

Pictures: Worth a thousand words (and then some)

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“If you’re going to be a teacher, you need to be a ‘picture person’”. That was the advice of Prof. Robert Gibson in graduate school. It struck me as a poignant comment amidst all the education theory being preached. Prof. Gibson’s suggestion was to collect magazine pictures for a picture file.

A picture file is certainly not an original idea but I’ve wondered why more teachers or programs are not in the practice of utilizing a well-organized picture file to its full advantage. Over the years, I’ve taken Prof. Gibson’s advice to heart and have added a few new twists to my own “picture person” practice.

In this article, I will describe activities using pictures. First up are two “art” activities to whet your appetite for pictures. Following will be a presentation of my approach to organizing and using a picture file. All represent my passion for pictures as a picture person.

Face art

This activity basically involves creating a collage from magazine pictures that represent a student’s identity (mostly, things students like, want, and have). The collage (see example in photo) is arranged on a poster-sized cut-out of each student’s face and head in profile. The finished piece is used as a prompt for self-introductions. For older children, the back of the collage can be used for writing practice. For example, the students can extend the stem sentences: “I like...”; “I want...”; and “I have...”. Higher level students might follow a form letter in writing a self-introduction.



Face art.

This activity was a hit with students in a series of English lessons at a community center in Gifu. Teachers noted how the students carried their posters to classes weeks after the activity had finished, indicating that they served as a source of pride. At the summer camp finale, the posters were used as prompts for speaking in pair work.

The rationale for the activity includes the following:

The cut-outs...

- provide a prompt for language activities as described above;
- serve as a long-term reminder of the “fun and interesting” nature of English learning (these collages often stay pinned up on bedroom walls for years);
- engage students in an activity of reflection on “self-identity”; and
- serve as a connection to American and other cultures through the interplay with the magazine pictures (e.g., students enjoy choosing pictures of “American” or other representations of things they like—car, dog, house, friends, etc.).

How to do it

The student’s profile is traced from the shadow that is cast utilizing an overhead projector (OHP). Seat the subject in a chair. If you are right-handed, choose the right profile of the student (it is easier to trace this way). Another student will need to help steady the seated student by standing behind the chair and gently placing hands on the seated student’s head.

Tape a poster-sized sheet of paper on the wall (Poster thickness if possible—in the past, I’ve used the backs of large calendar pages). Adjust the distance of the OHP from the subject for optimal shadow size. Trace the shadow rather quickly, in a continuous solid line. Carefully “sketching” an ambiguous line usually results in a less accurate representation and students have difficulty cutting along the line later.

Initially, the task seems difficult. With practice I was able to finish tracing entire outlines in about two or three minutes per student. While a pair of students are stationed at the OHP (one seated, the other steadying), the rest of the class can be engaged in collecting pictures and preparing sentences for the back of the collage. Otherwise, trace a few faces at a time over several weeks. (At the community center I used break time over two weeks to trace the majority of the class of 15.)

I tend to be reluctant to use valuable class time for mere “artwork”. After collecting materials and finishing outlines, much of the creative, time-consuming artwork can be finished at home. Take photographs of the best works to be used as examples the next time. Or save the collages at the school and display them in rotation.

Footprints

This is an activity suitable for very young learners.

- Make a template for an over-sized left and right footprint.
- Cut out pictures of things students will already know the English words for from Japanese. Some examples: “cake”, “cup”, “pen”, “bus”, “banana”, “table”, and “house”.
- Make multiple copies from the templates and paste the pictures on the “footprints”, one picture per footprint.
- Place the footprints in a path around the room. The students walk around the room “stomping out” while reciting each word along the way.
- Work on the pronunciation of the words.
- Of course, the footprints could be used as flashcards, in other game activities, etc. Over time, the set could grow as students progress.

My university students conducted a one-off English lesson at a nearby pre-school. The purpose of the activity was to provide a “first success” with English language studies for the pre-schoolers. The stomping out action created an atmosphere of mastery and instilled in the students a sense of achievement. It was raucous fun as well.

The Picture File

I will begin with my approach to the basic picture file.

Rationale: A picture file has represented the following and more to my lessons:

- Attention-getter: Carefully chosen pictures, used appropriately, stir interest and focus the attention of students;
- Fun: Numerous games and activities can be developed using the pictures (a few will be offered later);
- Extensive practice: Pictures used in various games or communicative pattern drills can serve to extend/reinforce lessons in an active and fun way;
- Flexibility: Pictures allow quick shifts even within a lesson—to extend practice, to drill, to play, etc. Pictures provide many mini lessons in a jiffy;
- Enhancement: Pictures can often bring alive an otherwise dull textbook lesson;
- Culture: Students enjoy looking at pictures of authentic scenes of other cultures— everything from food to sports to holiday scenes;
- Low cost: Picture sets or jumbo flash cards that accompany textbooks are expensive and may lose their appeal after a few uses. A picture file is very inexpensive and the pictures tend to be “busier” leading to more uses; and
- Connection to curriculum: Children enjoy seeing the pictures they contributed to the picture file in use in lessons. This connection to the lesson materials is motivating.

How to do it

Some keys to success in organizing a picture file include the following:

1) Where to collect pictures. Being a “picture person” means having an eye out for interesting and useful pictures wherever you go. Some of my favorite places to find suitable pictures include the following:



Giant steps for tiny feet.

- magazines of all sorts;
 - more specifically the “swap tables” for magazines that are set up at many public libraries in America (if you happen to take a trip abroad call the local libraries and ask if free magazines are available);
 - old magazines that friends and relatives might let you have for free;
 - the advertisements on the shelves next to products in Japanese electronic and computer stores;
 - the advertisements that come with the morning paper in Japan;
 - the advertisements for food products on the rack at post offices in Japan;
 - “sale bins” at used books shops in America; and
 - pictures your students can contribute.
- 2) What to collect. Collect pictures that are familiar to Japanese children, e.g. Doraemon, Hello Kitty, *umeboshi*, etc. Also, collect pictures that show things from other cultures, especially things appealing to children, e.g., advertisements for children’s snacks, animation characters from other countries, children’s fashion from other countries, etc. Children enjoy the connection to Japanese things in an English class. New things from other cultures stir interest as well.
- 3) Mounting pictures.
- Show students examples of finished work, contributions to the picture file from other students. Choose a variety of appealing original artwork among the finished works for inspiration. Students readily follow the standard of quality work.
 - Pass out 3-5 magazine pictures to each student. Don’t let them choose among your pile of pictures. They will take too long to choose.
 - Pass out regular white A-4 paper to mount pictures. One sheet per picture.
 - Pass out scissors to cut pictures. Students can cut pictures in any way they please—in outline form, as a square block, etc. I use a 100-Yen Shop set of scissors for the class. The set also includes various “fancy” edged scissors for a different effect if they choose.
 - A colored strip will go at the top of the front page (see

example). Each color represents a different category. Here are the categories I have used: sports, food, animals, fashion, places, famous people, actions, faces, nature, things, emotions, relationships, and miscellaneous. Of course students don't know the meanings of some of the category words in English so I write them on the board together with their Japanese definitions.

- Students choose a category to match their picture. Demonstrate how one picture may fit into various categories. They can decide the category. Make available pre-cut strips from colored paper. (In the long run, the color coding will be the key to keeping your picture file organized. The colored strips have been very helpful in sorting hundreds of pictures in disarray into piles. The categorizing activity is useful for the students.)

- Make available markers, stamps, stickers, etc. for students to create art for their pictures. However, it's a good idea to get the students to do the artwork at home. It's a fun activity for them so I haven't had to use class time for the artwork. In class, they have collected the materials in about 15 minutes. The next class they return with wonderfully creative pieces of art. Knowing that their work will be used for many years in the picture file seems to be motivating. To this end, be sure to have the students write their names on the back, along with the date.

- For older students, writing sentences on the back could be part of the work. For example, in one lesson, as an extension to the textbook, students brought in a picture for the "fashion" category. After creating the artwork on the front, they described the fashion in sentences on the back. Sometimes students are free to write any comment about the picture. Giving examples and patterns to follow is important. In the end, they seem very satisfied with their work and the contribution to the picture file is impressive.

- Repeat the picture file activity periodically, as warranted by the success of the activity and the use of the pictures in class. Encourage the students to bring to class pictures they find on their own to contribute. Now, you have many eyes out for good pictures.

- Here's some final advice from my trial and error experiences.

100-Yen Shop scissors have served me well; however, the glue from these shops has been a failure. Weeks later the artwork starts to come apart.

Opt for at least standard grade A-4 paper. It's worth it in the long run. Also, don't use "construction paper" of the American standard for the colored strips. The colors quickly fade and the paper becomes tattered over time as well. Colored paper is expensive. Use it sparingly. A one-centimeter width for the strip will probably suffice.

Much of the artwork would be well worth preserving through lamination. However, I have found the cost too high. The pictures have kept well over the years through the rigors of use without lamination.

Finally, you might consider numbering each item in the picture file. If the picture file is to be shared program-wide



A selection of picture cards.

amongst teachers, you may find that the items can too easily be lost and misplaced. You may need a sign out sheet to keep things in order.

Picture file activities

The mounted pictures of the picture file (hereafter referred to as "picture cards") can readily be used for many activities. Packaging them into game/activity formats is key. Here are four examples.

- 1) The Swinging Monkey. (see set up in photo). This activity utilizes two lines strung across the room. Hooks with clips from a 100-Yen Shop are used to hang picture cards from the line. Students swing a stuffed animal (in this case a monkey with long arms) from picture to picture, calling out the vocabulary items shown on the cards. This activity is good for reviewing previously learned vocabulary. It can serve well as a warm-up activity to greet students with individually as they arrive at the beginning of class as well.

- 2) Around the World in Many Ways.

Various question patterns can be practiced in this engaging pattern drill.

For example, consider the "yes/no question" pattern utilizing the stem "Can you...". Select appropriate picture cards to elicit responses from the students using the "Can you" question pattern (baseball, cooking, driving, skiing, speaking English, etc.). Show one picture at a time to the entire class. Call on students around the room. Ask: "Megumi, can you play baseball?" etc.

Next, show more picture cards for the focus, this time eliciting the questions for the pattern drill from the students. Some pictures may match more than one appropriate "Can you..." response. Originality should be encouraged.

After some practice, stand in a circle with the students (this activity works better with a larger class). With a stack of picture cards in hand (some used previously and some new), turn to the student on the left. Show everyone the picture. Say, "Can you play basketball?" Wait for the student on the left to respond. Next, that student asks the same question to the person to his left, and so on going clockwise around the circle. Meanwhile, start the pattern with another picture in



The Swinging Monkey: Curious George and friend reviewing the day's lesson.

the other direction. This picture will pass from student to student going counter-clockwise around the circle. Alternate sending pictures in the left and right directions. Soon students will encounter a barrage of pictures and questions from the left and right. The chaos created is part of the fun.

This drill can be conducted in the same fashion for question patterns such as “Do you have...?”; “Do you like...?”; etc.

3) Famous People in 20 Questions.

Photocopy some of the cards from the “Famous People” category. In conjunction with a textbook lesson or as a separate lesson, go over the pertinent “yes/no” question patterns and vocabulary for asking about famous people. For example:

Does s/he have...(black hair, long hair, big eyes, a nice smile, etc.)?

Is s/he...(tall, short, old, young, a baseball player, a singer, etc.)?

Next, use tape to attach many famous picture cards to the white board or a wall. These could include cards contributed by students in the class or their siblings. Acknowledge the contributions as a connection to the curriculum materials.

Then, tape a photocopy of one of the pictures to the back of each student. The students should not see which card they get. The challenge is for them to ask questions to find out which famous person they are/have. They can only ask “yes/no” questions. They need to count how many questions they take to guess the name of the person. The student with the lowest total is the winner. They can be paired or they can mingle randomly.

4) Anpanman Quiz.

I was lucky to find a set of large pictures from the Anpanman series some time ago, but this activity could be adapted to any set of characters that students know very well. I mounted each character separately making individual picture cards. They serve as material for a quiz about the characters.

Arrange students in pairs (in large classes, in threes, in small classes, individually). Write the team numbers on the board from top to bottom—team one through four for a class of 8 students, for example.

Pick a picture card from the set of Anpanman characters and pose a question to the entire class. For example, “What color are Tendonman’s shoes?” Give the students a few seconds to deliberate with their partners. Start with team one. Elicit, “His shoes are...” Don’t indicate whether it is a right or wrong answer. Move on to team 2, then 3, then 4. Show the picture, and reveal the right answer. Repeat the question and answer pattern. Each team with the correct answer receives one point.

Pick another card from the Anpanman set and ask another question. For example, “What color is Kamameshidon’s belt?” Begin eliciting answers from group 2 this time, then groups 3, 4, and 1.

Students work energetically through a series of patterns utilizing vocabulary for body parts, colors, shapes, and clothing.

This activity is always met with great enthusiasm. Students amazingly know the information and are eager to show it. It also serves as a nice connection to something Japanese in an “English only” atmosphere.

Some final thoughts

I hope the activities have shown that much more can and should be done with pictures. All of the activities and ideas have been used with success in real classroom settings. However, this does not mean that my suggestions need to be followed in the exact manner described. Certainly, they can be adapted or fine-tuned in many directions to suit your needs.

Although some of the activities seem to be time-consuming or labor intensive on the part of the teacher, I have always found the effort worthwhile. In the long run, the materials created and activities practiced build a nice treasure chest of “can’t fail” lessons that can be repeated numerous times with little effort. I see them as win-win situations all the way around—good for the students, good for the teacher, and good for the program. For me it has all been a part of being a “picture person”.

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