

Labels, Pictures, and ELT:

Selecting, Finding, and Creating, the Right Graphic

by Peter Warner

The "Snakes & Ladders" Winter 2003 issue had an article by Howard Higa entitled; "Pictures: Worth a thousand words". That article stimulated a few thoughts about using labels and pictures in ELT, based on working with Japanese children in EFL classes. The author's own picture work has evolved through all the stages mentioned here, from scissors to broad band computer.

What's in a Label?

A large part of language is labels, and a large part of teaching a language is assigning them. I learned a lot about labels from a little boy who was just learning to talk. This little bundle of wide-world curiosity and inquisitiveness kept picking up virtually identical pebbles in a garden path, asking his mother with each and every one: "Is this a stone?" After she patiently answered, "Yes, that one's also a stone", he would look over the hundreds of similar shaped polished stones at his feet, pick up another one, and repeat his question. I watched this for several minutes, and realized that for him, "stone" was just a label, and he was entirely correct: a label can be general or specific.

A vast portion of children's English Language Teaching (ELT) is assigning labels to pictures. When children are shown a graphic, they are usually asked to give it a label. If they produce the sound the teacher is hoping to hear, we often conclude that they have understood and acquired the target. But actually, all they have done is verbalized a label, and they may have no idea what the concept behind the label is. When Taro looks at a picture of a yellow dog sitting on a bed, he might say "dog", but he could be thinking of the bed, the color of the dog, or sitting, or being on something. Graphics must be chosen carefully and used precisely, in order to effectively communicate not just a target label, but the specific meaning of that label.

What's in a Picture?

An ELT image should be minimal in excess stimulation — it should convey a single concept as clearly as possible, and little else. A graphic used for "boy", for example, should be neutral in facial expression, or it might be confused with the emotions displayed, like "happy" or "sad". Likewise, a graphic for "sad" should not show someone crying, or students will confuse the verb "cry" with the adjective "sad". This is a common and long-lasting source of confusion, because most images designed for "sad" show someone shedding tears. An image of a long snake sleeping on a log would blur the concepts of "long", "dangerous", "snake", "sleeping", and so on. The right image is one that stimulates a clear, sudden reflex, not cautious consideration. If it requires explanation, it's insufficient, and if it includes a background or extra features that generate distracting chatter, it's excessive.

An image should be attractive, to draw interest and stimulate. Cute cartoon images are far more pleasing than realistic

images, which can actually be repulsive for children (real octopi are very ugly). Humor may help draw interest, but too much will distract from the target. Also, images don't always translate clearly across cultures — Japanese children will insist that a melon is not a melon, unless it shows the vine clipping still attached, the way they are sold in Japan. For illustrating possibly insulting adjectives ("strong", "weak", "fat", "thin", "smart", "stupid") images of cartoon animals are more likely to be well received. Some remarkable brain studies done by Ryuta Kawashima, MD, (2003), indicate that brain activity is dramatically reduced when viewing images that are unpleasant or disliked. I've had children refuse to touch some published flashcards because they were repelled by the image.

Using Pictures: All for One, but Not One for All

Different graphics should be used to illustrate the same concept. If the same image of a brown table is repeated for months, children may produce "table" when they see that image, yet ask "What's this?" when you show them a green table with shorter legs. Children can easily memorize dozens of images and corresponding labels, without grasping the meaning or application of the labels (or even phrases) they are repeating. By varying the images used to portray a single concept, learners are more likely to connect the verbalized label to the common (target) concept, and not just to a specific graphic. Repeating an identical image may seem to provide clarity through repetition; however doing so can just as easily produce confusion by implying the label is specific to that repeated image. It would certainly reduce stimulation, and thereby promote boredom. Because of this, thoughtfully designed materials should use perhaps six or more distinct images of each single target item.

For example, a set of bingo game boards should have different images of each target label on each board. Most picture bingo games simply vary the location of identical images. Consequently, a child unsure of the announced label "bag" spots the image on the announcer's board, and scans her own board for a similar looking green shape image. This actually discourages learning. If every child has unique images on their game board, initially there may be confusion — "This one?" — and perhaps irritation, but soon the lesson becomes clear: all bags are not the same, and there's no use just glancing for similar shapes and colors. The nature of the label, rather than the graphic, has to be considered. This is actual learning.

Homework material might repeat familiar images to avoid distress at home, but materials in class should be intended to stimulate productive confusion, a key component of active (and natural) learning. Flash card sets and textbook pages should include review of previous target labels, but the

images should vary. This is a weakness of many published materials. Uniqueness stimulates interest, similarity reduces it. Although different graphics should be used for the same concept, a graphic used for one target shouldn't be used for another target as well. Using an image of a long pencil for "long" is fine, but if that same graphic is also used for illustrating the target "pencil", clarity (at least in the initial learning stages) will be lost. All for one, but not one for all.

Finding and Getting Graphics (Legally!)

Obviously, ELT requires lots of carefully chosen graphics, which means having an extensive source library. A thrifty teacher could devote years to cutting up magazines, and still not have a suitable graphic for some simple noun or adjective. Although "pickpocket" is a common topic with anyone who has been a tourist, it took me over five years to find an image of one. Getting images in a set of uniform size would be almost impossible with the hunt-and-clip method. The solution is found in going digital, where images can be copied, edited, and stored endlessly.

While we can forget the drudgery of magazines and scissors, we should also remember that the ease of digital copying does not make it any less illegal than copying a published volume on a color copier at the local 7-11. Taking someone else's work without paying for it is always stealing, whether at gunpoint or by keyboard. Don't be an image thief. Typing a target label into Google Image search will produce hundreds of images, but most will be from copyrighted web sites. Many web sites offer images free, but some of them are clearly stolen from copyrighted sources. Being online, and being easy, doesn't mean being okay.

Getting digital art legally means going to commercial clip art collections. There are collections on CD or DVD, subscriber clip art web sites online, offering millions of images that are licensed to you (with minimal restrictions) as a subscriber, and even free clip art web sites. All of these formats include catalogs or search engines to assist in finding a specific theme or type of graphic quickly. Doing a search for "clip art", or "free clip art" will produce dozens of such web sites. The size and quality of the graphics contained in each sometimes vary widely, and sometimes seem identical, so it's wise to take a free tour of several sites, or to purchase a short-term subscription, before signing up for a longer term. Macintosh or Windows compatibility is also an issue to be wary of.

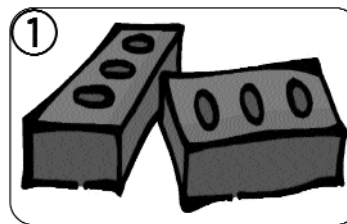
If your internet connection is fast, the online libraries can be searched, and selected clip art downloaded, more easily than shuffling through CDs. Furthermore, the online libraries are always expanding their selection, actually increasing the value of the subscription. An annual subscription to such an online image service can cost less than 3 US dollars a week.

Using Digital Graphics: Where the Printer Meets the Keyboard

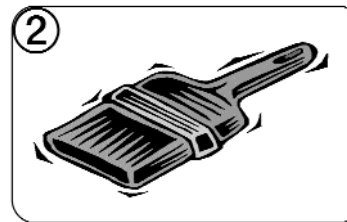
Being in digital format, clip art images are size adjustable (a major concern when designing card sets or worksheets) and easily and legally modified, duplicated,

and stored digitally in your chosen format. This technology saves an incredible amount of time, and offers unlimited creative possibilities. Color graphics are more attractive than black and white images, yet a graphic that looks perfect in color might be unclear when copied into black and white. For clarity, images with simple, clear lines and colors work best, with edges outlined in black. Plain or clear backgrounds improve visual understanding, and will allow combining with other graphics.

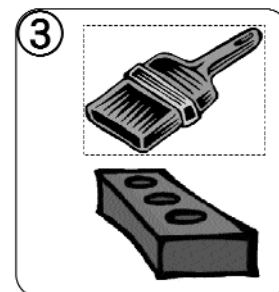
Suppose our syllabus includes the targets "brick", and "brush". After selecting and downloading an image of each, they could be combined on simple graphics software to produce an image of a brush on a brick, as shown in these illustrated steps:



1) These bricks are beautiful- but we just need one of them. I'll erase one, then touch up the other.

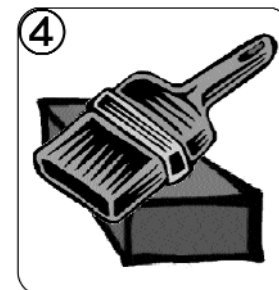


2) This brush graphic should copy nicely in black and white: the colors are bold, the outline is clear. The black accents are distracting, though.



3) After erasing the accents, the brush graphic is selected and

dragged onto the brick graphic. The brick has been flipped horizontally to add balance.



4) There's our ELT card: "The brush is on the brick." This simple image can now be printed out to almost any size desired, and saved for future use. It was produced within fifteen minutes, using common graphics software.

With digital technology, an enterprising teacher can easily (and legally) produce the right graphics, so the students can get the right concept. It's simply the right choice for ELT today.

References

Kawashima R. (2003) *Train your Brain*, translated by Ryoken Fujito. Tokyo: Kumon Publishing.

Peter Warner has been teaching children in Nagoya since 1991. He is the principal instructor of At Home English, in Tempaku-ku, and is the producer of At Home Worksheets, and A-Go Man Products. He can be contacted at warnerph@naa.att.ne.jp