Introduction

Content materials present text which is too dense for EFL. Therefore, teaching our students to use graphic organizers such as webs, Venn diagrams, and charts to help them better comprehend these texts can promote teachers’ instruction and students’ learning. These are visual tools that help EFL students understand and organize information. They are like mind maps which promote active learning. Additionally, graphic organizers can also help students develop higher-level thinking skills and promote creativity.

“Pictures are worth a thousand words” because they provoke more powerful associations that enhance critical thinking and memory than words alone. Advertisers have found that the most effective ways of communicating information are via “pictures, charts, and diagrams.”

Nowadays, secondary educators have tried to benefit from what the commercial advertisers already seem to know by incorporating the use of visual aids into our teaching methodologies.

Slowly, graphic organizers (a type of visual aid) have infiltrated secondary education in TESOL teaching methods from the late 1970’s and early 1980’s until now.

This article presents the points of view from my real-life observations and practice in my English class, and I believe that students learn best in many different ways by graphic organizers. Furthermore, I have shared this method through my speeches and seminars to colleagues from different high schools, and teachers favor this new way of EFL teaching.
The Significance of Visual Learning

Memorizing information is not the same thing as actually learning information. The reason for this is that one must understand information to remember it. To understand information, the information must be organized to form a string from which associations can be formed with one’s background knowledge. What is more, to make learning meaningful, learners must form a net to assimilate what they are learning into the information that they already knew. These associations make new information memorable. This concept is known as the schema theory.

As we know, the two hemispheres of the brain do not perform the same functions. The left hemisphere of the brain, which governs language and analysis, controls the right side of the body, directing linguistic processing and controlling verbal, logical, analytical, and linear operations. The right hemisphere of the brain regulates nonverbal functions such as pattern discrimination. Moreover, it controls rhythm, spatial awareness, color, and shape. It is the area of the brain that governs visual-spatial processing, relational, synthesizing, holistic, simultaneous, and visual input.

Visual-spatial intelligence is of importance in using graphic organizers because the visual-spatial intelligence is to be able to think in pictures and to perceive the visual world accurately. It is also to be able to think in three-dimensions and to transform one’s perceptions and re-create aspects of one’s visual experience via imagination.

Here are two examples I use in my practice.

Cluster Diagram as Concept Map and Web Map

The cluster diagram is a “nonlinear” map where students can put down their ideas about a central concept in the center of the diagram. As the cluster map grows bigger, students are able to see patterns in their cluster diagram. The following cluster diagram is as a concept map which can be used to learn knowledge presented in The Blue Whale—Sanmin Version B1L9. Concept maps allow a student to organize and represent knowledge that can be stored in long-term memory. They permit students to understand rather than simply memorize information by relating the new information to information they already know. As opposed to students who learn via rote memorization, concept maps facilitate meaningful learning which allows students to retain knowledge for a longer period of time and makes learning new material easier. Additionally, concept maps promote critical thinking in students by allowing them to find new ways to connect information.
Concept mapping resembles clustering in that both diagrams are designed with circles and connecting lines, but concept mapping shows a distinct relationship between the concepts that the student is learning about. Concept mapping is also a lot like mind mapping (discussed below). However, a mind map has one central concept whereas a concept map may have several main concepts.
Sequence of Chains and Cause & Event

Sequence of chains tells the important order of events, while cause and effect makes an analysis and links the related lines of the events between cause and result as well as the supporting details via branches attached to corresponding ideas. The following are examples from—Sanmin Version Book 1 & 2.

Sequence of Chains B1L4—**Looking for Love**

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Cause and effects B2L3—**Misunderstanding**
Cotinuum

The continuum is usually used as a time line to show the sequence of events in the order in which they occurred. The following diagram is an example of a blank continuum from the Outside Reader *Pocahontas*. A continuum or a time line can be used in a context for giving a clear picture of time line about events.

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**How Students Use Graphic Organizers**

Students can incorporate the use of graphic organizers in their classes to prepare briefs, take notes from lectures, and to organize information to study for an exam. In a large class, students may have different learning styles and may learn information better visually as opposed to linguistically. Visual students could use mind maps to take notes and to help them recall the information in their notes more easily.

The shapes and structures of mind maps can provide the “cues” essential to recalling the information embodied within them. Mind maps can be memorized by one’s visual memory which has been shown to be almost perfect. Whether a student learns better linguistically or visually, either student can use mind maps to facilitate the recall of information from their notes because mind maps use both sides of the brain in assimilating and connecting information. Students can use graphic organizers for exam preparation in the same way that they can use them for preparing briefs before class or taking notes during a lecture. The same rationale applies in that in preparing for an exam, a student can use mind maps or other graphic organizers to isolate and clarify
main concepts and how they are related to subconcepts. When reviewing for an exam, if a student has used mind maps or other graphic organizers in their note taking, then the mind maps are easily reviewed, and simply looking at them can refresh a student’s memory.

Once a student looks over the mind maps a few times, she should be ready to take the final exam. Additionally, a student could make an overview-of-the-course mind map that connects all of the mind maps made from her notes into one big mind map with all of the information from the semester. Each time a student creates a mind map, she is assimilating, not memorizing information, but learning, understanding, and remembering it. Likewise, students can use graphic organizers to write papers or organize their information search. A graphic organizer can be used to organize information into separate ideas and then to visually see how all of the ideas are interrelated. In organizing the ideas and information, it is easier to draw a mind map or concept map, beginning with a central idea and then branching off with connecting ideas, than it is to write an outline from scratch. In an outline, certain concepts or topics have to be in a specific order; this linear format of listing the information interferes with a person’s thought processes.

To organize a clear map of information, a person can put all of their thoughts on paper and then begin to see a pattern in the graphic organizer rather than having to decide what the pattern or order will be first. If a student gets “so bogged down in research that she cannot see patterns” and a structure, then a graphic organizer might help her to gain organization and a “perspective.” Cluster diagrams, concept maps, or mind maps may help a student sort out complex ideas and form logical associations between paragraphs. Cluster diagram, concept map, or mind map can easily be changed into an outline.

There is such a vast amount of information in texts that students might have a hard time catching it all in a limited time and have no idea how to form an outline to show their understanding. For example, a student in a writing task may have many ideas about the topic, but does not know where or how to begin writing the paper. The student could brainstorm all of her ideas concerning the issue onto a cluster diagram. After the student does further thinking or exchange of ideas, she could then add more information to the cluster diagram, and from this diagram form an outline for her report.

**How to Mind Map and Write**

- Use just key words, or, wherever possible, images.
- Make the center a clear and strong visual image that depicts the general theme of the map.
- Create sub-centers for sub-themes.
- Put key words on lines. This reinforces structure of notes.
- Think three-dimensionally.
- Use arrows, icons, or other visual aids to show links between different elements.
How EFL Teachers Use Graphic Organizers

Teachers can use graphic organizers to give a lecture to their students whether the class is a large first-year class or a smaller upper-level course. Additionally, teachers can use graphic organizers in their own teaching strategies.

The teacher can use graphic organizers in a lecture in two ways. First, the teacher could use them to prepare their instruction and second, the teacher could use them as a visual aid for students in a large class.

In teaching reading, graphic organizers allow both the teacher and students to keep an overview of what the topic of discussion is at all times. Moreover, graphic organizers could be used to narrow many ideas written in a linear format to key topics that the teacher would like to discuss in class. Having only the key words or topics that the teacher would like to explain allows him the freedom to discuss topics in a structured format without having a rehearsed instruction. Graphic organizers may make the class more interesting because the teacher has the flexibility to flow from one topic to the next and can answer questions that may lead students to another part of the context in the reading.

Conclusion

Learning theory states that students learn best in many different ways. Each student is like a snowflake in that no student is alike in the way that they like to learn or organize information. Consequently, the more EFL teachers incorporate different teaching techniques into their classes, the greater number of students that will be reached. Knowing that students learn best in different ways, why do we English teachers mainly continue to teach in only one way?