

Teaching Tip: What Do You See?

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Summary: This article outlines three ways teachers can use picture prompts in English conversation classes. They include conversation prompts, vocabulary review, and listening practice.

Keywords: visual prompts, images in the classroom, teaching tip, conversation, wildlife

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” or so the adage goes. For ESL learners with beginning English vocabulary, it may be worth only 100 or fewer words as they master a new language, but pictures do provide an outstanding way to learn and practice. They’re readily adaptable to different levels from beginners to advanced, and they engage students by connecting new ideas with what they already know. I’d like to share three ways I use pictures in an English conversation class (CONVO) I teach at Literacy Source, a non-profit organization in Seattle, WA providing free, learner-centered basic education to low-income adult immigrants. The three ways are as conversation prompts, vocabulary review, and listening practice.

Images as Conversation Prompts

I started down this path shortly after Literacy Source moved CONVO from live classes to Zoom in response to the COVID pandemic. I was struggling with the transition, particularly with the limitations it placed on the use of realia. Literacy Source’s volunteer program manager, Caroline Socha, came to the rescue with the [New York Times Learning Network](#), a free resource for picture prompts

and other teaching tools. It became my go-to resource for spurring conversation that first quarter. I started with the simple activity of posting a picture on the Zoom screen related to the conversation topic for that day, for example, *family holidays*. I selected a picture of a Muslim family having a Ramadan feast (see Image 1), then asked “Look at the picture. What do you see? What is happening?” Some examples of student responses were

- “They are eating”
- “There is food on the table”
- “It is party.”
- “It is Eid, a holiday to break the fast.”

I prompted students to talk about the food on the table by asking, “Can you name the dishes?” My Muslim students explained the names and ingredients. Some students asked about the meaning of Ramadan, the number of days, and fasting practices. What I expected to be a 5-minute discussion often ran two or three times longer as students came up with their own examples. This gave me the courage to expand to other topics such as *sorting garbage at home*.

In the pre-COVID days, I would dump a bag of garbage (realia) on the table and instruct students to take turns sorting the various materials—cardboard, magazines, egg cartons, cans and glass. In Zoom, we couldn’t easily use realia so we used pictures for the activity (see Image 2).

In this example, we had a lively discussion about “what it is” and “where it goes,” including plenty of disagreement (“It goes in recycling!” “No, I disagree. It



Image 1: Family Holiday Example—What do you see? [Source](#)

goes in the garbage!”). In the end, we learned a lot about proper sorting, the sorting mistakes we were making (teacher included), and how to do better sorting in the future. When implementing the activity, I found it helpful to select images of a single waste material rather than mixed waste materials. For example, using an image of glass bottles rather than one of glass and plastic bottles, made it easier for students to answer the question “What is it?” Students gave the activity a high rating in the class. One student who works as a custodian noted that “this helped me do better on my job.”

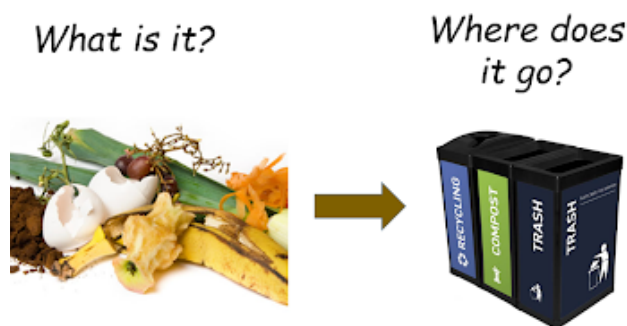


Image 2: Sorting Garbage Example [Source](#)

Early this year, I attended an “Experienced Tutor Training” presented by Literacy Source’s instructor, Philip Morris, where I learned two new ways to use picture prompts –as a tool for vocabulary review and for practicing listening skills.

Images as Vocabulary Review

In a lesson on wildlife in Puget Sound, I introduced new vocabulary for wild animals in our neighborhoods using pictures of a bald eagle, spider, squirrel, raccoon, mouse, and more, all labeled with the new vocabulary. We asked

Say the name.



Image 3: Wildlife in Puget Sound Example [Source](#)

students to name a wild animal they see in their neighborhood. In the follow-up lesson 2 days later, we used the same pictures of new vocabulary with no labels, then asked students to “fill in” by saying the name of the animal in the picture (see Image 3).

Images as Listening Comprehension

In this activity, I used the same pictures from the Vocabulary Review above. I asked students to look at two pictures (A and B), then listen to a sentence about one of the 2 pictures read by one of my class assistants. “Listen to the sentence. Is it picture A or B?” (Image 4) I called on students to correctly identify the picture based on what they heard. In the example below, I encountered some difficulty with comprehension of the two sentences among my beginning learners. In the future, I would modify the sentences to be more literal. For example, I would change the sentence “My house is a cobweb” to the sentence “I have six legs.” Six legs are immediately visible in the picture while “house” is not.

Listen... Is it A or B?

My house is a cobweb.



A



B

Image 4: Listening Practice Example

These are simple examples, but infinitely expandable. For example, how does looking at a spider make you feel? What do you do when you see a spider in your home? Outdoors?” Alternatively, a teacher can ask students to bring a picture of their own to share, and to make up their own “A or B” sentences to quiz a partner.

In summary, pictures are plentiful on the internet and readily adaptable to all levels. Many are also quite evocative, opening the door for deeper discussion about how an image makes us feel—afraid, happy, in love, sad, inspired—and to help students’ describe their personal experiences more deeply. I hope you will have fun exploring this teaching avenue.

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CYNTHIA PUTNAM joined Literacy Source as a volunteer in 2017 as she was in the process of retiring from her own environmental firm. She began as a class assistant teaching ESOL I students and, following full retirement, became a lead instructor for the Center’s Conversation Classes. She works with a team of skilled and dedicated volunteers to deliver classes that are fun, friendly, and provide lots of opportunities for students to practice their English listening and speaking skills. You can contact her at cynthia@putnamprice.com.



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