

Visual Merchandising Tasks and Their Impact on English Communication and Aesthetic Awareness

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ABSTRACT

This investigation explores learners' views on incorporating retail-oriented visual art assignments within English language courses, particularly emphasising their influence on communicative competence and aesthetic engagement. Leveraging the expanding focus on multimodal pedagogy and cross-disciplinary inquiry, the analysis interrogates how visual artistic components, especially those derived from retail, including advertisements, merchandising displays, and promotional graphics, enrich language acquisition among university undergraduates. 92 diploma and degree candidates from a local university's campuses in Perak and Negeri Sembilan, comprised the sample of this quantitative inquiry. Data was gathered via a standardised questionnaire composed of fifteen items on a five-point Likert scale aligned with three analysed research themes, and descriptive statistical techniques produced the mean scores for each question. Results indicate that respondents essentially endorsed the incorporation of visual art-based assignments. High engagement rates were recorded, with mean values ranging from $M = 3.93$ to $M = 4.32$ across the three research dimensions. Especially pronounced evidence indicated that the tasks clarified learning objectives ($M = 4.26$), facilitated clearer self-expression ($M = 4.10$), and sustained motivation for both oral and written performance ($M = 4.07$). A pronounced aesthetic awareness surfaced, with students carefully evaluating colour, spatial organisation, and typeface in graphic materials, supported by strong ratings in aesthetic engagement ($M = 4.14$ – 4.24). Furthermore, combining visual merchandising components with linguistic tasks was enjoyable and advantageous in enhancing self-assurance and linguistic fluency. The evidence indicates that embedding visual-art interventions in genuine retail environments constitutes a promising instructional device within English language pedagogy. The approach simultaneously advances communicative competence and cultivates visual literacy and creative skills. Accordingly, the study's outcomes yield significant counsel for curriculum architects with an intent on integrating artistic practice, language instruction, and practical application within higher-education programmes.

Keywords: Visual art integration, English language learning, Aesthetic engagement, Visual merchandising

INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape focuses on the interplay between visual and linguistic modes to bolster student engagement and improve learning outcomes. Multimodal pedagogies, which harness textual, visual, and spatial resources, excel in language learning contexts characterised by heterogeneous literacy profiles and mode preferences (Ferstephanie & Pratiwi, 2023). Device-incorporated pedagogies that utilise visual art, exemplified by poster drafts, in-store display prototypes, and the design of promotional artefacts, illustrate how the concurrent processing of image and text can simultaneously advance language proficiency, stimulate creative expression, increase intercultural awareness, and cultivate communicative competence.

Visual merchandising, conventionally framed within retail and consumer marketing, provides a fertile and authentic substrate for language instruction, by engaging in tasks that emulate genuine retail environments,

from product curation to floorplan sketching. Learners undertake purposeful communicative acts, thereby rehearsing linguistic competences that mirror the communicative demands of the marketplace. The subsequent alignment with project-based and task-based pedagogies foregrounds authentic application, interdependence within diverse teams, and the concurrent management of linguistic, computational, and reflective skills (Haniah et al., 2021; Boppre et al., 2022; Azevodo et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2025). Moreover, the deliberate incorporation of design parameters—colour theory, spatial hierarchy, iconography, and ergonomic design—encourages elevated student motivation, hones critical and creative cognition, and augments aesthetic literacy (Taylor & Carpenter, 2020). The concurrent processing of linguistic, visual, and spatial resources undergirds an integrated curriculum that foregrounds authenticity, communicative competence, and creative engagement.

Although existing studies have examined digital storytelling, infographics, and broader visual semiotic resources in ESL/EFL learning (Nhan, 2023; Dewi et al., 2023; Pho & Trang, 2023), there is limited insight into the effects of retail-inspired visual art on learners' metacognitive and affective engagement in Malaysian higher education contexts. Therefore, this study investigates how curriculum modules centred on retail-themed visual art influence undergraduates' proficiency in English and their engagement with the aesthetic dimension of language learning. The research elicits learners' self-reported perceptions by employing a survey methodology across two campuses. It seeks to articulate the resultant pedagogical affordances for interdisciplinary programme design and the iterative advancement of task-based language instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodal learning theory undergirds the convergence of visual art and language education, asserting that meaning-making occurs through intertwined modes such as linguistic, visual, spatial, and gestural, as students interact with content (Salim et al., 2024; Kendrick, 2022). Over the past decade, English language instruction has increasingly embraced this principle, especially within project-based learning (PBL) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) paradigms, which foreground the learner's engagement and the exigencies of authentic contexts. These models seamlessly accommodate visual and design-oriented components by foregrounding collaborative and purposeful tasks.

Visual Art and Multimodal Literacy in Language Learning

Multimodal texts, such as infographics, advertisements, and digital posters, have enhanced comprehension and engagement among ESL and EFL learners. Sutrisno et al. (2024) argue that reading and producing multimodal texts foster critical literacy, as students must navigate and produce meaning beyond written language. Chattopadhyay et al. (2025) further note that including visual narratives supports vocabulary development, idea generation, and discourse skills, particularly when learners are asked to create their own visual products. In classroom contexts, students engage with visual grammar—such as composition, colour, and emphasis—promoting a deeper understanding of how language and imagery work together.

Retail-Themed Visual Art in English Education

While multimodal and visual literacy approaches have gained traction, less research has focused on visual tasks situated specifically within retail contexts. However, this emerging intersection is valuable. Retail-themed projects such as promotional posters, product advertisements, and store design mock-ups allow students to use English in meaningful, goal-oriented tasks. These activities reflect workplace communication scenarios, increasing the authenticity of language use and relevance to future professional domains (Domingues et al., 2025). Incorporating retail scenarios also aligns with PBL principles, encouraging collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. For example, Estima and Marques (2021) found that project-based tasks in business and marketing education significantly improved students' presentation and negotiation skills in English. In this context, visual merchandising projects serve as both linguistic and artistic tasks that require students to express ideas, persuade audiences, and explain design choices, all in English.

Aesthetic Engagement and Visual Communication

Aesthetic awareness plays a key role in student engagement with visual tasks. According to Taylor and Carpenter (2020), students are more invested in learning when they can express personal and cultural identities

through visual art. In language classrooms, aesthetic engagement promotes creativity and strengthens learners' confidence and motivation. Kidane and Xuefeng (2021) demonstrated that visual storytelling increased affective engagement, especially when learners had autonomy over design choices. This dimension is critical in tertiary-level ESL settings, where students may face anxiety related to language performance. Creative visual tasks reduce cognitive load by providing alternative modes of expression and supporting learner agency. Moreover, when tasks such as those inspired by retail contexts are culturally and professionally relevant, they further enhance learners' sense of purpose and ownership (Li et al., 2024).

Gaps in Literature

Despite the growing body of research on visual literacy and language learning, there remains a lack of empirical studies examining how retail-themed visual art tasks influence English communication skills and aesthetic engagement. This gap is especially evident in Malaysian higher education, where interdisciplinary approaches in language instruction are still evolving. Therefore, this study needs empirical data on how visual-art-based retail activities affect students' perceptions, engagement, and learning outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed quantitative research design with a structured questionnaire as the principal instrument for data gathering. This methodological choice was intended to elicit students' self-reported evaluations of incorporating visual art activities within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, with particular emphasis on curricular modules centred on retail environments. By survey-based design, the inquiry sought exclusively to delineate and interpret distributions in participant feedback, refraining from manipulating pedagogical factors or applying controlled treatments. The design facilitated the systematic collection of responses from a sufficiently capacious participant cohort, thereby enabling the identification of pervasive patterns in communicative proficiency, learner engagement, and the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility.

Participants

Participants for this investigation comprised ninety-two undergraduate students from two campuses of a local university: Perak and Negeri Sembilan. Forty-three learners were recruited from the Perak campus, while forty-nine were drawn from the Negeri Sembilan site. All participants were enrolled in English or communication courses incorporating creative visual tasks as an assessed component or an integral in-class exercise. To minimise the influence of confounding variables, audio recordings originating from courses at the Shah Alam campus were systematically purged from the dataset and consequently excluded from subsequent analysis. A purposive sampling strategy ascertained that subjects evidenced relevant previous engagement with the pedagogical framework under scrutiny.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire explicitly developed to assess students' perceptions across three thematic areas aligned with the research questions. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items; each measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The items were organised into three subscales: (1) perceptions of retail-themed visual art tasks, (2) the perceived impact of such tasks on English communication skills, and (3) students' level of aesthetic engagement when completing visual-art-based English tasks. Each subscale consisted of five items, designed to elicit responses about learners' attitudes, motivations, and perceived outcomes. The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies on multimodal literacy, visual learning, and task-based language education to ensure content validity.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Participants received the

survey link through their instructors or program coordinators and were provided with a brief explanation regarding the purpose and confidentiality of the study. Participation was voluntary, and no personal identifiers were collected to ensure anonymity. The data collection period spanned two weeks in May 2025. Respondents were given ample time to complete the survey, and no incentives were offered to avoid bias. After completing the data collection phase, responses were exported and cleaned in Microsoft Excel and Python. Only responses from the Perak and Negeri Sembilan campuses were retained for analysis, resulting in a final dataset of 92 valid entries. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Specifically, mean scores were computed for each questionnaire item to identify overall trends and patterns. The results were then grouped according to the three research questions and presented as tables to facilitate interpretation. Descriptive analysis was appropriate given the study's exploratory nature and focus on perceptions rather than causality or group comparisons.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Perceptions of the Use of Retail-Themed Visual Art Tasks in English Classrooms (RQ1)

The first research question examines the degree to which learners endorse the introduction of retail-art tasks in the English curriculum. Descriptive analysis reveals consistently positive responses, with aggregated mean scores ranging from 4.14 to 4.32. The item eliciting the highest mean, “I enjoy English tasks that involve design or visual creativity” ($M = 4.32$), evidences a strong affective and cognitive commitment when learners are invited to deploy visual and design skills in English assignments. This result supports the hypothesis that creative engagement is simultaneously a motivational catalyst and a cognitive scaffold in second-language learning.

The statement “Visual elements like posters, store layouts, or ads help me understand lesson objectives better” yielded a statistically robust mean score of 4.26, suggesting that learners regard visual stimuli as instrumental in rendering abstract linguistic objectives tangible. Furthermore, a mean score of 4.20 for tasks that embedded visual art components—even when juxtaposed with conventionally text-based assignments—affirms a curricular justification for infusing design and visual narrative into second-language pedagogy. Notably, the relatively lowest yet uniformly favourable score in the entire domain pertained to “Integrating retail-themed visuals in class creates a more enjoyable learning environment” ($M = 4.14$), underscoring a coherent student consensus that warrants continued integration of visual merchandising elements into instructional practice. These findings highlight a student-centred learning climate where visual tasks enhance motivation, attention, and interest in course content. The real-world nature of retail-themed tasks may contribute to their relevance, making language use more authentic and context-driven.

Impact of Visual Art Tasks on English Communication Skills (RQ2)

The second research question focused on how students believed these tasks improved their English communication abilities. The results again showed a positive trend, with mean scores ranging from 3.93 to 4.10. This category's most highly rated item was “Retail-themed visual art tasks help me express my ideas more clearly in English” ($M = 4.10$), indicating that such tasks support cognitive processing and verbal articulation. The items “I am more motivated to write when the task involves a visual or creative element” and “I use more vocabulary when describing or explaining visual projects in English” scored $M = 4.07$ and $M = 3.99$, respectively. These responses reflect how visual prompts encourage lexical diversity and depth, likely due to the need to describe layout, design, purpose, and audience intention—essential elements in retail communication. Furthermore, students agreed that visual tasks improved their confidence in speaking or presenting in English ($M = 3.97$) and contributed to grammatical improvement ($M = 3.93$). Although this last item received the lowest score in this category, it still falls within the “agree” range, suggesting that the linguistic benefits are perceived, albeit to a slightly lesser degree compared to affective and expressive gains.

Interest and Aesthetic Engagement in Visual Art-Based Learning Activities (RQ3)

The third research question explored students' aesthetic engagement during visual art-based learning tasks. This category revealed some of the highest overall scores in the study, with means ranging from 4.14 to 4.23,

emphasising the centrality of aesthetic appreciation in the learning process. The item “I feel a sense of achievement when completing visually appealing assignments” had the highest mean ($M = 4.23$), highlighting the emotional satisfaction derived from artistic accomplishment. Students also agreed that “Visual creativity in tasks helps me feel more connected to the topic” ($M = 4.22$) and that they enjoy selecting visual elements such as colours, fonts, and layout for their projects ($M = 4.21$). These responses suggest aesthetic decisions enhance motivation and contribute to deeper topic immersion. The remaining items— “I find aesthetic or artistic tasks interesting and enjoyable in my English class” and “I pay attention to the artistic quality of my work in English class assignments”—also scored highly, at $M = 4.16$ and $M = 4.14$, respectively. Together, these findings illustrate that students are not passive consumers of visual tasks but take ownership of the creative process, which nurtures intrinsic motivation and personal engagement.

Summary of Findings

This section presents the descriptive findings derived from the responses of 92 students from Perak and Negeri Sembilan campuses. The results are organised according to the study’s three research questions. Each research question was measured using five Likert-scale items rated from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The mean scores reflect the overall perceptions of all participants concerning integrating retail-themed visual art tasks into English language instruction.

Perceptions of Retail-Themed Visual Art Tasks (RQ1)

Students expressed positive perceptions of including retail-themed visual art tasks in their English classrooms. The overall mean scores ranged from 4.14 to 4.32, indicating general or strong agreement with all five statements. The highest-rated item was “*I enjoy working on English tasks involving design or visual creativity*” ($M = 4.32$), revealing students’ enthusiasm for visually enriched assignments. Likewise, students agreed that “*Visual elements like posters, store layouts, or ads help me understand lesson objectives better*” ($M = 4.26$), reflecting the pedagogical benefit of using multimodal tools to reinforce comprehension. The lowest, though still positive, score was “*Integrating retail-themed visuals in class creates a more enjoyable learning environment*” ($M = 4.14$), showing overall consistency in positive sentiment.

Table 1. Overall Mean Scores for Perceptions of Visual Art Tasks (RQ1)

Measure	Mean Score
English lessons are more engaging with visual art tasks	4.17
Enjoy tasks involving design or visual creativity	4.32
Visual elements help me understand lesson objectives	4.26
Prefer visual art components over traditional tasks	4.20
Integrating visuals creates a more enjoyable environment	4.14

Perceived Impact on English Communication Skills (RQ2)

Students generally agreed that visual-art-based tasks positively influenced their English communication skills. Mean scores ranged from 3.93 to 4.10. The item “*Retail-themed visual art tasks help me express my ideas more clearly in English*” received the highest score ($M = 4.10$), suggesting that such tasks help students effectively organise and articulate thoughts. Items related to motivation and vocabulary use also scored well, including “*I am more motivated to write when the task involves a visual or creative element*” ($M = 4.07$) and “*I use more vocabulary when describing or explaining visual projects*” ($M = 3.99$). The lowest-rated item in this set was “*Visual tasks improve grammar and sentence structure*” ($M = 3.93$), though still within the “Agree” range, indicating moderate perceived benefits in linguistic structure.

Table 2. Overall Mean Scores for Communication Skills (RQ2)

Measure	Mean Score
Retail-themed tasks help express ideas more clearly in English	4.10
Tasks improve confidence when speaking or presenting	3.97
Use more vocabulary in visual project descriptions	3.99
More motivated to write when tasks are visual/creative	4.07
Visual tasks improve grammar and sentence structure	3.93

Aesthetic Engagement in Visual Art-Based Learning (RQ3)

The final research question assessed how aesthetically engaged students felt while completing visual-art-based tasks. Responses in this section showed particularly high mean scores, ranging from 4.13 to 4.24, indicating a substantial emotional and artistic investment in the tasks. The highest-rated item was “*Enjoy aesthetic or artistic tasks*” ($M = 4.24$), showing that students genuinely appreciate the creative dimension of English assignments. This was closely followed by “*Feel a sense of achievement from visually appealing work*” ($M = 4.23$) and “*Enjoy selecting colours, fonts, and layout*” ($M = 4.21$). These results confirm that visual and design elements enhance motivation and a sense of ownership over the learning process.

Table 3. Overall Mean Scores for Aesthetic Engagement (RQ3)

Measure	Mean Score
Enjoy aesthetic or artistic tasks	4.24
Visual creativity helps me feel connected to the topic	4.20
Enjoy selecting colours, fonts, and layout	4.21
Feel a sense of achievement from visually appealing work	4.23
Pay attention to artistic quality in assignments	4.13

Summary of Overall Findings

The findings reveal that students hold consistently favourable views of using retail-themed visual art in English classrooms regardless of campus. These tasks are perceived as enjoyable, pedagogically effective, and personally meaningful. Students believe visual tasks enhance their communication skills and provide a channel for aesthetic and creative expression. The results strongly support the integration of visual merchandising concepts and multimodal tasks into English education, particularly within tertiary-level project-based or communication-focused curricula.

CONCLUSION

The present investigation furnishes compelling evidence that retail-themed visual art tasks engender appreciable improvement in English communicative competence and aesthetic engagement among tertiary students. The uniformly elevated mean values across the three guiding questions substantiate the assertion that participants regard the exercises as enjoyable and pedagogically consequential. The participants’ fervent engagement with tasks centred on design and visual creativity corroborates Sutrisno et al.’s (2024) contention

that multimodal texts promote deeper involvement by compelling learners to transcend written discourse and to generate and interpret meaning through diverse semiotic modes. Such concordance suggests that the inclusion of visual merchandising within English curricula operationalises, in an instructive context, the multimodal literacy tenets articulated by Midgette et al. (2023).

Concerning communicative ability, the data reveal that students exhibited heightened confidence and expressiveness when undertaking the retail-themed projects. This observation substantiates Bdaiwi and Sayer's (2023) assertion that authentic, purpose-driven tasks constitute a prerequisite for communicative competence. The exercises facilitated lexical expansion, sharpened clarity of thought, and elevated oral self-assuredness by obliging learners to articulate the rationale behind design choices, justify aesthetic decisions, and present the visual products. Such findings substantiate the efficacy of project-based pedagogy (Figueiredo et al., 2021), wherein authentic, real-world undertakings permit language to be directed toward purposeful ends that mirror conventions in specialised communicative contexts.

Equally important are the findings on aesthetic engagement, which revealed high levels of student satisfaction and personal investment in the creative process. The enjoyment of selecting colours, layouts, and fonts reflects Taylor and Carpenter's (2020) observation that aesthetic literacy promotes learner motivation and identity expression. Furthermore, students' reported sense of achievement from visually appealing work echoes Barton and Le's (2022) findings on the affective benefits of visual storytelling. In this way, the study validates earlier work on the motivational impact of aesthetics and extends it into the underexplored context of retail-themed language education.

Overall, the results suggest that visual merchandising projects serve a dual function: they act as linguistic tasks that build communicative competence and as artistic tasks that foster aesthetic awareness and creativity. This dual impact directly addresses the gap in the literature noted earlier, where few empirical studies had examined the integration of retail-based visual art in English education, particularly in Malaysia. By demonstrating that such tasks are both engaging and pedagogically effective, this study contributes to the growing call for interdisciplinary approaches to language teaching (García-Feijoo et al., 2020).

The study highlights the promise of retail-inspired multimodal pedagogy. Future research could build upon these findings by employing mixed-methods designs, incorporating performance-based assessments, or expanding the scope across more institutions and cultural contexts. In conclusion, integrating visual merchandising into English classrooms offers a powerful pedagogical strategy that aligns with multimodal and project-based learning theories, strengthens communicative competence, and fosters aesthetic literacy—an innovation that can transform English education in Malaysian higher education and beyond.

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