

Using Pictures from Magazines

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The purpose of this article is to show that pictures from magazines are a source of varied classroom activities in the areas of speaking, listening, writing, vocabulary and grammar. I'll give tips on how to collect and sort suitable pictures and I'll include several sample activities. Teachers can use the activities as they are presented, or adapt them to fit their needs.

Introduction

Several years ago I was teaching a beginning level class. One student in the group, Juan, seemed particularly shy, he was afraid of making mistakes, and reluctant to participate. One day, I gave each student an unusual picture of a person, and I asked them to describe the people in the pictures. Juan's photograph showed a young woman swimming with a killer whale in a deep blue sea. Juan came up with a remarkably long story about a woman who had a pet killer whale. When he gave his description, Juan's classmates were fascinated by his vivid imagination. Juan was surprised and thrilled by his classmates' appreciation. He instantly lost his inhibitions toward speaking English in class, and he participated actively from then on.

This experience convinced me that visuals, especially 'unusual' pictures, foster students' imagination, which in turn motivates them to use English. I found that there are many reasons to use magazine cutouts or other pictures in class. With pictures we can:

- teach, practice, or review new vocabulary
- do guided practice (drills)
- practice grammatical structures
- practice listening comprehension
- do writing activities
- do semi-guided or free speaking practice such as problem solving activities, role plays, discussions, etc.

Depending on the purpose of the activity, a task can take up five minutes at the beginning or end of a class, or last 20 minutes or more in the main part of the class.

Preparation

Choosing Pictures

Pictures are illustrations that are cut from a magazine, newspapers or other sources. They're mostly photographs, but drawings, collages, maps or other illustrations can be used for certain activities. Each picture should be at least 13 x 18 cm, but preferably about 20 x 25 cm, i.e., almost an entire magazine page. Pictures are easier to use without any printed text on them. You will only be able to use pictures with text for certain activities. If pictures do include text, the text should be in English.

Collecting the pictures

Students like colorful and varied materials. Available sources for pictures are glossy magazines, TV guides, the Sunday supplements of newspapers, and so on. You can collect the pictures yourself, or ask your students to bring them in for you. Your own selections will probably focus on pictures for discussions, games, and teaching vocabulary. Students are good at getting pictures of famous people, sports and objects they like, which gives you a good opportunity to learn about students' interests.

Sorting the Pictures

When you have a stack of pictures, you will notice that some cutouts seem perfect for teaching vocabulary (for example, clothes, furniture) and other pictures will be appropriate for guessing games. Try to identify a structure or function that can be practiced with each picture. You should paste the pictures on letter-sized paper, and punch holes in them to keep them in a binder. You can sort them out by level or grade, by activity or by topic. Some topics are: faces, famous people, clothes, actions, sports, professions, nationalities/cultures, unusual pictures, cities, interiors, nature, etc. You can write notes on the back of the sheets.

Sample Activities

Below, I'll describe nine activities that can be done with magazine cutouts. These are just a few examples of what can be done with pictures. As you start using pictures in new and creative ways, you will come up with many variations. Textbooks may also give you ideas for working with pictures.

Note: where examples of speech are included, "T" indicates the teacher speaking, "S1" indicates a student, "S2" is a second student, and so on.

Vocabulary Building or Review

"Find 10 Differences"

Language focus: descriptive adjectives, nouns, comparatives

Skills practiced: writing descriptions or comparisons

Time: 10 minutes

Material: Sets of two pictures that show similar people or related situations. You'll need one set per pair of students. If you want to review specific material, choose an appropriate set and hand out a set of photocopies to each pair of students.

Instructions:

1. Show a sample set and ask students if the pictures are similar, and how they are different. Elicit 10 differences.
2. Give pairs of students two pictures. Tell them write a list of 10 differences. If you want to turn this into a competition, the first pair to find ten differences is the winner.

Variation: Find 10 Similarities: do this activity with very different pictures and have students find the similarities.

Guided Practice

"How Do They Feel?"

Language focus: adjectives describing feelings, actions

Skills practiced: describing feelings

Time: 20 minutes

Material: Pictures of faces or people expressing different feelings and moods.

Instructions:

1. Teach or review adjectives describing moods and feelings: happy, sad, angry, upset, cheerful, etc.
2. Hand out pictures and ask students to describe how the people feel, and why they feel that way. What happened that made them feel this way?
3. As a follow up, students can present their descriptions to the group, and their classmates can add additional information about the person in the picture.

Example of student production:

S1: This man is tired. Very tired.

S2: He's a businessman. He probably has a lot of work.

S3: He has a lot of stress. Maybe he has a problem at work. He looks worried. (Etc.)

Variation: You may want to use this activity to have students speculate, using modals like may, might/might have, must/must have, etc.

Grammar

"If I were there ..."

Language focus: the second conditional

Material: Pictures that show locations or locale with or without people: landscapes, city streets, interiors of public buildings or houses, etc.

Instructions:

1. Show students a picture of a location and have them brainstorm about the place: where it is, what people normally do there. Also elicit vocabulary words related to the location.
2. Ask the students what they would do if they were there, how they would be feeling, etc.

Example: (Picture of a smoky bar.)

T: What would you be doing if you were there right now?

S2: I would be dancing.

S1: I would be talking to my friends.

T: What would you order?

S2: A beer.

T: If you were there right now, what would you hear?

S5: We would hear music from the juke box.

T: What song would you choose?

3. Students work in pairs or small groups. Students can just brainstorm, using the structure in affirmative, or they can take turns asking questions (with question words or yes-no questions).

"Sort It Out!"

Language focus: modal verbs can, could, should

Skills practiced: expressing ideas, negotiating

Material: Any. A set of 10 to 20 pictures or cutouts per group of three to six students.

Instructions:

1. Have students work in groups of four. Give each group a set of pictures. Tell them to sort these pictures out in three (3) logical categories. All categories should have a similar number of pictures. There are probably different options, so students need to work together in each group to find the best solution.
2. [After the activity:] Was it easy to do? Did you work together, or did one person find the solution? Why?

Example of student production:

S1: I think these two should go here. They're all indoor activities.

S2: Yes, but you can do them outdoors, too.

S3: What if we put all men together in one group, and the women in another? (etc.)

Listening Comprehension

"Dictate the Picture"

Language focus: there is, there are; prepositions

Skills practiced: listening comprehension

Time: 15-20 minutes

Material: Pictures, or a photocopies of a picture where the items are spread over the page. The vocabulary should be known to the students. There should be one picture or copy for each pair of students. Also, a similar picture to do the example with.

Instructions:

1. To do an example of the activity, tell the class that you have a picture which you will not show to them, but you will describe it

for them. The students should draw the picture. "Dictate" the picture to them. Do this slowly and repeat or rephrase sentences when necessary. Allow students to ask questions.

Example: This is a picture of a man in his office. In the middle of the picture, there is a man. He is sitting on a chair. To his left, there is a large desk. There is a computer on his desk, and there are many papers on the desk. Behind the man, there is a picture on the wall. (Etc.)

2. Divide the students up in pairs. Hand out a picture to each pair. One student will describe, the other will listen and draw the picture. The listeners cannot look at the pictures! When students finish, they can compare the drawings with the original picture.
3. Students change roles: the person who just described will now draw, and vice versa.

"Which One?"

Language focus: (no specific focus)

Skills practiced: listening comprehension

Material: One or more sets of pictures that have things in common (all portraits of men, or all landscapes, etc.). A set should have about four or five pictures.

Instructions:

1. Display a set of pictures and tell students you will describe one picture. They need to listen carefully to find out which picture you are describing.
2. Describe the picture in excruciating detail, starting with the similarities. Little by little, mention small differences. To make this activity work really well, you should write out the description beforehand, so you can avoid giving away too much too soon.
3. Example: This is a picture of a man. He is a model. He's young, about 25 years old. His hair is dark. I think it's black or dark brown. He has no beard and no moustache. He is standing up, and he's looking at the camera. He's wearing a suit. I don't know if he's happy. He's not smiling. (Etc.)
4. When students have guessed which picture you described, they can take turns describing a different picture. If you have more sets of pictures, students can do the activity in groups and take turns describing different pictures.

Speaking

"Have That Conversation"

Language focus: depending on the pictures

Skills practiced: role-playing common conversations

Material: Photographs of two people having a conversation. One picture per pair or one picture for all students.

Instructions:

1. If you want the students to practice a specific kind of dialog, you can look for one single appropriate picture. Stick it on the board for all students to see or make photocopies and hand them out.
2. Show a sample picture – not the one you want students to use later. Ask what the people are doing, what they are talking about, what some of the words or expressions are that they are using. Elicit or teach vocabulary if necessary.
3. As a follow up, you can ask several pairs to perform their dialogs in front of the group. The class votes on the best dialog for the people in the picture.

"Speculation"

Language focus: past tenses and other structures depending on the level of the students

Material: Pictures with unusual situations (e.g., a man balancing chairs on his arms, feet and head, a female executive tied and gagged in her office, a very muddy Mercedes parked in the business district of a city, etc.).

Instructions:

1. Elicit question words and write them on the board: where, why, who, when, what, etc.
2. Tell the students to work in pairs or small groups and explain the picture, using the questions words. Do one picture with the class as an example.

Example of questions: (I like to use picture of an archeologist standing between a group of Peruvian mummies.) Who is this man? What does he do? How do you know? What is he doing now? What does it say on the bags? What's in the bags?

Writing

"Text balloons"

Language focus: a language focus may or may not exist (see variation 2)

Material: Two or more pictures that show two or three people talking. Paste in white text balloons, large enough for students to write one or two sentences in. A photocopy of one of the pictures for each pair of students. A similar picture (with or without text balloons) to do the example in class.

Instructions:

1. Show a picture of two people talking. Ask students about the setting and the situation, and what they think these people are saying.
2. Hand out photocopies and ask pairs to write in text balloons.
3. Each pair exchanges photocopies with a pair that worked with a different picture. Tell the pairs they will now write the continuation of the dialog.
4. Have each pair get together with the pair that wrote their text balloons. Each pair reads the dialog the other pair wrote. Pairs can comment on the dialogs. Are they surprised how their dialog turned out?

Variation 1: The text balloons could also be 'thinking balloons' (clouds) that describe what people are thinking.

Variation 2: To elicit use of a specific structure, you can fill in the first text balloon using that structure (e.g., write a question in past tense to elicit an answer in past).

Conclusion

In this article I've tried to show that pictures are a good source of material for practicing speaking, listening, writing, vocabulary and grammar. The activities above are just a few examples of what teachers can do with pictures. I hope the sample activities above will stimulate teachers to come up with their many more effective and enjoyable activities.

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