



3 Activities for Using Pictures With Multilevel MLLs

by [Kitty Barnhouse Purgason](#)

Teachers have long used pictures in language classes to motivate students, provide cultural context, and stimulate speaking or writing (Wright, 1989). They are even more valuable nowadays because of the importance of visual literacy in the 21st century (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017). This article describes three picture-based activities—talk about, conversations, and describe-and-draw—with an emphasis on how to use them in a multilevel class.

1. Talk About

In Talk About, you are at the front of the class, calling on students to say something about a picture everyone is looking at. In three stages, you guide the students to talk about the picture. Lower level students first use single words, then intermediate students engage in guided descriptions, and, finally, advanced students give explanations and predictions using more sophisticated language and critical thinking.

In the Classroom

Using the picture in Figure 1, for example, when you call on lower level students to share what they see using one word, they might say:

- “dog,”
- “cow,”
- or “trash.”

The next stage is for intermediate students: Give them some guidance as you ask them to describe the picture (e.g., “What do you see? Use *in*, *on*, or *next to*.”) Students might say:



Figure 1. Example image for Talk About activity. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lamoney/97461242>

- “The dog is on the cow.”
- “The cow is in the street.”
- “There is trash next to the cow.”

This step offers a great opportunity to target recent grammar or vocabulary teaching points. For example, you could ask students to use present continuous, and they might respond with the following:

- “The dog is lying on the cow.”
- “The cow is sleeping.”

Finally, call on advanced students. At this level, students can use more complex grammar and vocabulary. They may also have the language to express critical thinking. This is a good time to ask deeper questions to elicit thoughtful responses:

- “Why is this happening?” ⇨ “The dog is unhappy about the garbage on the street. He doesn’t want to touch it so he’s lying on top of the cow.”
- “What will happen next?” ⇨ “The cow will ask the dog to get her something to eat.”
- “Is this a picture of something bad or something good?” ⇨ “I think having trash and animals on the street makes it unpleasant for people.” Or “I love this picture of two animals living in harmony.”

As the three stages have progressed, everyone has contributed to the class within their capacity: The students are all valued participants, there’s been an opportunity to review recent vocabulary or grammar, and the advanced learners have been pushed in their critical thinking and language output.

Classroom Management

- To encourage open responses, it’s helpful to smile at students for their efforts and for participating in the class.
- To manage *too much* responsiveness, a key point is not to allow students to blurt out answers, but to give students at lower levels the chance to participate first. This works if you use your knowledge of students to call on individuals by name.

2. Picture-Based Conversations

Students work in pairs for this activity to create an imagined dialogue between or among people in a photo. The pictures you need for this activity should feature two or three people talking together and interesting backgrounds or situations that can elicit spirited or enthusiastic discussions. Consider using the *NY Times* collections, “[40 Intriguing Photos to Make Students Think](#)” and “[40 More Intriguing Photos to Make Students Think](#),” where they have collected some of their most commented-on images into two slideshows.

In the Classroom

Choose an interesting image and show it at the front of the class or on the projector. Pair students up, preferably with classmates who have similar English proficiency, and ask them to create a dialogue between two (or more) of the people in the photo. In the example image in Figure 2, ask your students to imagine a conversation between the child and the adult.



Figure 2. Example image for Picture-Based Conversations activity.

Here are some of the conversations that pairs might come up with, from lower to higher levels.

A: I'm tired.

B: OK. Let's rest here.

A: [after a few minutes] I'm still tired.

B: One more minute.

A: Where's the bus?

B: I don't know. It's very late.

A: We've been waiting a long time.

B: Yes, it's been more than 20 minutes.

B: We should keep going.

A: I don't want to go to school.

B: You have to go.

A: Please, not today.

B: Why not?

A: I hate school...someone has been bullying me.

B: You should tell your teacher.

Classroom Management

- For a multilevel class, it helps to put students in pairs that are equally matched in terms of language ability. That way, a classmate with higher language proficiency isn't able to do all the work within the pair.
- As you walk around the room observing how students are doing, urge those who have greater proficiency to write more, asking questions like, "What else do these guys say to each other?" or "How does he respond to that?"
- If the students with beginning proficiency are not participating, scaffold by giving them an opening line, such as the man on the motorcycle saying, "Hey, what's happening?" or "Are you okay?"

Extending the Activity

If there's time, you might want to have students work on their conversations in several more rounds in order to improve both accuracy and fluency in writing and speaking. Here are some additional steps for students to create a polished final draft:

1. Write a draft of a conversation.
2. Get feedback from a classmate or the teacher.
3. Practice the conversation with your partner.
4. Perform the conversation for classmates sitting nearby.
5. Perform the conversation in front of the whole class.
6. Get more feedback from the class or the teacher.
7. Rewrite the conversation.
8. Record the conversation for "publication."

3. Describe and Draw

Sometimes, it's not logistically feasible to pair students with classmates at the same level, and sometimes we want an activity to mix everyone up and build community across proficiency lines. In this pair activity, one student describes an image while the other draws what they hear and asks questions for clarification if needed. This activity is good for pairs in which one student may have a higher speaking proficiency than their partner.

In the Classroom

Choose an image for students to describe. If you are going to project a single picture for the class, have pairs sit tango style (back-to-back) so that one person can look at the screen and the other can't see it. If you have enough pictures for every pair to have a different one, they can sit across from each other, but those holding pictures should not show them to their partners. See Figure 3 for a picture I've used for this activity.



Figure 3. Photo of Kirkjufell Mountain in Iceland for Describe and Draw activity.

If one student has better speaking skills, let that student describe the picture while the other student draws what is described. If you're distributing pictures, you can be very deliberate about this. One way is to ask students to pair up and then walk around handing out pictures to the more proficient student in each pair. If you're going to project a picture, you can do a roll call for higher proficiency students, inviting them to stand up and face the front. Then ask the other half of the class to find a partner from among those standing. Or, keeping it simple, with students in their regular places, you might just ask, "Who feels like talking more today? You face the screen."

Here's an example of a student conversation describing the picture in Figure 3:

A: In this picture there is a mountain, a waterfall, and river with some rocks. First draw the mountain. It's shaped like a triangle.

B: Shape what?

A: Triangle. *Samgaghyeong*. Triangle.

B: Okay. How big is the mountain?

A: It's kind of in the middle of the picture, but maybe a little more to the right, and it takes up almost the whole right half of the picture.

B: Okay.

A: Now draw a river in front. It curves around the mountain.

B: Curve?

A: Not straight. Curve. *Gogseon*. Curve.

You can see from the example that some home language might be required—if your students share a home language. However, I try to encourage the describing students to see themselves as teachers. The goal isn't simply to finish the activity, but to have everyone learn something.

If you are responsible for teaching content in addition to the English language, think about using this activity with pictures and diagrams related to that content. This way, students can use academic or job-related vocabulary.

Classroom Management

As you walk around the class, monitor to ensure that neither partner in the pair is sneaking looks. The point is to describe and draw just based on words.

Conclusion

You can easily find lots of interesting royalty-free images online. Search for “royalty free photos” or, if you have access to Google, start with a Google images search and then, under Tools, click on Usage Rights and then Creative Commons Licenses (see Figure 4). Creative Commons licenses enable free usage and sharing of a work.

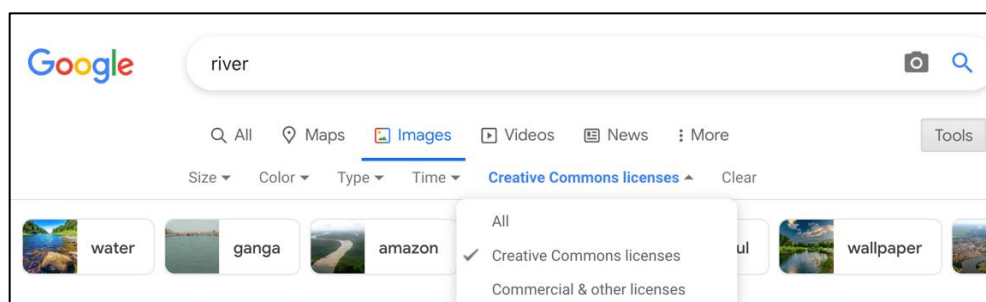


Figure 4. Screenshot of Google Images search for Creative Commons–licensed photos.

This search will yield photos from sites like Wikimedia, Flickr, Pixnio, and Pixabay. You might especially be interested in [a collection](#) on Flickr by language teachers.

Talk about, conversations, and describe-and-draw are activities that you might have tried before. I hope the sample pictures and the suggestions for doing them in multilevel classes have inspired you to try them again in a fresh way. The visual element will enliven speaking and writing classes, and the ways of organizing multilevel classes—beginners first, same-level pairs, and mixed-level pairs—will ensure everyone gets to participate.

References

Donaghy, K., & Xerri, D. (Eds.) 2017. [The image in English language teaching](#). ELT Council.

Wright, A. 1989. *Pictures for language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Note: This article is based on the presentation “[Picture-Based Activities for Multilevel Classes](#),” prepared for the virtual TESOL International Convention, March 2022.

Kitty Barnhouse Purgason is professor emerita of TESOL at Biola University. She has a PhD in applied linguistics from UCLA. She has lived, studied, served, or taught in India, Russia, Korea, China, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Mauritania, Indonesia, Kuwait, Oman, Vietnam, Spain, and

Tajikistan. She is a three-time Fulbright fellow and a U.S. State Department English Language Specialist.