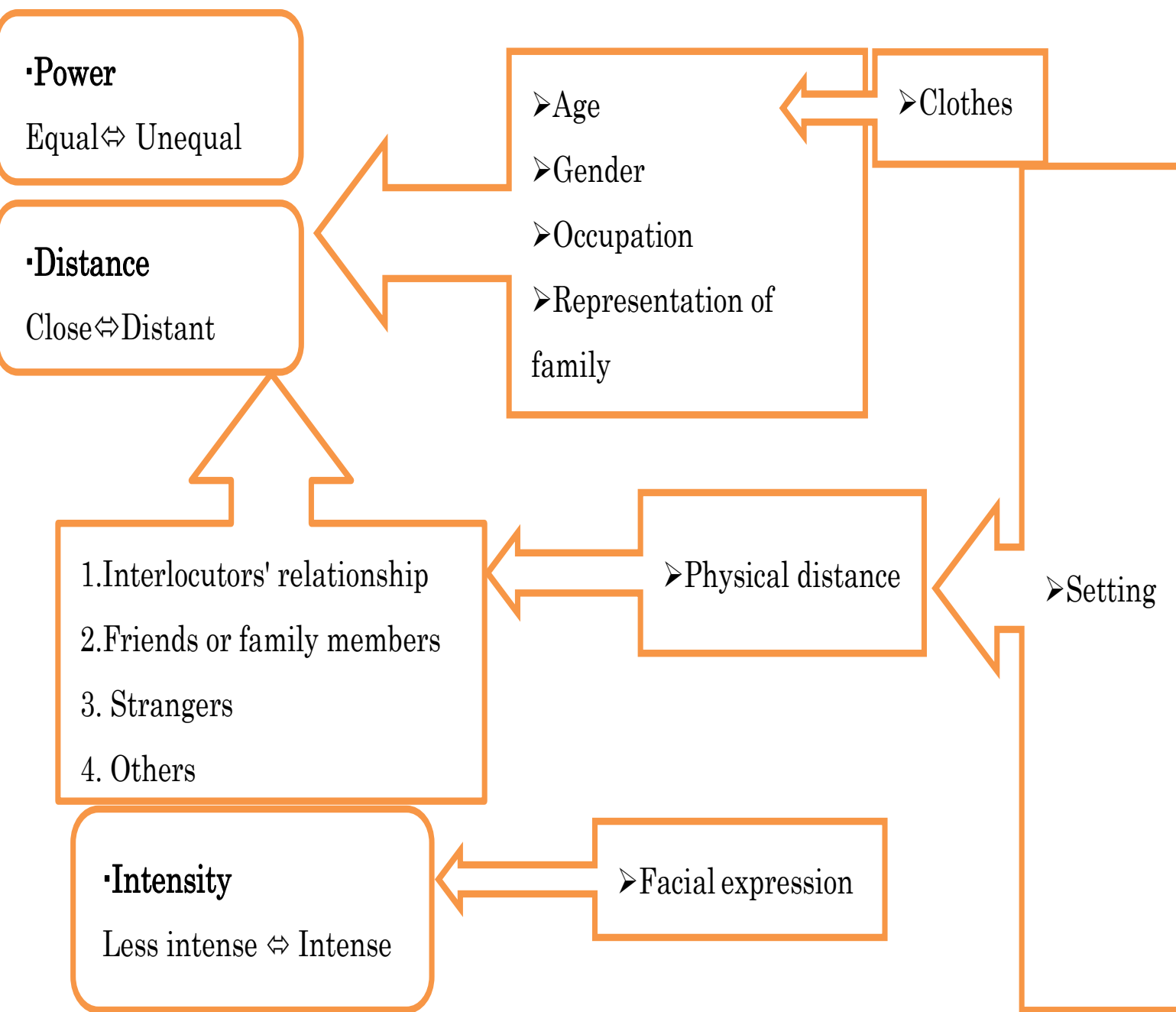


Fig. 2: Elements providing information to categorise visual images

•Further investigation was undertaken to determine how many different speech acts were involved in the visuals related to the participants’ power relations and distance as categorised into each of these four groups. Linguistic forms involved in each of these speech acts were also examined to note any specific forms involving im/politeness, in/directness or formality peculiar to the different power relations and distance of the participants.

Results

	TB1	TB2	TB3	TB4	TB5
Average no. of images per page	3.4	4.3	2.9	3.8	3.7
Total no. of images	499	487	329	438	477
No. of images with contextual information (%)	35 (7.0%)	41 (8.4%)	18 (5.4%)	3 (0.6%)	15 (3.1%)

Table1: Visuals presented in the set of internationally used commercial ELT textbooks

	TB6	TB7	TB8	TB9	TB10	TB11	TB12
Average no. of images per page	1.3	0.5	1.0	2.4	1.1	2.7	1.4
Total no. of images	260	100	184	262	162	189	135
No. of images with contextual information (%)	26 (10.0%)	0	2 (1.1%)	11 (4.2%)	1 (0.6%)	11 (5.8%)	9 (6.7%)

Table 2: Visuals presented in the set of textbooks used in Japanese high schools

Categorization of visuals according to power relations and social distance

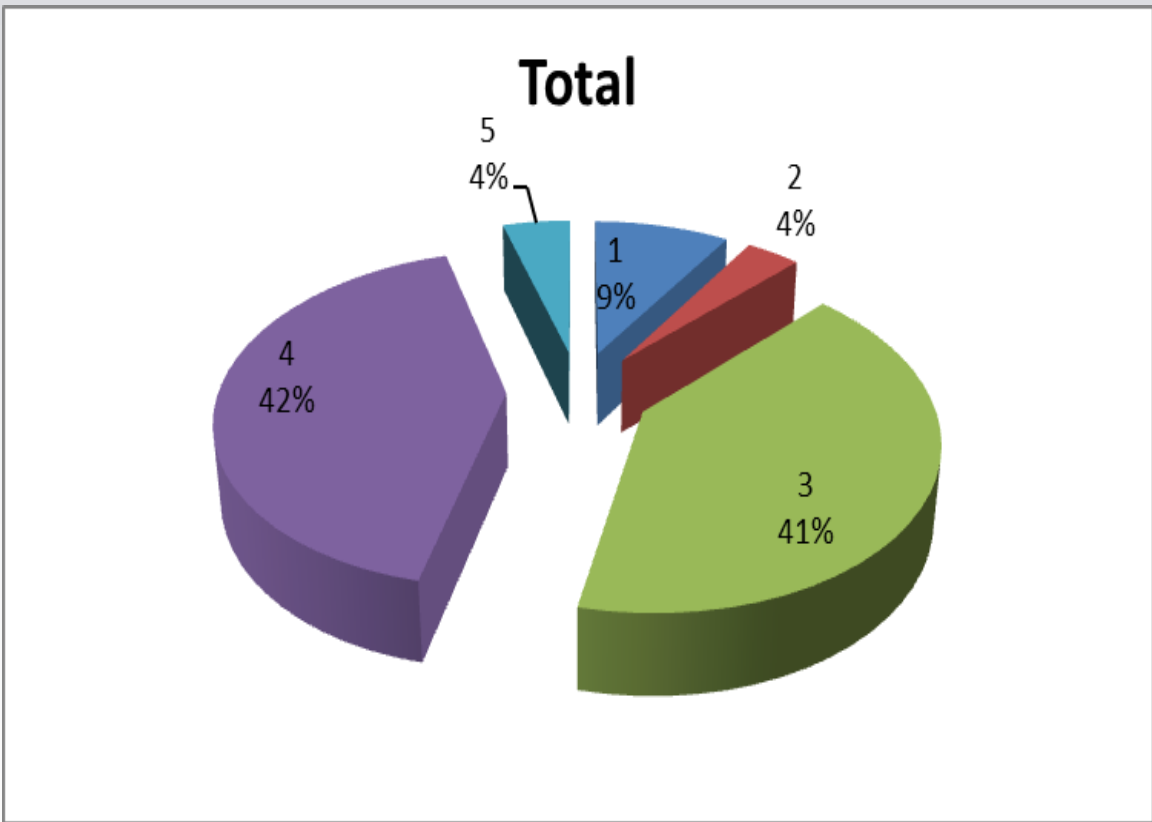


Fig.3: The case of internationally used commercial ELT textbooks

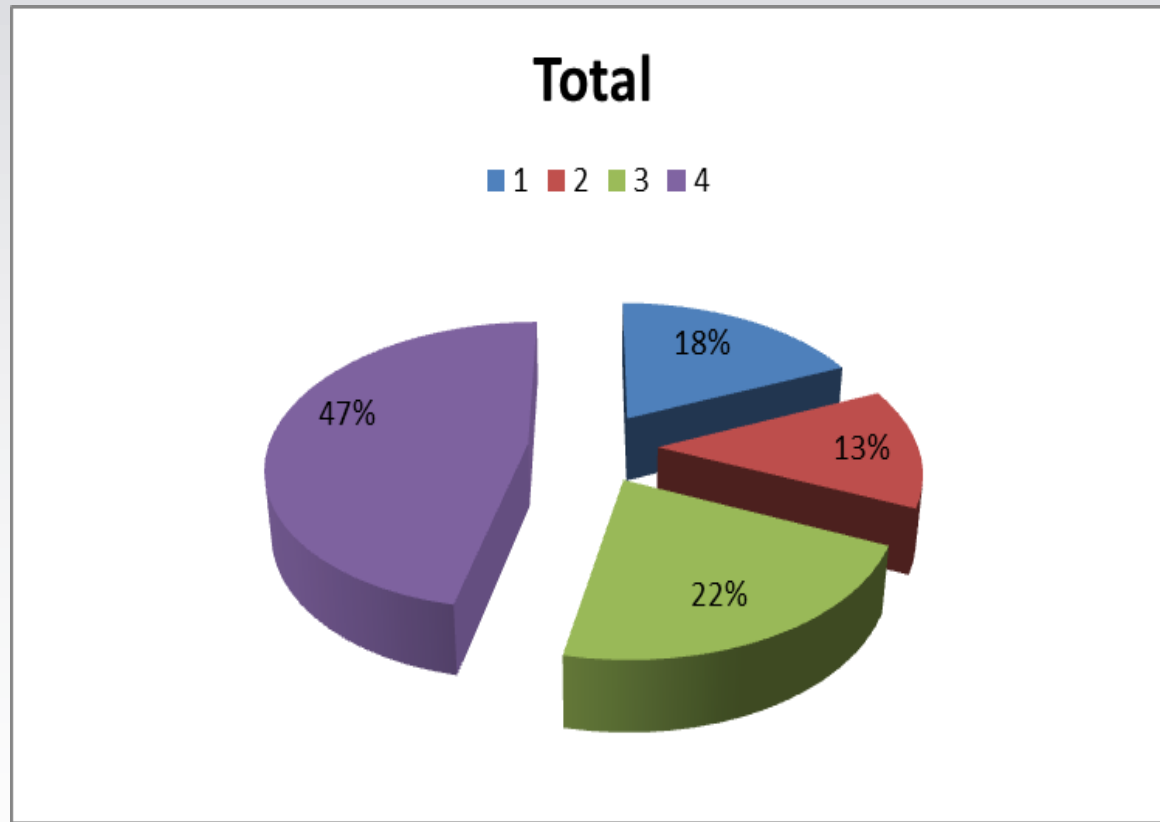


Fig.4: The case of textbooks used in Japanese high schools

Across the set of internationally used commercial ELT textbooks, more than 20 visuals are present with the speech acts of *thanking*, *requesting* and *greeting*, and *suggesting proposals*, *apologising*, *leave-taking* and *giving advice* involve over 10 visuals. Across the set of textbooks used in Japanese upper secondary education, on the other hand, the speech acts of *giving advice*, *requesting*, *thanking* and *giving orders* involve more than 10 visuals. Indirect use of these speech acts is rarely introduced with visuals.

Far more visuals were categorised into Group 3 and 4, where participants share the equal power relations, while the number of visuals categorised into Group 1 and 2, which depict participants’ asymmetrical power relations, is very limited. The visuals of Group 3 and 4 are associated with a wider range of speech acts. Group 5 was added as miscellaneous category.



Fig 5:Visuals which represent typical participants' relationship in each group

Discussion

The participants’ power relations and social distances depicted in the visuals associated with speech acts may have some impacts on language use introduced in the materials. As Taguchi and Rover (2017) describe, speakers’ power is firmly controlled by the context and social roles rather than intrinsic to individuals. The visuals categorised into Group 3 mainly represent the participants’ relationship in service encounters, where conventionally indirect form of *requesting* is frequently used. In this situation, the right and obligation of both service givers and receivers are balanced out (Spencer-Ottay, 1996). Although indirect language use is governed by the factors represented in asymmetrical power relations and social distances between the speaker and hearer (Thomas, 1995), the visuals categorised into Group 1 mainly involve direct use of language as *giving orders* and *prohibiting*. The visuals categorised into Group 1 clearly represent the participants’ social roles in a specific context and only the language use of the participants with higher power is highlighted.

Conclusions

Visual images may help pragmatic input as to language use according to the circumstances and speaker-hearer relationship. They have potentials to enhance learners’ cultural awareness through learners’ critical discussion based on their spontaneous reaction (Kiss & Weninger, 2013). The use of visuals could be adapted to awareness-raising approach along with explicit instruction though the discussion about speaker-hearer relationship and directness level of language use.

References

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