

Using Photo News materials in the EFL classroom

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写真ニュース

台風から無事救出

スミスさん家族11人は台風カトリナによる洪水のため二日間ニューオーリンズの自宅の屋根上に取り残されたが、ヘリコプターにより無事救出された。

Hurricane Survivors

All eleven members of the Smith family were safely rescued by helicopter after spending two days trapped on the roof of their New Orleans home, surrounded by flood waters from Hurricane Katrina.

Photographs and illustrations have long been a staple of the EFL classroom (Adelson-Goldstein, 2006; Curtis & Bailey, 2001; Wright & Haleem, 1991; Wright, 1989). For example, Jianxin (1998) outlined several uses of news photos in conversation classes. In Japan, numerous libraries and other public venues maintain regularly updated *Photo News* (写真ニュース) displays featuring large-format, eye-catching scenes from the recent news accompanied by extended, explanatory captions in Japanese, or Japanese and English. As a result, an excellent but largely untapped source of materials for English conversation

Keywords

news, current events, photographs, communication, activities, 写真ニュース

Abstract

The pictures and captions from Photo News (写真ニュース) displays, seen in many libraries and schools in Japan, can be a stimulating resource for communication in the language classroom. This article provides a number of ideas for their use, along with comments and variations. Activities include proposing alternate scenarios to explain a photo, drawing a scene based on a partner's description while trying to figure out the story, finding photos based on captions written by classmates, proposing the wildest scenario still consistent with a scene, creating dialogs to match a scene, and speculating on why a photo was in the news.

写真ニュースの写真や説明文は、日本の多くの図書館や学校で見ることが可能であり、語学授業のコミュニケーションを活性化する補助教材にもなり得る。本論ではその使用法について多くのアイデアを、解説やバリエーションと共に提供する。写真を説明する別の説明文を作ったり、説明に基づいて話の筋を考えながら絵を描いたり、クラスメートの書いた説明文から写真を探したり、写真と矛盾しないとんでもない話を考えたり、写真に合う対話を作ったり、なぜその写真がニュースに出てくるのかを思索したりするアクティビティが提案されている。

practice may be no further than your school's library. The Photo News captions go far beyond those in typical news photos in summarizing a story and provide excellent support for associated language activities. Photos are available by subscription from various news agencies, with regularly changed displays of four to six pictures. In most cases, old Photo News displays are simply thrown out, but library staff may be happy to save them for use in English classes.

What follows are a number of ideas for utilizing the intriguing pictures and captions for stimulating and supporting communication among your students.

I. Alternative scenarios



In this activity, students create a story to go with a picture, then share this story *and* the true story with classmates, who try to guess which is the actual account.

Level: Upper elementary to advanced

Procedure:

- Select a group of intriguing photos for which explanations are not readily apparent and

fold the sheets to hide the explanatory captions. Actual examples include a man kissing a pig, the Statue of Liberty in the middle of a flooded street, a man lying on the courtroom floor in front of a judge, hundreds of buses jamming downtown streets, or an officer in protective clothing aiming a gun at a 15 meter tall preying mantis. These photos provide rich ground for speculation.

- Lay the photos out on desks and have student pairs each select a photo of interest and devise a scenario (or two) to account for what they see (who? what? where? when? why? how?).
- After a period of brainstorming, each pair unfolds their sheet to reveal the caption and learn the actual story. They then prepare to tell both stories.
- Finally, three or four pairs join to form larger groups. Each pair shows their picture (without caption) to their group and relates their scenarios, while other group members listen, ask questions, and try to guess which account is true.
- When the truth is revealed, pairs can receive points for guessing correctly or fooling their peers. Curious students also often have more questions about the true story.
- As an extra step, the most interesting photo and set of stories from each group can be presented to the whole class.

Simpler option: Divide the class into groups of three. Give each group 6-9 intriguing photos with captions hidden. The first photo is displayed, and after a few minutes' thinking time, each member offers a guess about the story depicted. The caption is then revealed, with the winner being the member with the closest scenario (as judged by the group). Repeat for each picture. As a wrap-up activity, each group can present their most interesting picture and set of 2-4 scenarios (including the actual story) to the whole class.

Commentary: This activity provides an interesting conversation stimulus, plentiful opportunities for language planning (Helgesen, 2003a), a motivating context for genuine communication through story

telling and Q&A, considerable feedback and opportunity to gauge one's success in communicating scenarios, and chances to learn about real people and events through English.

2. Describe, draw & tell

In this activity, a student draws a scene as described by their partner and tries to figure out the story behind it.



Level: Intermediate to advanced

Procedure:

- Before beginning, project one or two sample photos on a large screen and elicit or supply language helpful for describing such scenes (e.g., *on the left, in the foreground, in the background, beside, in the lower right corner, near the camera*).
- As students pair up, lay out the pictures at one end of the classroom.
- From each pair, student A then approaches the photos, chooses an intriguing one, reads the extended caption, and returns with the photo to sit facing their partner.
- Without showing the photo to Student B, Student A's first job is to describe key elements of the scene while B asks questions and attempts a rough drawing.
- After a set time, A attempts to elicit the true account from B, mostly by drawing attention to features of B's drawing (*Why do you think the man is wearing a gas mask and carrying a bird cage? Why does he need that on an open road in the countryside? Why are the others standing so far behind? What could be nearby, outside of the scene?*) This process can elicit a great deal

of language as B also asks numerous questions and A may need to explain the scene in greater detail to provide the needed clues.

- After a set time, A shows the picture (with or without caption) to B. Each pair should compare the drawing to the original and discuss any remaining gaps in B's understanding of the story.
- Finally, partners switch roles and repeat this procedure with a new photograph.

Simpler option: In the second step, Student A, rather than eliciting the story from B (the drawer), simply tells the story to B while using B's drawing as support. A then reveals the original picture and caption for comparison and confirmation of the story. This option involves less interaction and negotiation, but the task is easier to grasp and less daunting linguistically.

Commentary: This activity can be much more meaningful to students than simply describing and drawing a scene, such as mountains, a house, three birds, and two trees. The photo depicts an actual event, and in addition to the drawing task, figuring out what the scene means introduces a further intellectual challenge and reason for interaction.

3. Photo search

In this activity, one student relates a story, while teammate(s) roam the room, looking for the matching picture.



Level: Elementary to advanced

Procedure:

- Students each select two pictures of interest and write up English summaries for homework. Stress that students should not attempt word-by-word translations of the Japanese captions, nor should they make use of online translation services. A simple retelling in their own words will typically be more effective.
- In the next class, collect all the summaries and photos.
- Spread the photos (with captions hidden) on desks around the room, including extra photos (distracters) as needed.
- Place student-composed summaries (including writers' names) on a table at the front of the room.
- After dividing students up into pairs or trios, one student from each team picks up a summary and reads it to their partner(s).
- The partner(s) then proceed to search the room for the matching photo.
- When they believe they have found it, they confirm their guess with the writer (*Is this a photo you wrote about?*), return the photo and summary to their original locations, and start again with a new summary.
- Teams can compete to find the most matches in a given amount of time.

Quicker option: If you have a set of photos with extended English captions and students are advanced enough to comprehend them, clip or copy the captions (English portion only, if bilingual) and use these in place of student summaries. Students follow the procedure above to find the matching photos, and confirm their choices with you.

Another quick option gives students the choice of relating the story or simply describing the scene. Spread photos around the room. Students individually walk around, taking notes on 3-4 photos. They then form teams of three and take turns talking about their scenes while team members look for the matching pictures. While searching, team members may ask questions

(*Where did this happen? How many buses are in the scene? What's his hairstyle like*), but have only one chance to ask, *Is this the picture?* They must elicit enough information to be sure. After finding the correct picture, teams may check the hidden caption for the real story.

Commentary: This activity combines writing and listening practice with a challenging puzzle aspect and the interest of learning about real events. The need for clear, audience-friendly summaries and descriptions is also made repeatedly clear, through the praise or good-natured frustration of peers.

4. Wild Scenarios

Rather than trying to create believable stories, students compete to produce the *craziest* scenario.



Level: Upper elementary to advanced

Procedure:

- Project one intriguing photo (with extended caption hidden) on a large screen.
- Have student pairs dream up the wildest scenarios they can.
- Each pair then relates their story to the whole class, competing to provide the account farthest from the truth, yet still consistent with the scene.
- After students share their stories, you can tell the real story and have the class vote for the winner.

Commentary: This activity allows all members of a small class to get involved with one particularly interesting scene, pushes students to be as creative as possible, and gives a motivating reason to listen. The activity can be repeated in several rounds. With a large class, students can share their scenarios in small groups rather than the whole class.

5. Photo Dialogs

Here, students create dialogs to accompany photographs and perform them for a group.



Level: Upper elementary to advanced

Procedure:

- Many pictures portray people interacting, and it can be interesting to speculate on what they are saying or thinking. If the class is small enough for students to sit near the front, fix a group of 10–20 interesting photos (captions hidden) on the board.
- Have each student pair develop and rehearse a dialog to accompany one of the pictures. The dialog can include what the characters are saying or their *innervoice* (Helgesen, 2003b).
- Pairs then perform their conversations for a larger group or the whole class while everyone listens and tries to identify the matching picture.

- As a follow-up activity, students can read the captions and tell the other students the actual stories, or adjust their dialogs for the real story, then perform the new dialogs and answer further questions about the situation depicted.

Commentary: This activity supports students in creative conversation practice and performance while giving their audience a reason to listen and even ask for further information.

6. Why Was It News?

While some news photos immediately pique our curiosity, others seem mundane or obvious (e.g., Ichiro running to first base, heavy equipment being loaded onto a ship, a family having a picnic,



a tree). Questions like, “What’s happening here?” or “Why are they doing that?” produce... no response. However, approaching them from a different angle--“Why do you suppose this was news?” “What was special about these people or their picnic?”--can motivate speculation, stimulate interaction, and provide a use for many photos that would otherwise be thrown away.

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Procedure: Follow procedure for 1. *Alternative Scenarios*, above.

Commentary: Clear, engaging examples or demonstrations are particularly important here, as it may take time for some students to grasp the concept of creating interesting explanations for apparently mundane scenes.

Points to consider

Variations: The activities above are only examples, and these ideas can be easily modified and mixed to create new activities that suit your own linguistic targets, communicative goals and student needs. See *Newspapers*, by Grundy (1993), for other ideas on using news-related photos.

Demonstrations: The creative speculation and sense of play involved in these activities may be unfamiliar or difficult for some students. Clear, imaginative demonstrations eliciting student participation are vital to setting up successful activities. Students need a good look at examples of language they can use, the procedures they need to follow and the potential for creativity and stimulating interaction. Using two, or even three, pictures as examples helps students see how they can adjust for different situations. Eliciting ideas during demonstration helps engage students and reveals misunderstandings. Students need a clear understanding of where the activity is going and reassurance that even crazy ideas are approved. They can thus feel safe,

with the knowledge that they can be creative and playful with the activity without making fools of themselves or risking the instructor's displeasure.

Bilingual captions: Some publishers produce Photo News materials with both Japanese and English captions. Consider ways to employ these. When read after, or mid-way through, the story-creation stage, English captions can supply words and phrases students were searching for in developing their own scenarios--a helpful context for learning (Shoemaker & Shoemaker, 1991). When reading the captions to get the story, I may have lower level students read the Japanese first, to support subsequent understanding of the English. With more advanced students, the order can be reversed, with the Japanese simply confirming understanding.

Old or unfamiliar photos: Since speculation and imagination are important components of most of the activities described here, photos will ideally depict events unfamiliar to students, or depict known events in ambiguous or unfamiliar ways. Older photos can thus become more valuable as the events recede into the past, and at the same time provide chances to learn some interesting history. Adult students, in particular, enjoy older photos because they can trigger a variety of memories and stories associated with the events. A mix of older and newer materials often seems to best meet the varied needs and interests of students.

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?
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Digging deeper: Further information on pictured events is often easily available online. Have students brainstorm on questions they would like to ask about events that piqued their interest, find the answers for homework, and report back to the class.

Other sources of photos: Many of the activities described here could be done with photos from other sources. Photos clipped from magazines and newspapers are readily available, license-free photos can be downloaded from the Internet, and photos from any Internet news source can be shown on classroom displays. The Photo News materials described here, however, offer the advantages of regular new issues, large size, portability and extended (often bilingual) captions offering brief, but sufficient, accounts for basic understanding of the actual events. This is especially important because speculation can become empty and tedious without the payoff of eventually learning the *real story*. If teachers can find or produce sufficient captions or summaries, any suitable photos can be used.

Conclusion

Photo News pictures are a valuable resource for stimulating classroom communication and can form the basis for numerous activities. Besides helping students use English, they provide opportunities to learn and communicate about real-world events through a foreign language. The extended captions, in particular, can add a new dimension to many picture-based activities, allowing greater depth of understanding and supporting more substantive interaction. Rather than going to waste, out-of-date Photo News materials at many schools can find new life in language classrooms.

Overheard at JALT2009 in Shizuoka . . .

"Excuse me, but are there any stairs in the building?"

"The only stairs I've seen are back at the station!"

Photo News Sources

- *Nikkei Photo News* (日経写真ニュース) <www.nni.nikkei.co.jp/> (bilingual)
- *Mainichi Shinbun* (毎日新聞) <mdn.mainichi.jp/>
- *Asahi Photo News* (朝日写真ニュース) <www.asahi-photonews.com/>
- *Sankei Photo News* (産経写真ニュース) <sankei.jp.msn.com/top.htm>

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