Visible Thinking Routines in the ELT Classroom

By Judson Wright

Introduction

Visible Thinking Routines (VTR) is a sophisticated name for a simple concept: sets of questions or sequences of steps which get students thinking about a topic while providing them opportunities to speak, work together, and share ideas. VTR were developed through extensive research by Harvard's Project Zero and many of these routines make the key steps of the thinking process intentional. These fun, engaging routines are designed to enhance thinking skills in the classroom while simultaneously enhancing content learning. If students use them regularly, Visible Thinking Routines provide a system through which students are able to make a habit of deeper, more meaningful thinking.

Which Visible Thinking Routines Can I Use?

Harvard's Project Zero website for Visible Thinking has a helpful toolbox that breaks down routines into different categories depending on your needs. Even then, there are quite a lot to choose from. So, here are five routines you could start with. As you grow in comfort with using them, you can expand your own toolbox and use the ones that work just right for you and your students!

See, Think, Wonder

This is probably one of the more straightforward and scalable Visible Thinking Routines. Students look at an image or object and are then asked what they see, what they think is happening, and what they wonder. It allows students time to think individually about content before sharing their ideas as a group. Also, it helps you get an idea of your students' prior knowledge and vocabulary, the "See" step in particular. Also, it pushes older students to look beyond the details and descriptions of the scene in favor of the big picture.

Step inside, Step out, Step back

Students choose any element from a scene and think about its perspective. The routine fosters not only critical thinking, but empathy. Students consider individual motivations, interests, and values. It can be particularly fun when students "step inside" the perspective of an inanimate object. For example, if the students "step inside" an umbrella and are asked to consider what the umbrella cares about, they may explore values that range from "it cares about protecting its owner" to "it loves the feeling of warm rain".

Circle of Viewpoints

Circle of Viewpoints is another great routine for exploring differing perspectives. Students brainstorm different perspectives then select one to explore by thinking about a topic and asking a question from that perspective. This can be a very powerful tool when looking at complex or controversial issues, especially for art which shows people with conflicting needs or ideas. Students get a better understanding of motivations or concerns and question their own preconceived notions or stances.

What Makes You Say That?

This is a staggeringly simple yet extremely effective routine for developing evidential reasoning while also bringing out various perspectives from the class. Students first are asked what they think is happening and then asked why they think that. This requires them to either dig deeper into the content for their evidence, or to think from prior knowledge to come up with a rationale. This is a routine where "I don't know" can lead to an opportunity for personalized research for the student (but never in a way that should feel like a punishment) or embedding answers into subsequent lessons.

Tug of War

This routine is particularly effective as a visual tool for exploring debatable topics or ideas. Students look at either side of a fairness dilemma and identify the factors that pull them in one direction or the other. By adding their factors to either side of a line (using an actual piece of string helps build on their familiarity with the physical game of *Tug of War*), students can visually see that many issues have a variety of influencing forces. Like *Circle of Viewpoints*, this is a great routine for helping students develop a great appreciation for nuance in situations that may feel black or white.

Who Are Visible Thinking Routines For?

Visible Thinking Routines can be used across all age groups, subject content areas, and teaching contexts thanks to how they scale content to the ability level of the user. At lower levels, maybe only some routines can be used because of language constraints or the acceptance of the use of the L1 in the classroom. At higher language levels, more routines become accessible, and those same routines lend themselves to increasingly more complex or nuanced content.

Visible Thinking Routines help those in an ELT context as they provide an opportunity to reinforce vocabulary (e.g. the "See" step reviewing students' prior knowledge and vocabulary, in *See, Think, Wonder*) in addition to content. VTR help students to participate even if they are at low levels, as it focuses more on their ability to identify and think, and express through whatever language or communication method they have.

The elegant simplicity of VTR means you can use them with a group of ten-year-olds and a group of eighteen-year-olds and they will each have a unique, scaled experience.

How Do Visible Thinking Routines Work in the Classroom?

Visible Thinking Routines are a form of student-centered communicative language approach and are best used at moments when you want the students to have pair, group, or classroom discussion. Typically, a routine starts individually so students have time to think quietly, explore the material and make meaningful discoveries. Then, students progress to sharing their thoughts and ideas with partners or as a larger group. A great example of this is *Think, Pair, Share* where students first work independently and then share ideas in pairs. Often times, this means that a great deal of interaction may involve a student responding to the ideas of another student, and coming up with new thoughts because of that student's input.

While routines vary, most VTR are best used at the beginning of a lesson or unit. By introducing VTR at the beginning of a lesson, you are creating an entry point to the context for the students and giving yourself an opportunity to monitor and gauge what prior knowledge and language the students already have.

Another helpful element of presenting VTR at the beginning of the lesson is you are able to gauge student interest and identify areas that the students are most curious about. With *See, Think, Wonder*, you could take the "Wonder" step and either have an additional assignment to explore that context or find a way to include that information in subsequent lessons. This gives students an extra level of engagement, and allows them an opportunity to contribute to their own learning.

It is important to emphasize that during a routine, there are no wrong answers. Students must feel that this is an opportunity for them to express themselves. This also fosters risk taking, which is key for aspiring language learners. There should be an aim for fluency over accuracy during a routine because by overly correcting students while they are suggesting ideas, you may prevent them from feeling safe to express themselves.

What is the Role of the Teacher During Visible Thinking Routines?

Given that Visible Thinking Routines support a student-centered approach, they require you to act as both a facilitator and a model for approaching both the routines and appropriate language structures. You should provide students with an opportunity to think quietly, and to interact among themselves while you watch, listen, and support the students' ideas. This can look different from routine to routine, but often it includes you scaffolding or providing examples of responses, mediating differing thoughts and opinions, combining a range of similar ideas into one idea that the class can share, and often times either keeping track of ideas on the board or providing graphic organizers for the students to keep track of their own thoughts or ideas.

While students should have as much freedom as possible to think creatively about how they choose to respond to routines, you should also be aware that you will have certain topical objectives for the lesson or unit. Listening intently to student thoughts and implementing follow-up questions can be a nice way to accept student ideas and guide the conversation towards the specific content. It is important to note you do not want to guide VTR too strictly. VTR have the most meaningful results when you provide students with the space for moments of discovery which bring out those unexpected, wacky, fun ideas.

Depending on the age and ability level of the students, you will still need to be there as a guide to support their general comprehension. If students are struggling with words, you may encourage students to use their dictionary or create a list of the new words they are discovering. These then become a bank of words developed by the students and not by you, although you can use these new words however you want.

You may also wish to keep notes based on the student responses, make use of graphic organizers, or have students keep their own notes. At the end of a lesson or unit, you can always return to those notes and see what new thoughts or ideas the students have.

Conclusion

Some of the most powerful language learning moments (and the most powerful teachable moments) are when the students bring their own thoughts and ideas to the class. VTR are designed to make sure that the activity is led by the students' ideas. Also, because VTR engage students, they also increase opportunities for retention and motivation: two of the most fundamental requirements for learning.

The content that works best for routines is content that inspires curiosity; that hints at a deeper story or evokes a sense of wonderment. Every student brings a wealth of their own life, their own thoughts, and their own wonderment. Given that the students' thoughts and experiences contribute the "answers" to the routines, every student's output is valid, and the unique driving force behind the lesson.