

# An Approach to Picture Compositions

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Most language teachers would agree that teaching composition, the “putting together . . . of a sequence of connected sentences” (Byrne, 1978) is a long and often intricate process involving the use of a progression of techniques ranging from very controlled exercises to “free compositions”. Along this continuum of methods one finds a major technique which Sarkar (1978) describes as unsurpassed as a stimulus to creative expression”: the use of the Picture Composition.

## What is a Picture Composition?

Picture compositions are defined by Breitzkreuz (1972) as including all those texts which are composed in response to one picture or a “series of three to nine pictures, normally depicting logical or continuous actions, situations, thoughts or scenes in the form of sketches or drawings”. These pictures may be presented in the form of wall pictures (produced commercially or through the concerted efforts of teacher and learners), or stencilled so that each student has a copy, or an overhead projected transparency.

One need not here repeat all the arguments which stress the educational value of using a visual stimulus to enhance learning. In respect of composition work it is enough to quote the major one: if nothing else pictures provide the learners with material to talk and/or write about.

## Choice of Pictures

But how is the teacher to decide which picture/s would constitute adequate material?

Different people<sup>1</sup> offer various sets of criteria which might be used as a gauge of the appropriateness of a picture. The following is a list of what would seem to be the more important ones:

*Scope of relevance* to the part of the programme the learners are currently engaged in studying. Questions to ask oneself would include: Does the narration of the action implied by the picture/s require the practice or consolidation of the select corpus of a new instructional item (e.g. the Part

Tense) currently being studied? Is it relevant to the adopted Scheme of Work?

*‘Point-of View’ and Nature of Content.* Is the point of view implied by the picture (if at all) a socially acceptable one? Is it desirable to include a “value judgement” teaching point with the linguistic ones? e.g. the moral aspects of riding a bicycle: the need to drive well and carefully.

*Appropriateness to Age, Grade and Interest of Learners.* Will the learners find the topic appealing and interesting? Can they relate to it, identify themselves with the characters in the pictures? Does it appeal to students of both sexes?

*‘Local Colour’ and/or Necessity of not being Culturally alien.* Does the picture/picture-sequence present an environment and a context which is familiar to the children? Does it use local matters to increase actuality and interest? Are there any culturally alien features?

## Physical Features

Is the picture/picture-sequence of a practical size?

Is it suggestive of reality? Pleasing to the eye?

Is it well planned and well produced, clear and distinct? Are the colours (if any) clear and deep?

Is it a recent production?

Is the material durable? Is the picture well mounted?

Is it artistically finished but not in a way as to destroy the simplicity and directness of the message?

Is the relationship between each picture in a sequence easily perceived?

## Using Picture Stories

When a teacher decides to set a picture composition task the first choice he/she faces is whether or not it is desirable to adopt a free or guided approach. It is only in respect of the second approach that the following is relevant.

Within the guided approach of teaching com-

position it is common practice to talk of an "oral picture composition" and "written picture composition" and to consider them as two separate works necessitating different pedagogical techniques. When one studies the available literature<sup>2</sup>, however, it is possible to distinguish a basic pattern underlying each of the variations<sup>3</sup>. It is this "basic pattern" of which an outline is here attempted.

The need of having a set of clearly defined criteria to apply in the choice of picture-sequences for a composition task has already been emphasised. A second requisite for a successful composition lesson is that the teacher's own preparation be as full and complete as possible. Thus it is felt that in the choice of the picture or picture-sequence, the teacher should:

Identify the main points of the story as shown or implied by the picture-sequence. These points should correspond with what the students themselves see when they first look at the pictures.

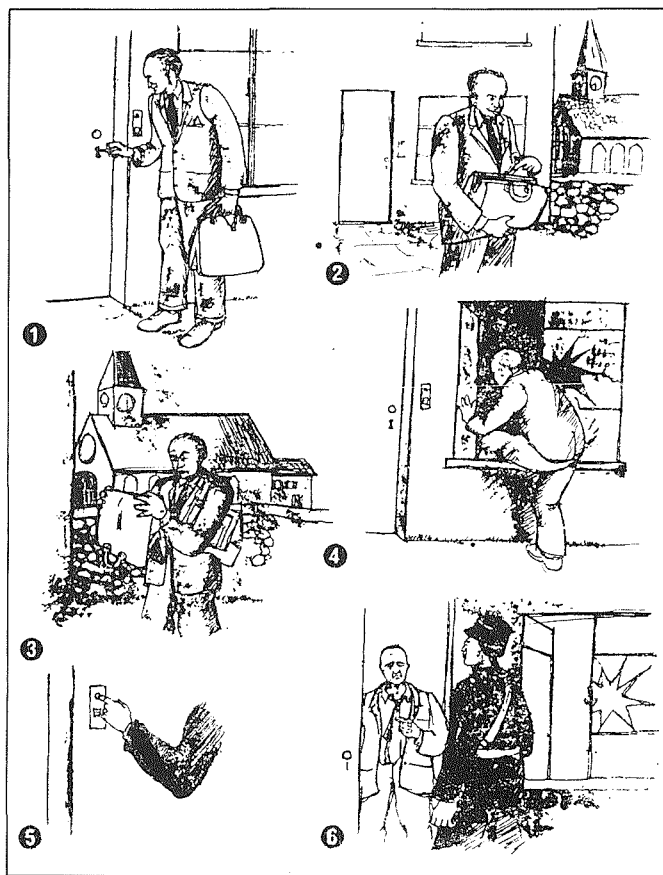
Thus, for example, in the picture-sequence reproduced on this page the main points of the picture sequence would be:

A man left home in the morning and locked the front door. (He went to the office.) He put the key in the briefcase. (He did not want to lose it.) Later that day he went back home. He looked for his key in his briefcase. His key was no longer there. He took out all his papers and upturned his briefcase. He still could not find his key. (Since there was no one else at home he decided to try to enter his home through the window.) He broke the window-pane, pulled back the latch and got in. Soon the doorbell rang. A policeman wanted an explanation of the man's strange behaviour.

The writer suggests that the teacher should prepare a brief summary, such as the foregoing, of the points noted. The parts in brackets correspond to the information which is implied as opposed to that revealed by the pictures themselves. It should be noted that this text was prepared with average Form II students in mind.

Note the language needed to express their main points and identify any difficulties.

Do the students know the word "briefcase"? Can they offer another suggestion for the same item? Perhaps *bag*, *case*, or *satchel*. Is there an alternative way for saying "He discovered that his key was no longer there?" It will be seen that by identifying all the points in the story, the teacher will be able to anticipate the areas which might offer difficulties to the learners, and will, therefore, be able to provide solutions for them. This does not, however, necessarily imply that the teacher has to circumvent such difficulties. On the contrary, he may well decide to use these difficulties as an opportunity for extending his students' vocabulary,



or even, for practising known (or even new) language structures. It is, however, desirable that new structural items be introduced during a language lesson. Despite this, however, a new structure may have to be introduced during a composition lesson since it is essential to the lesson. When this happens the teacher may practise the structure by first using the linguistic item himself and then getting his students to use it.

Note what kind of background or setting is needed for the story.

Thus the teacher should consider such questions as who the man is and where he is going: to the office, or the bank, or visiting his old parents. If the story is to be developed in any detail, it might also be necessary to consider how the man managed to break the window-pane and pull back the latch as well as why he looked so dishevelled when he opened the door for the policeman. Naturally, the teacher should not answer all these questions himself. Rather, he should pose them to the students at the beginning of the lesson and agree together with his students as to which version to adopt.

Finally the teacher should prepare a number of guiding questions to help him elicit the story from his students. There are various questioning techniques which might be used, depending upon the

particular teaching point the teacher wishes to make. As has been indicated, the foregoing points may serve as a guide for the teacher's own preparations. Once this has been done, he may then start to plan the actual lesson itself.

### The "Basic Pattern" of the Picture Composition Lesson Plan

An illustration of how the various steps of the "basic pattern" mentioned above is here given. Reference is made throughout to the picture sequence appearing in the diagram.

The teacher presents the picture-sequence (or part of the picture-sequence) and, with the help of the class, decides on the background or setting of the story.

In the case of our particular picture-sequence, it might be preferable to present the first two pictures together as the second picture establishes that the man is leaving the house thereby providing further relevant information as to the background. Thus, the teacher elicits from the class who the man is, (his name), *what* he is doing, *where* he is going, and possibly, what type of work he does. This type of work is called "description" by Haycraft (1978) and is used in most proposed methods - whether specified under such a title or not.

The teacher here presents any vocabulary or structural item he would like his students to use in the particular composition task.

Since the object is to present these items and familiarise the students with them, the students themselves are not expected to use them at this stage. Thus only the teacher uses them by putting them in questions which require only "Yes/No" answers. These questions allow for the possible presentation of any new linguistic item which might need to be introduced for the purposes of the particular picture composition. Such questions may be:

- (i) formed with the use of the auxiliary verb;
- (ii) tag-questions.

For example:

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Student</i>
Did Mr Peters <i>lock the door</i> ?	Yes, he did.
Did he put the key in his <i>briefcase</i> ?	Yes, he did.
Did he want to <i>lose the key</i> ?	No, he didn't.
Was he <i>leaving home</i> , or wasn't he?	Yes, he was.
He was <i>going out</i> then, wasn't he?	Yes, he was.

Alternative type questions may also be used as in the example:

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Student</i>
Was he leaving home or was he	

going back home?	He was leaving home.
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Here the teacher asks questions which elicit the actual development of the story.

The questions which are most likely to do this are the *Wh*-questions (where, what, when, who, why) as well as *how*. Such questions bring out the "facts" of the story which may now begin to emerge. For example:

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Student</i>
What did Mr Peters do?	He locked the front door.
What was he carrying in his hand?	He was carrying a briefcase.
Why did Mr Peters put the key in his briefcase?	Because he did not want to lose it.
Where was he going?	To the office.

At this stage the teacher may recapitulate or use guides to get students to do this.

The story for the first two pictures might therefore run:

Mr Peters left home. He locked the front door. He was carrying a briefcase. He put the key in his briefcase. He was going out. He was going to the office.

It will be readily seen that the material for the "sequence of connected sentences" is accumulating. It is now necessary that this is built into "a connected sequence".

The teacher elicits sentences which are connected.

This is done with both variations of picture-composition methodology: The "oral as-an-end" and the "oral as-a-means-to-an-end". In the latter case this step is given more emphasis. Various techniques may be used for eliciting connected sentences, chief among which one could include:

- (i) asking the students to continue a statement;
- (ii) asking the students to explain a point;
- (iii) asking the students to say whether a statement is important in the context of the story.

For example:

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Student</i>
What did Mr Peters do?	He locked the front door.
What happened after that?	He put the key in his briefcase.
That's right. Now repeat the two sentences.	He locked the front door and put the key in his briefcase.
Good. Now can you tell me why Mr Peters put the key	Because he did not want to lose it.

in the briefcase?

Quite right. Now, can you give me a whole sentence telling me why he locked the front-door and put the key in his briefcase?

He locked the front door and put the key in his briefcase because he did not want to lose it.

The foregoing examples illustrate questions of type (i) and (ii). So far, the story does not offer an opportunity for asking questions of type (iii) but this would be possible when dealing with later pictures in the same picture-sequence. Thus when the above steps are repeated for the next picture or two pictures according to one's initial decision about the presentation of the pictures, the teacher may use a question of type (iii) thus:

*Teacher*

So Mr Peters couldn't find his key. What did he do to try to find it?

But could he find it?

Right, can anyone put these sentences together?

Do you think it's important that Mr Peters couldn't find his key?

Why?

Right, so Mr Peters had to break the window-pane to get in. Why did he break it? Wasn't there something else he could do?

Why not?

Yes, I like that, Now, can you put that in one sentence?

*Student*

He took out all his papers and upturned his briefcase.

No, he couldn't.

Mr Peters took out all his papers and upturned his briefcase to try to find his key but he still couldn't find it.

Yes, it's important.

Because then he couldn't open the door and had to break the window-pane to get in.

No, there wasn't.

Because there was no-one else at home.

Mr Peters decided to break the window-pane to get in because there was no-one else at home.

When each of the pictures has been dealt with in this way, the students should be able to tell the story quite easily.

In the case of the "oral-as-an-end" variation, the aim is achieved at the end of step 4. Similarly, it may be said that the same step 4 is the end of a process which fulfills all that may be required of a method which is expected to "prepare for written work". The preparatory work ends with step 4. All

that remains to be done, according to the "oral-as-a-means-to-an-end" variation is that the students are asked to reproduce the story in written form. In the production of the "written composition", a number of variations may again be used.

Space is, however, too limited to allow an account of what some of these variations might be. Suffice it to say that they comprise two main types: those used in producing a narrative composition and those used when a particular picture-sequence allows for the use of dialogue as its main feature.

Variations used in the production of a narrative composition would include variations in the presentation of the picture or picture-sequence as well as the introduction of various aids such as vocabulary lists, oral call-words or written key-words in the appropriate step of the lesson. The oral preparation may then culminate in the student's being asked to prepare the narrative as seen from a particular point of view or as a newspaper report.

In the case of the composition where dialogue constitutes a main element the final text may be produced in the form of a playlet and work on this (as in the narrative composition) may be done either individually or in groups. Students may also be asked to include some basic stage-directions and some of the playlets could even be acted out.

These and many other variations would all help to make the composition lesson more attractive, interesting and, above all, enjoyable. The experienced teacher will undoubtedly be able to think of many other ways of varying the development of the steps proposed in this paper.

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## Notes and References

1. Ref: Richardson 1975.
  2. Ref: Byrne 1978, Bright and McGregor 1970, Haycraft 1978, Kennedy 1975, Winks 1978, Gatenby 1967, Gurrey 1956.
  3. For a full discussion of this point of view please refer: Dalli, M.C. *Picture Compositions: a Survey and Assessment* pp. 50-58.
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