6 Some basic ways of using pictures in language teaching

I hope that people with concerns very different from those of language teachers will find this book useful as a source of pictures. However, language teachers and in particular teachers of foreign or second languages will probably be the chief users and it is for them that I am adding this section.

It is not possible in the space available to describe the nature of language teaching aims and methods, for example contrasting recent movements towards communicative competence with the more traditional emphasis given to formal accuracy. I have concentrated, therefore, on listing basic ways in which pictures might be used and not on evaluating these uses in terms of learning outcome.

The methods and the roles of visual materials in listening and reading activities as well as in speaking and writing have many similarities. Partly for this reason and partly due to the need for brevity I am discussing these four activities under two headings rather than four. There are a number of recent books rich in suggestions for using pictures in language teaching at all levesl; reference is made to these in each of the following sections.

Listening and reading

Some roles for visual materials

1 To interest the student
2 To help to 'translate' the meaning of the gist of the text or of individual items of language
3 To give a context for the language and student activity
4 To give cultural information
5 To contribute to the search for specific information in the text and to help the student demonstrate non-verbally that s/he has found that information and understood it.

A single picture may be used to teach the meaning of a word or phrase new to the student. However, pictures are usually ambiguous: people interpret them differently.

The most useful contribution a picture can make is to contribute to the student's understanding of a more general context which may be made up of pictures, the teacher's actions, sound effects and words. And it is in the understanding of this overall context that the language new to the student will have meaning.

There is another way of thinking about the role of pictures. It is normally assumed that the picture is supposed to *illustrate* the new meaning. And this is one way of using pictures (see the two previous pages).

However, sometimes it is the *way* the picture is used and referred to which gives meaning to the 'new' language. The most obvious example is to put away a picture and then to challenge the students' ability to remember it. This immediately calls for the use of a past tense form. (For example, show a picture of an action or actions and, putting it away, ask, 'What was he doing?' Thus the past tense form is illustrated not by the picture but by the way in which the picture has been used and referred to.)

The *way* in which pictures can be used to promote language which is not actually illustrated in the picture is discussed at length in a number of books: see McAlpin, J., *The Magazine Picture Library*, and Maley and Duff, *Drama Techniques in Language Learning*. (See section on Further reading). This exploitation of the picture has great significance in *all* areas of language learning.

Demonstrating understanding

Essentially, all the techniques listed here involve the student in matching information in the text, heard or read, with non-verbal information in the picture.

Texts describing people, places, objects, etc.

A number of pictures are shown to the student and s/he must point to, tick, number, colour or complete the drawing of the appropriate picture according to the text.

The text may be the simple naming of objects or actions or the qualities of them or their position. Longer texts in which there is deliberately distracting information can be used

with some advanced students.

A simple way of following up this idea would be to photocopy a page of, for example, objects from the book (removing the text), give each student a copy and then describe each object or its use out of order. The students would simply number the pictures in the order you described them. (Alternatively, a page of characters, pages 20-23).

Bingo is a game based on the same basic idea. Each student has a set of pictures. Pictures are named or described by the teacher. When the student hears one of his/her own pictures named he crosses it out. The first student to cross out all his/her pictures calls 'Bingo' and has won the game.

Alternatively, the students might have a copy of a composite picture (a scene with various people in it, see pages 36-52). They then tick or encircle and number the order in which these features of the picture are described.

Dialogues

Pictures of people talking, either separate pictures or in a composite scene are shown to the students. A conversation is played on the tape recorder or reproduced in written form and the student indicates which people are speaking. (You might use some of the scenes pages 36-52, the pages of characters, pages 20-23, on the people on pages 54-55).

Sequences

A number of pictures presented out of sequence are studied by the students. After listening to or reading a text these are then numbered or arranged in the appropriate order.

Story sequences are the most relevant for this purpose but lists of objects or actions can also be represented in this way. Sequences or arrangements of objects and people in a setting can also be represented on the magnet board, flannelboard, blackboard or OHP. The magnet board is particularly useful for this purpose as figures can be added, moved or taken away with such ease. (See pages 114-116).

Writing and speaking as a demonstration of comprehension

By studying selected pictures a student can complete gapped sentences, choose and write out multiple-choice answers or simply answer questions in which the content of the answer is to be found by studying the picture(s) given. These are the more traditional tasks set for demonstrating comprehension and associated with testing.

Speaking and writing

Some roles for visual materials

1 To motivate the student to want to speak or write
2 To create a context within which his/her response will have meaning
3 To provide the student with information to use in controlled practice work. Pictures showing objects, actions, events and relationships can cue answers to questions, substitutions and sentence completions.
4 To guide spoken and written descriptions or narrations or dialogues
5 To promote discussion and to provide reference

Pictures providing information for answers

The simplest way of using a picture is to ask a question about it. The answer may be a single word or may require the student to structure a sentence and thereby test and give practice in the use of structures and tenses. The information represented in the pictures can be used to cue answers to the questions, to cue substitution of vocabulary items or the completion of sentences. This may be done orally or in writing and is a well-established use of pictures.

The pictures may all be seen together on a chart, blackboard, OHP or on a student sheet. Alternatively, separate pictures may be placed face down and thus not seen, but be picked up and seen for the first time. They can then be picked up and used as the information is required.

This is preferable as it contributes interest and, more importantly, contributes a reason for speaking if no-one except the speaker can see the picture.

For example:

A pile of pictures showing foods, placed face down.

Student A (picking up a picture), Do you like pears?

Student B Yes./No./Sometimes.
Very much. They're delicious.
I can't stand them!

For more example of this use of pictures see Kerr, J.Y.K., *Picture Cue Cards for Oral Language Practice*, and Buckby and Wright, *Flash Cards*.

There are a number of interesting variants on

these well-known ways of using pictures for controlled practice.

Spot the difference

Two or three pictures which are the same except for a number of details are examined by the students. Each difference is described. The differences can be designed so that the sentences used to describe them can be of the same construction; for example, 'In the first picture the cat's tail is longer than in the second picture. In the first picture the table is higher than in the second picture.'

Technically, such drawings are relatively easy to produce. Make a photocopy of your first drawing (one of the settings from pages 36-52). Then, on the photocopy, white out the details you wish to omit or to change.

Memory

Various memory games involve the student in making use of a fixed sentence pattern. For example, fifteen pictures of men and women, each with an identifying feature are placed face down. One student picks up a picture. The other tries to remember what that card was. If s/he is right s/he is given it, otherwise it is replaced.

'Is it the woman with the cat?'
'Is it the man with the hat?'
'Is it the boy with the curly hair?

For more 'game-like' controlled practice activities, see various games books:
Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, *Games for Language Learning*,
Lee, W.R., *Language Teaching Games and Contests*, Buckby and Wright, *Flashcards*.

Pictures as cues in dialogues

Pictures can be used to cue substitutions within dialogues in which the basic sentence patterns are determined by the teacher. Such dialogue work, after an initial demonstration, would normally be done in pair or group work. The pictures would either be printed on a single sheet and taken in turn or each picture would be on a single piece of paper or card and turned over or taken by a student. The advantage of the latter lies partly in the element of surprise and interest; more importantly, however, the advantage lies in the creation of an 'information gap' between the students. If only student B sees the picture there is some reason for student A asking the question. The importance of 'information gap' and 'opinion gap' to language learning is discussed fully elsewhere. (Johnson, K., *Communicative Syllabus Design and Methodology*, McAlpin, J. *The Magazine Picture Library*, to name two of the many sources.)

Any pictures of single objects or actions may be used. For a wealth of ideas for using pictures for the practice of structures and tenses, see Heaton, B., *Practice through Pictures*. For ideas for using pictures for more functional orientated exchanges see, Kerr, J.Y.K., *Picture Cue Cards for Oral Language Practice*. For ideas for the use of pictures in practice generally, see Byrne, D., *Teaching Oral English*, Wright A., *Visual Materials for the Language Teacher*, Buckby and Wright, *Flash Cards*, McAlpin, J., *The Magazine Picture Library*.

Pictures as cues for guiding written composition

There are several basic ways of using pictures in order to guide written composition.

A written text with gaps may be given to the student and a picture or pictures provide the source of information for completing the gaps.

Alternatively, the text is given in jumbled order. By reading the different sentences and studying the pictures the student is able to rewrite the text in sequence.

A composite picture or a sequence of pictures is necessary for this activity. (See pages 114-116).

Pictures as a stimulus for spoken and written composition

Written composition

A single picture or sequence of pictures without textual guidance is the traditional test in written composition. This established use of pictures need not be described further.

A variation which provides for more interest and is quite easy for the teacher to organise is as follows: show the first picture by itself and ask the students to start writing a story based on it. After five minutes ask them to read what they have written to their neighbour. You might ask one student to read out his version to the whole group. Then show another picture which may not have any obvious relationship with the previous one. Tell the students they must continue their story without any break. Continue in this way with three or four pictures.

Other well known techniques include showing a sequence with one picture missing. The students write the story and are expected to guess at the content of the missing picture.

Speaking

A single picture for interpretation:

A reasonable development of conversation between the teacher and students would be broadly as follows:

Description

First of all, the students should describe in very simple terms what they can see. What can you see in the picture? How many people are there? What's this? etc.

Interpretation

Very quickly individual interpretations of what is represented become apparent and should be encouraged as they lead to genuine exchanges of views. It is advisable for the teacher him/herself not to allow anyone's interpretation to 'crush' another's. For example, experience using this picture shows that people imagine the scene is inside a house, others believe it takes place outside a house.
What is happening? (What do you think? Do you agree?)
What has happened? What will happen next?
Why do you think it is a house/hut/factory/school/, etc?
Why do you think it is a back door and not a front door?

Personal experiences

Such an incident can naturally lead to the question 'Have you ever broken a window?' Students will usually be quite keen to tell you. To release the flood of stories you could ask them to tell their neighbour of their experiences. And you might, finally, invite students to tell the rest of the class about their neighbour's 'doings'.

Broader issues

Very often a broader issue can be discerned and highlighted by the teacher. For example, the question of punishment, initially for the breaking of windows but finally the role of punishment in society.

Do you think that was fair? What do you think should happen? What is punishment for, do you think?

Written and acted conversations

Ask the students to imagine a conversation between the people (or other people not depicted, e.g. a neighbour) before, during or after the incident depicted. They should write the conversation down, perhaps with another student, and then act or read it out.

A sequence of pictures

If there is a degree of ambiguity in the pictures, all the better! The ambiguity provides a reason for speaking. The students might discuss the sequence in pairs, evolving their story and writing it down. The stories may then be read aloud to the class and the differences discussed, particularly in so far as they derive from a literal interpretation of the pictures.

Other ways of using the sequence

Dialogues may be written and acted out; the story may be written from the viewpoint of one of the participants; an interview on behalf of a newspaper can be carried out and an article written; a related social or philosophical issue might be discussed; a simulation might be played out.
For some of these in practice refer to Fletcher and Birt, *Newsflash*.

Media

Blackboard

Whenever possible do your drawings on paper/card or on OHP transparencies so that you can use them again. (Preparing pictures at home also means you can draw in peace and produce them the instant you need them.)

If you do wish to draw on the blackboard it is of tremendous help if you have at least tried out the drawing beforehand, perhaps copying it from this book or from a photograph.

Many teachers say that the very inadequacy of their drawings catches the students' attention. However, even a good joke begins to lose its attraction when relentlessly repeated! Professional illustrators would find it difficult to draw any action or animal or object on the board if they had not previously studied it. So, if you find it difficult to draw on the board without some preparation you are quite normal!

One way of retaining interest and class discipline while you draw is to ask the students to guess what you are drawing.

Growing, changing drawings are possible on the blackboard: they are not possible when pre-prepared. This factor plus the interest on seeing something being made is the black-

board's great strength. (See Mugglestone, P., *Planning and Using the Blackboard.*)

Magnet board/flannel board

In recent years a new substance rather like plasticine has in many ways overtaken both these media in convenience. Small balls of the substance on the back of a piece of paper can stick to most surfaces. Drawings or magazine pictures can thus be instantly displayed and moved about. Solid people rather than stick-people are essential. People, animals and objects can be stuck and moved around on a setting, providing reference for the practice of specific language items or for less controlled composition or a support for listening comprehension.
(See Byrne, D., *Using the Magnet Board.*)

Wall pictures

The scenes in this book will prove invaluable here. A composite picture, as Donn Byrne has shown (Byrne, D., *Wall Pictures for Language Practice* and *Teaching Oral English*) can provide information cues in controlled practice as well as a stimulus and reference for composition.

As with all pictures it is essential that the vital details are big enough and clear enough. Solid figures would normally be clearer than stick figures in a wall picture.

Picture cards for class use: flashcards

Such cards must be one of the most flexible of the media – particularly now that Bluetack and its equivalents allow the teacher to stick the cards on to the board or on to cupboards, etc. Their chief role is in intense oral work both controlled and open. The ease with which a picture can be produced, shown to the class or to an individual and then put away helps the teacher to create a sense of urgency and drama.

A picture card can, of course, simply cue a response as described above. However, there are more game-like activities with cards in which 'information gaps' or 'opinion gaps' can be created thus giving a reason for speaking.

For example, a series of action cards are shown to the students. When they are familiar with the ones in your hand (about six or seven of them) show one card to *half* the class (group A). Then tell everyone to concentrate and feel the telepathic waves! Group B then has three guesses: 'Is he swimming? Is he jumping? Is he playing football?' See if telepathy works: try the experiment twenty times and record each time a group guesses correctly within three guesses. This simple sentence pattern is an intrinsic part of the activity. Furthermore, it is used as a genuine question. The students really want to know. Even a drill can be communicative!

Here is another example of the use of a picture card, in this case for open unguided communication; take any picture card showing a few objects or people on it. Hold it so that the class see the reverse side of the card, then spin it very rapidly! They will only see a flash of the picture and will protest! However, experience of playing this game shows that people *do* see something. Gradually, as you spin the card again and encourage discussion the picture is established. For many more ideas on the use of the picture card, see Buckby and Wright, *Flash Cards.*

Picture cards for group use

The cards can obviously be smaller than for class use. Their main purpose is to cue language in controlled practice. A single sentence pattern or a mini-dialogue is set by the teacher and written on the board or on a piece of card which all the group can see. The picture cards are usually placed face down. When it is a student's turn to speak, s/he picks up a card and refers to it in his sentence.
For example, pictures of foods:

Student A (picking up a card), Do you like (chips)?
Student B Yes, I do./No, I don't.
Yes, I love them./No, I hate them.

There are many examples of the use of picture cards in Kerr, J.Y.K., *Picture Cue Cards for Oral Language Practice*, or Buckby and Wright, *Flash Cards.*

The overhead projector

Pictures can be shown on the OHP with ease. They can be prepared beforehand, produced at the right moment, moved around on the screen, have text added to them and then be stored away to be used again . . . and again. Such is the flexibility of the OHP in terms of the way in which pictures and text can be used that all the skills at all levels can be catered for.
For ideas on the use of the OHP, see Jones, R, *The Overhead Projector.*