

Picture Composition

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Too often, there is a misunderstanding in many teachers' minds of the concept of picture composition. Mention the words and teachers' faces light up with "understanding" and their mind are filled with vague ideas on how such compositions can be carried out. This approach is regarded by many as being suitable only for primary children or hopelessly "weak" classes. Suggest it to a upper secondary school teacher and you will get the "do-you-know-what-are-talking-about" stare. Suggest it to primary teachers and you will get the well known wail "I've tried it but the children still make *so many* mistakes". The main point is that picture composition is sadly misunderstood.

Let us look at some reasons why picture composition often fails in its aims. Picture composition will *not* miraculously cure grammatical mistakes. It will only help to solve one problem in essay writing – that is, the problem of subject matter. We must realise that this is the main aim of picture composition. It helps pupils by giving them a basic plot to launch them off, so that they need not cope with *both* the difficulties of language structure and subject matter. It also helps them to visualise the subject matter and hopefully this may assist them in self-expression. Children who have undergone previous learning of structural English where often pictures were used will find themselves on familiar ground, and the picture, as it were, will spark off a train of thoughts.

This is about all that the pictures will do to help the pupils. The rest depends on the teacher. A weak class will still require a lot of oral preparation in the form of structural drilling and use of new vocabulary. The teacher, through skilled questioning, and/or guidance makes the pupils volunteer to make up correct sentences about the pictures, using old structures that they have learnt. It is in fact a consolidation and integration of past drills and exercises. Weaker classes will need more repetition until pupils have more or less memorized the correct structures, and then – and only then – are they asked to write out the composition.

Picture composition should be introduced gradually. Children may be taught at the beginning to say a few sentences about a picture. In earlier days, from situation drills using pictures, children will be conditioned to the correct response.

Difficulties in written work for picture composition can be avoided if the teacher observes some rules:

- (1) *Sufficient Oral Drill* If an item has not been sufficiently practised orally, pupils will tend to fall back on translation to express themselves and thus carry over the patterns of their mother tongue. e.g. verb tenses will be forgotten.
- (2) *Sufficient Structural Guidance* Pupils must be given help with the arrangement and linking of sentences.
- (3) *Correct Pronunciation Endings* of 's' or 'ed' often are frequent errors that can be avoided if these endings are emphasised.
- (4) *Content Guidance* This is partially solved by the picture itself. The teacher, however, can help by asking some leading questions about the picture.

Let's look at a simple introduction to picture composition that can be used in Standard One (3rd Term) or Standard 2.

STAGE ONE



HASSAN

This is Hassan. He is a boy. He is a thin boy.
He is sitting on a chair. He is crying.

1. The above sentences can be given by a pupil or several pupils or even the teacher, if it is a class that needs more prompting. In this case, the teacher needs to drill the class several times. Then using another picture, for example this one,



AMINAH

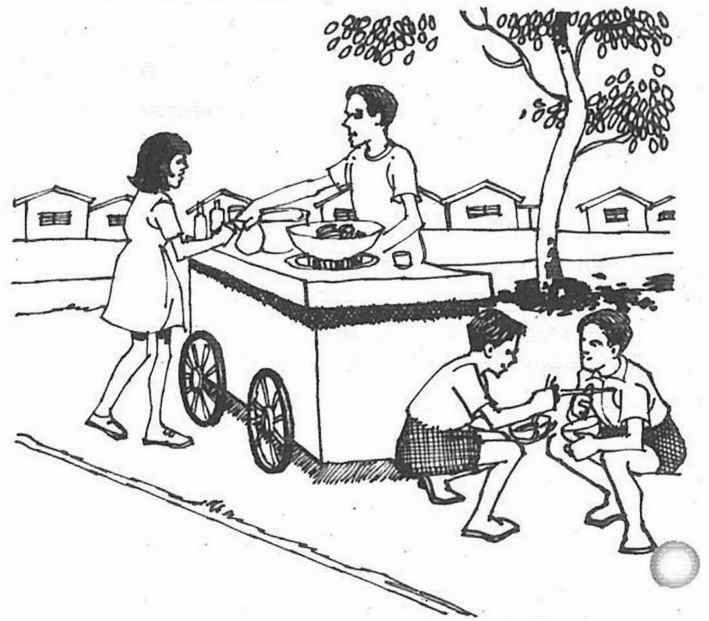
the class, following the same sentence structure can construct new sentences on their own.

“This is Aminah. She is a girl. She is a fat girl. She is sitting on a chair. She is laughing.”

2. Several pictures can be pinned up and pupils are invited to volunteer similar sentences. Questions may be used to help suggest ideas.
3. After sufficient oral drill and structural guidance, the teacher can now ask the pupils to write about one or more of the pictures that are pinned up. Words that may be difficult to spell, or tense mistakes to be avoided, can be put on the board as well.
4. These few connected sentences are consolidation of all the structures mastered and the beginning of composition writing.

STAGE TWO

A more complex picture can be introduced, where children can widen both subject matter and sentence structure. e.g.



A Hawker

Teacher: Who can say something about this picture?

Expected Response: There is a man, a girl and two boys.
(From one or more pupils).

The man is selling _____.

The boys are squatting by the roadside.

Etc. etc.

Teacher writes some of these sentences on the board. When pupils can no longer think of other sentences, the teacher can provide questions to stimulate more ideas.

Suggested Questions:

Is it a sunny day or a rainy day?

What is the man selling?

What is he wearing?

What is his name?

What is the girl in the blue dress doing?

What are the two boys doing?

What do they use to eat with – a fork? – chopsticks?

More Difficult Questions:

Where are the children eating?

Why do they like to buy food from the hawker?

Who gave them money to buy food?

Is the hawker happy or sad?

Why is he happy?

- a) If a class is slow, the sentences can be placed on the board and after sufficient repetition, the content words can be rubbed off. Then the class can write out the composition.
- b) In a better class, all the sentences can be rubbed off after the oral preparation. Some questions or key

words may be written on the board to help pupils.

) In a good class, both questions and sentences can be removed and only the picture remains on the board.

STAGE THREE

Slightly more difficult work can be introduced when children have become more familiar with picture composition. A simple plot can now be introduced.

Using two pictures like these, the teacher displays them and helps by asking simple questions like these:



Picture One:

What is Minah doing?

What does she use to make the cake?

Who is looking at her?

Picture Two:

Is he happy with the cake?

Why?

More Difficult Questions

1. What do you think has gone wrong with Minah's cake?
2. What do you think Minah did with the unwanted cake?
3. Is Minah a good cook?
4. Is her brother happy or sad? Why?

After enough oral preparation, the pupils can be asked to write out the story.

Three methods again are suggested:

- (a) The teacher can jumble up the sentences and let pupils rearrange them in order of sequence.
- (b) The teacher can write out questions that would help.
- (c) The teacher can allow the class to write the story with no aid except the pictures on the board.

Alternative Lesson



Falling Down

“One day, Kassim fell down. He cut his knee. His mother washed the cut carefully, because dirt is bad for cuts. Then she put a bandage on his knee to keep it clean. Soon the cut was healed.”

- (1) The teacher repeats the story slowly many times until the class is familiar with it.

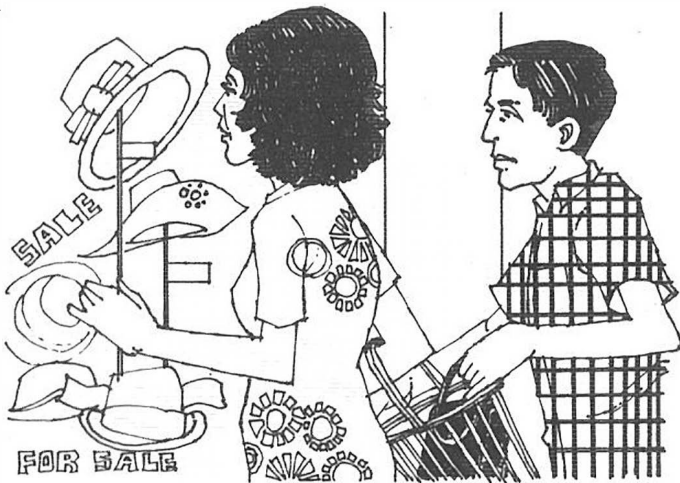
- (2) The teacher tests the children's memory with questions like these:

One day, who fell down?
 What happened to him?
 What did his mother do?
 Why did she do that?
 Why did she put a bandage on his knee?
 What happened to the cut?

- (3) The story is repeated once more. In a bright class, the passage need not be written on the board. In a weaker class, the teacher may have to write it out on the board.
- (4) Pin up another picture of Aminah who has fallen down and cut her elbow.
- (5) Ask pupils to write about Aminah. They can use the same sentences, changing some words where necessary.
- (6) A weaker class may need an oral revision with the new picture first. The teacher can use the same questions suggested in No. 2.

STAGE FOUR

A



B



C



D



A more complicated composition can be written from the above pictures. This is adapted from composition 14 in *Progressive Picture Composition* by Longman.

1. Questions:

Picture A: Where was Puan Sim standing?
 What was she looking at?
 What did the thief see in her basket?
 What did he do?

Picture B: What did the thief do then?
 What did Puan Sim do?
 What did she call out?
 Who heard her?
 Where was the old man sitting?
 What did he see?
 What did he decide to do?

Picture C: How did the old man stop the thief?
What happened to the thief?
Did he drop the handbag?

Picture D: Did the thief get up and run away?
Why not? What did Mrs. Sim do?

2. Go over the story again and again, until it is very familiar. Then the teacher calls out key words and pupils make up the sentence. For example:

Teacher: Puan Sim – stand – front of shop.

Pupil : One morning, Puan Sim was standing in front of a shop.

Teacher: Look – dresses – window,

Pupil : She was looking at the dresses in the window etc.

3. A good class can proceed to write out the composition after this. A slower class can have their sentences written out on the blackboard and names, places and items can be substituted. Alternatively, key words can be rubbed out.

4. Here are three model versions of the same composition beginning with a simplified version and going on to a harder one.

- (a) Puan Sim (was standing) in front of a shop, looking at (the dresses in the window). A thief (took her handbag) from her basket and (ran away) with it.

“Stop that man!” Puan Sim cried. “He (has stolen my handbag.)” The thief ran past and the old man put his stick between his legs. The thief (fell down) and the policeman caught (the thief).

The words in brackets are to be filled in by the pupils.

- (b) One morning, Puan Sim was standing in front of a shop, looking at the dresses in the window. A thief saw her handbag in her basket. He took the handbag and ran off with it. Puan Sim turned and saw the thief (running down the street). ‘Stop that man,’ she cried. ‘He has stolen my handbag.’

An old man was sitting on a seat at the corner of the street. He heard Puan Sim (and saw the thief running towards him). ‘I’ll stop him,’ he said. ‘I’ll put my stick between his legs and he’ll fall down.’

The thief ran past and the old man put his stick between his legs. The thief fell down and dropped the hand-

bag. Then a policeman came and caught the thief. Puan Sim thanked the old man.

(Verb Forms used: Simple Past; Past Continuous; Present Perfect; imperative; participle; will.

Linking Words: and; then.)

The words in brackets are alternative words, phrases or sentences.

- (c) One morning, Puan Sim went shopping. She saw some nice hats in a shop window and stopped to look at them. While she was looking at the hats, a thief (came up behind her and) took her handbag from her shopping basket. (Just at the moment) Puan Sim turned round and saw the thief running off with her handbag. ‘Stop thief!’ she cried. ‘That man has stolen my handbag.’

An old man was sitting on a bench at the street corner. He heard Puan Sim (call out) and saw the thief running towards him. ‘I know how to stop him,’ he thought. ‘I’ll put my walking-stick between the thief’s legs and trip him up.’

So, as the thief ran past, the old man put his stick between his legs. The thief fell down and dropped the handbag. Before he could get up and run off, a policeman came up and arrested him. Puan Sim thanked the old man for stopping the thief.

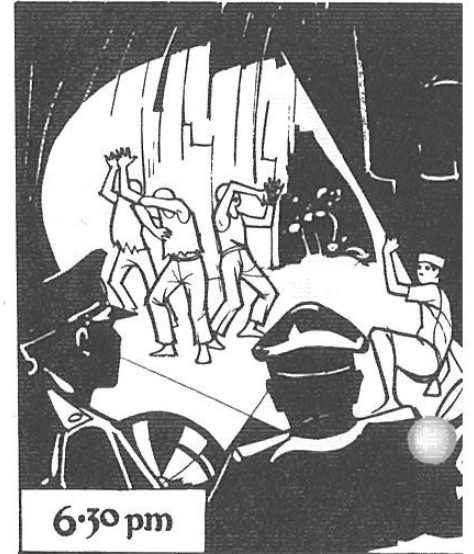
(Verb Forms used: Simple Past; Past Continuous; Present Perfect; Simple Present; (Past Perfect); Imperative; infinitive; participle; will.

Linking Words: and; so; while; as; before; (because).)

So far, our picture composition has been controlled to reduce the number of mistakes and thereby give pupils greater confidence. Now we will give two examples of picture composition which provide practice in relatively free composition.

The first example (taken from the 1969 Special English Language Paper) uses questions as a guide. After oral discussion with the teacher, the pupils now have to write out their composition. They have the subject matter already and structural guidance is reduced to only answers to the questions. They now have to write out the story in about 80 – 100 words on their own. This is the stage we expect our pupils at secondary school level (where English is taught as a second language) to be able to do.

STAGE FIVE



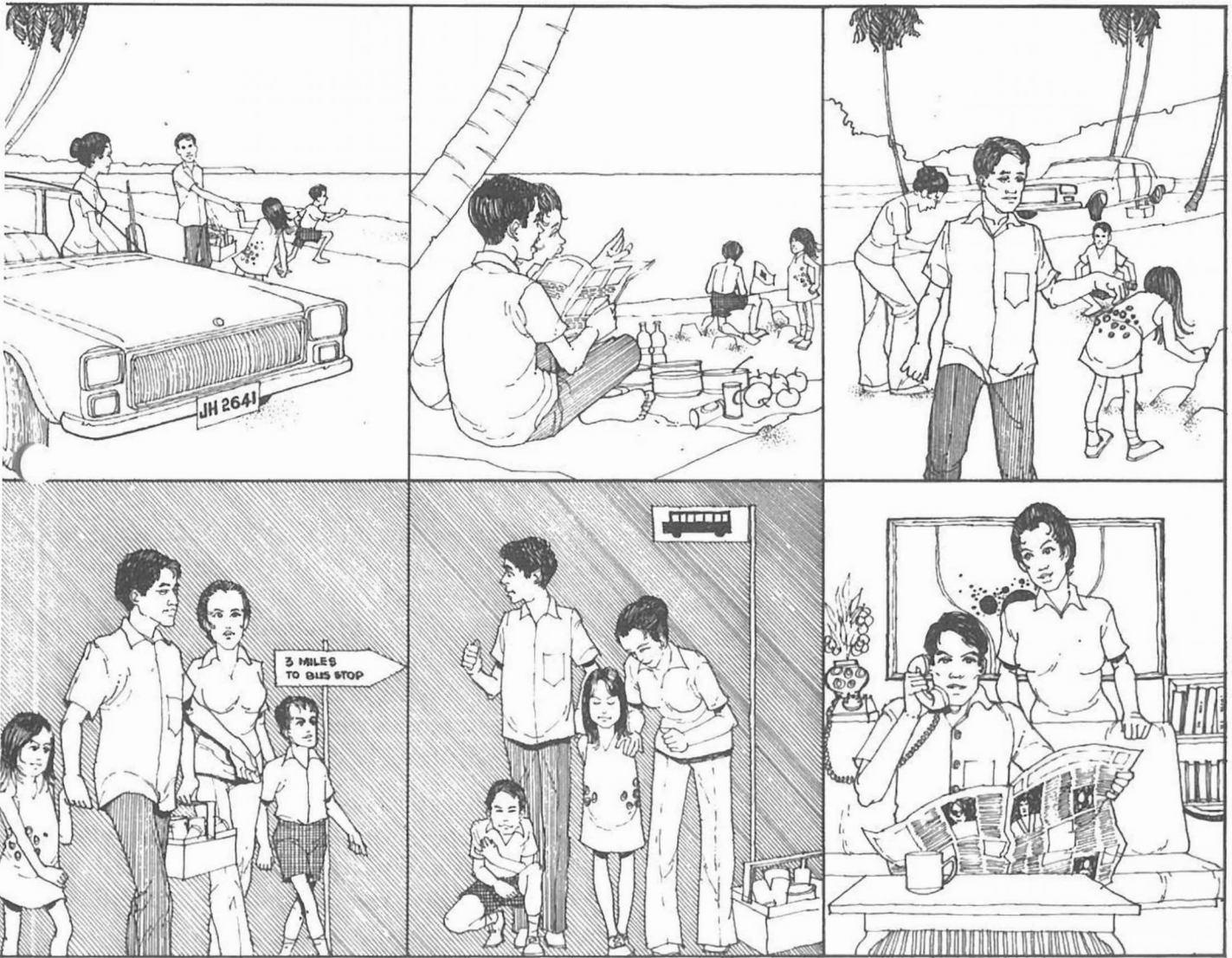
The teacher discusses the pictures with the class. Questions are asked until the class is familiar with both the story and several helpful sentence structures.

Questions

- Picture 1 What was the main news in the newspaper?
 Picture 2 Why were the scouts carrying haversacks and water-bottles?
 Picture 3 (a) Where did the boys come out of the jungle?
 (b) What did they see in front of them?

- Picture 4 (a) What did the scouts find in the cave?
 (b) What was the time when they found it?
 Picture 5 (a) Who went to the cave with the scouts?
 (b) Why did they put powerful battery lamps in the caves?
 Picture 6 (a) When did the thieves come back for the treasure?
 (b) What happened when the thieves were inside the cave?

Now pupils must write the story, using between 80 – 100 words.



The introduction of the story is given. The pupils are asked to complete the story as portrayed in the pictures. No other guide is given except some key points and the pictures. (Adapted from *Guided Composition Exercises*, D.H. Spencer,) Longman.

Mr. & Mrs. Verni, with their two young children, went for a picnic on a lonely beach. They locked their car and left it on the nearest road. The children had a lovely time, swimming and building sandcastles. At sunset, when they wanted to go home, Mr. Verni couldn't find the key of his car. He soon realized that it must have dropped out of his trousers pocket, and was now buried in the sand on the beach. The whole family searched for it, but in vain.

Complete the story:

walked three miles in dark to nearest bus-stop; children very tired; waited half an hour for bus; got home at

midnight; next morning Mr. Verni telephoned garage to go and collect car.

We hope these few examples will help to encourage the use of pictures in composition writing. As we have seen, it can be used in Standard One right up to Secondary School level. Variety can be introduced and guidance can be very controlled or relaxed accordingly, depending on the ability of our pupils. Let me sum up some of the various methods we can use:

- (a) Rewriting a passage, making specific changes.
- (b) Completing a paragraph by filling in blanks.
- (c) Writing a parallel paragraph.
- (d) Answering a series of questions to produce a paragraph.
- (e) Using a series of sentence substitution tables (not illustrated here, but examples of this can be

- found in *Guided Composition Exercises*
- (f) Finally, giving only the key points – the final stage of writing free composition.

Some reference books which will be helpful are:

- (1) Teachers' Handbook for the post 1970 Primary English Syllabus, Books 1, 2 and 3.

- (2) *Progressive Picture Composition*, Donn Byrne, Longmans
- (3) *General Service English Wall Pictures Published by Longman*
- (4) *Modern English for Malaysians Workbook*, John Parry, University of London Press Ltd.

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