

FUN WITH PICTURES FOR ELT

By Simon Mumford

Teachers are well aware that pictures are a valuable tool in the language classroom, for instance, using pictures of people for teaching the language of clothes or appearance; pictures of rooms for teaching prepositions; pictures of actions for teaching verb tenses. I have found, however, that with a little imagination and a good stock of pictures, they can be used in many more teaching situations.

Finding suitable pictures can take time to find, but I hope the following activities will persuade you that it is well worth the time and the effort. After all, as the saying has it, a picture paints a thousand words.

Activities Using Pictures

Believe it or Not

(To practise the intonation of surprise)



Take a picture (pictures of people work best for this) and hold it up for the whole class to see. Make statements about the person in the card that are credible, e.g. "He's 40." "He's a bus driver." Ask the class to say the statements after you, as in a repetition drill. Then say something that is either not believable or very surprising, e.g. "He's had a head transplant!" or "He won a gold medal in the Olympics!" Repeat these sentences yourself with the intonation of disbelief or surprise, as a model, and drill these round the class. Practise with the class letting the learners react to new believable and unbelievable statements. You may find that individual learners have different ideas of what is credible! Finally, give learners their own pictures to make up believable and unbelievable statements, and ask them to practise in pairs.

Guess my Story

(To practise Simple Past question forms)

For this activity, you need four pictures showing a mixture of people, places and things. Before the lesson, prepare a story that includes all four pictures. Stick the pictures on the board, and tell the class that they are from a story, but you cannot say what the story is about or in which order the four pictures appear. The class have to discover the story by asking you yes / no questions. When they have discovered it, get learners to make up their own stories using different sets of pictures. Put them in pairs to guess each other's stories.

Future Faces

(To present / practise the Simple Future and Future Perfect tenses)

For this activity, use two pictures of different people of the same sex, but with a significant age difference between them e.g. a young girl and a woman in her late twenties. Get the class to describe each picture in turn and then compare them. Tell the class that they are in fact the same person, the younger one as she is now - the older one, a computer-generated picture of her in the future. This scenario can now be used for eliciting / teaching, "She will be fatter / better-dressed / happier ...", and "She will have become more confident / dyed her hair / had a face-lift ...", etc. It does not matter if the two pictures you use do not look the same. In fact, the more different they are, the better. In pairs, learners can then compare other pairs of people in the same way, or for more fun, a real picture of you and a 'computer-generated' picture of you in thirty years' time!

Describe Around

(To practise describing pictures)

Divide the class into groups, and ask each group to sit in a circle. Give a picture to one learner in each group, and ask this person to make a simple sentence describing the picture, e.g. "There's a woman." This learner then passes the picture to the next person, who repeats the sentence and extends it or adds a new (true) sentence, e.g. "There's a woman ... with a red dress / She's wearing a red dress." The activity continues this way (with learners either extending the original sentence or adding new sentences) until one learner cannot remember everything. Although



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this is quite a demanding exercise, the picture acts as a prompt for learners.

No Pictures

(To practise speaking)

Divide the class into two groups, and ask each group to stand facing each other on opposite sides of the classroom. Tell the class you are going to show some pictures to one group only. Explain that by observing the reactions of the group who see the picture, the other group should try to guess the content of each picture. Show the first 'picture' - not pictures at all, but a piece of paper with an instruction written on it (e.g. "Laugh", "Be completely silent", "Talk excitedly", "Scream", etc) which they should follow. The guessers who cannot see the picture should shout out their ideas as to what the picture contains. After three or four 'pictures', show the guessers what the 'pictures' really are.

Conclusion

Pictures can bring enormous variety to lessons and provide the teacher with a flexible and convenient tool. Activities such as those described above are fine for fun at the end of a lesson, or even for a change of pace in the middle of a lesson, but they can also provide serious language practice. Some of them can be integrated into grammar input lessons, e.g. 'Future Faces' could be the presentation stage of a lesson on the Future Perfect tense.

In fact, we can use pictures for both 'fun' games and 'serious' input activities, showing that sometimes there is not much difference between the two and that using pictures can actually be 'serious fun'!

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