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Using Still Images for English Communication: What Testing Teaches Teachers

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Using Still Images for English Communication: What Testing Teaches Teachers

David John WOOD

1. Introduction

Japan's English education system is at a critical stage as the Education Ministry's decade old directive to produce top class communicators is still unrealized due to a lack of TESOL qualified staffing, communicative teaching and practical research support. Tokyo's second Olympic Games, the nation's biggest international event in 5 decades, seems ill prepared for the linguistic and intercultural challenges it faces, with no sign of the necessary initiative to rectify the situation in sight. Policies to cope suggested so far like recorded announcements and technological translation devices defeat the purpose. Despite all the time, effort and resources invested so far, Japan will remain "last at speaking English in the world" according to one leading researcher (Nakatani 2014) who claims that Japanese teachers are "too busy" to teach and learning shouldn't be fun! International charts show Japan lags far behind its neighbors in terms of the ability to communicate in English, as confirmed by the 2013 *Business English Index*, on which Japan ranked bottom of all Asian countries, including those with economies that are just a fraction of Japan's. Even worse, since 2007, the overall trend here has been downward, while most other Asian nations' have risen (*EF English Proficiency Index*, 2014).

As educators, we need to take a long hard look at what we are, but should be, doing both individually and institutionally in this situation. However, educational research funding favors abstract, archaic and academic language research at best instead of efforts that might actually help students communicate practically. In Japan, learning remains passive, text-centered with only one right answer, namely, the teachers', and no objective pedagogical evaluation. All learning here is equated with passing multi-choice tests deprived of any spark of the spontaneity essential to acquiring a foreign language. While there are more tests in total and per capita in the Japanese education than anywhere, at least for English, they have had only a negative effect on communication. The STEP (the Society for Testing English Proficiency or *Eiken*) whose test is the only one MEXT backs officially, stresses rigid adherence to grammar above communication.

STEP spoken interviews, for example, resemble recitations by automatons whose every thought, action and utterance is scripted and puppeteered. Speaking from 30 years of experience as a STEP interviewer, their oral tests are specious. The illustrations used only aim at eliciting rigidly prescribed answers and no real communicative interaction. Thus, in answer to “Where’s the boy?” in a picture of a boy at school, points are deducted for “In school” “The boy’s in school” or even “He is in school” - only “He’s in school” is judged completely correct! Like Japan’s “paper drivers” who can pass written driving exams, but don’t know how to drive well in the real world, ministerial and institutional “reform” only continues to produce “paper English speakers” who are unable to communicate clearly even if they pass the top grade of the STEP test.

MEXT reported in early 2015 that high school English proficiency scores were well below its goals on the STEP test of between grades pre-2 and 2 (approximately 500 on the Test of English for International Communication) according to a *Japan Times* editorial “Disappointing levels of English” March 28, 2015. As the editors suggest “the English education system in Japan is still in desperate need of reform” suggesting that all the decades of Ministry spending has been completely misdirected. In the most necessary areas of active skills, only 20% of all students taking *Eiken* even attempt the speaking and writing sections, and over 30% overall of these (out of those who are likely the most confident or most able) scored zero on the latter. Most of the takers of the regular and simpler STEP could not get above Grade 3 (300 on TOEIC - see **Appendix 1** for score descriptors) well below functional communication levels, indicating that “schools continue to teach English to pass university entrance exams, instead of working toward students’ learning functioning and creative English” and that “students are not getting much practice in speaking and writing” which must be “acquired in the context of realistic and useful content.” The same editorial continues:

For students to really function in a language, they need active and regular practice in producing meaningful, content-filled communication. Communication that contains meaningful content connects language study with students’ innate curiosity and motivates them to keep learning. The disappointing results show those conditions have yet to take hold in most public English classrooms (Japan Times, March 28, 2015)

This is compounded by a related survey indicating 60% of all students dislike English: “receiving a zero in writing or speaking is evidence of tremendous resistance (and) much more basic reform is needed in Japan’s English language classrooms.

Internationally, too, Japan seems to be groping in the dark when it comes to teaching English (see “Fluency Requires Direct Interaction” Wood, *Japan Times* April 4, 2015). At RELC’s 2015 50th major international conference on teaching English in Singapore (co-sponsored by Japan’s Education Ministry) none of the presentations by Japanese teachers focused on acquiring English

communicative proficiency. One billed as “Measuring Fluency” seemed promising as the measurement of second language acquisition in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity is a key part of this writer’s text-free methodology research studies. However, the college students referred to were merely told to read a book aloud to measure how quickly they could read, a mechanical activity with no guarantee of comprehension and even less chance of communicative interaction. Even more shocking were the evasive responses to my question at the end of the session as to whether the kind of fluency being discussed was even fluency at all. Such inability if not unwillingness to respond clearly seems symbolic of the Japanese preference to avoid spontaneous English interaction, and the preponderance to defer to texts to attempt communication is no answer. Live, face-to-face, unscripted dialogue is the sole solution. Contrary to text sellers and education policies, communicating directly first and foremost requires *communicating directly!* Until this basic prerequisite of language learning is accepted and acted on, the only Japanese students who will learn are those going abroad. However, this is the greater of 2 evils, as many do not return. Better domestic English education could even help obviate Japan’s terminal aging crisis.

2. Using Still Images

Against this backdrop, the writer has formulated an innovative method, rigorously piloted in Japan over 3 years with relevance to global communicative language teaching. The method and its assessment have already been extensively detailed and discussed (**Appendix 2** and **Selected Bibliography**). Decades of teaching, in hundreds of classes to thousands of students of all ages, nationalities and abilities, and the many different kinds of approaches attempted convince me that text-free teaching has the most to offer. This does not mean teacher dominated classes or zero preparation - to succeed, personalization must be student-oriented, with the teacher holding back to allow students maximum interface time, and dozens of methods meticulously planned and ready to use, but all of which can be shelved once a class has been stimulated enough to take over its own momentum. Whether in speech or writing, non-native English speaking students wish above all else to discover their developing foreign language identities to communicate to each other. Thus texts of any form are anathema to real communication. Texts may have a reference value, but they will only obstruct classroom development until students can express their own content in their own words first, no matter how simplistically or inaccurately, and no matter how deeply texts seem rooted in teaching, it is only a vested interest between publishers’ and publishing or over-dependent teachers’ resistance to change unsuccessful traditional methods that denies our students’ potential. We must therefore challenge texts’ self-conferred divine right

to dominate classes, and consider alternatives, such as using their own photos. They are part of the human “text” that we all carry inside of us, which is more motivating and memorable than any inflexible publication can ever be. Committing oneself to text-free alternatives is both self-motivating and inspirational for students who see that learning does not have to be just for the convenience (or profit!) of those in authority, but instead that it can be alive and alert to their demands. Communicative interface is everyone’s best teacher.

More than anywhere in the world English teaching in Japan is text-bound and publishing profit motivated making a conceptual mismatch between objective and pedagogical modes. To harmonize our methods and aims, first we need to reflect on what a text is but what it can be. When I announce that I don’t use texts in my first class, I tell students instead they are the text and must learn from each other, their ultimate communication goal. As a result, student numbers have grown in my optional classes while other teachers’ class sizes have shrunk. I don’t make students buy texts because:

- The fundamental skills of EFL communication are best acquired through direct interaction, something that texts can seriously hamper, if not defeat altogether. Learners default to L1 translations and sounds when using inflexible texts, destroying any motivation to communicate before they can utter a single English sound.
- Reading and writing skills can also benefit from being personalized through group interaction, which can be better served through non-conventional non-textual materials.
- Confining students to a single source, writer and style limits learners’ multiple learning goals and styles that have to be developed individually for different needs.
- The Internet has effectively put paid to textbooks as we have known them thus far, offering instead a potentially limitless source of multi-media materials to choose from.
- Ethically, teachers should embrace full responsibility for classes, and not delegate them unthinkingly to a text writer unfamiliar with the uniqueness of each situation.

The modal identity crisis afflicting texts is mirrored in the polarized teaching styles of English native-speaking teachers (ENS) versus non-native speaking teachers and the writers they choose. ENS text writers may know little of all the countries where their texts are used, and are less likely to have an intimate knowledge of the specific situations of all teachers and students, making it impossible to synthesize disparate cultures into a single volume. Only individual teachers can do this for their students. Most texts are inappropriate for the situations that their retailers target. Domestic text writers on the other hand may be familiar with the contexts of local education, but their teaching styles are just as inappropriate. Japan’s native foreign language methodology, grammar-translation, defies communication so ultimately neither ENS nor domestic texts can be compatible with the communication shifts of spontaneous interaction.

Some conventional texts contain ideas that can stimulate teacher development and resources, but they can never be the language Bible they must claim to be to sell. Confining a class to a text undermines a teacher's responsibility as the real class director. All teachers, native speakers of the target language or otherwise, should undergo an internationally valid TESOL course to understand what a good text comprises, and thus be able to evaluate available materials. Japan's official approach has always been to cut human teaching costs while increasing administrative budgetary control. Starting with the Assistant English Teacher program, which allowed non-specialist graduates to teach instead of investing in either qualified teachers or expert TESOL trainers, the recent implementation of limited elementary school English was largely cancelled out by retraining reluctant Japanese teachers with no English background to carry out the policy for the most part. Instead of improving communication prospects, their students' English communication skills have only seen a downwards trend for the decade since the education ministry announced it would improve English education, while most other countries in Asia and beyond have gone forward. This is caused by an inability to think outside of the box of bureaucratic convention: "More creative and constructive thinking is the best way out of its self-contained box. Japan must commit to unlocking its English education system" ("Ministry's Self-contained Box" Wood, *Japan Times*, Opinion, May 14, 2014.) As proper TESOL training includes courses on devising materials, it is natural to expect teachers to apply their critical thinking skills to the texts at hand. Career teachers have several decades to acquire the necessary acumen to both choose from what already exists, as well as to customize and develop the specific materials most applicable to their own particular classes. While this needs considerable investment of time and effort, both teachers and, more importantly, their charges can benefit immensely in the long term from this view of their roles and responsibilities.

To accept the responsibility for designing our own materials and dispensing with our reliance on conventional texts, we must first identify the most important principles to follow. Responsibility is the core principle guiding all others, so if there is a problem in our class, we cannot blame the textbook or the students, but only ourselves. This means that we must be answerable for the materials that we use to teach too. This means that delegating answerability to a textbook makes personal accountability invalid. While many teachers may not have the luxury of choosing their own textbooks, let alone the option to use one or not in the first place, it is still our job to strive for such a right and duty, so if teachers are denied this right, real education is impossible anyway. In the most extreme cases, teachers can still customize or supplement prescribed texts with their own ideas, but this is only a temporary measure, not the ultimate solution.

Still images are as much a part of TEFL in Japan as anywhere else, with Japan's main MEXT

-sponsored domestic English proficiency test, or *Eigo Kentei Shiken* in Japanese, the STEP test, featuring picture pairs as the central part of its oral test. However, still images by themselves do not guarantee a good result. Still images in TEFL are as old as TEFL itself, yet their potential has often been similarly capped by the propensity of the attendant approach to be prescribed and limited to punitively prescriptive one-way communication. The images nearly always used and the pedagogy surrounding them are too often stilted, impersonal and demotivating, and they tend to achieve a limited, undirected and unmemorable communicative effect at best. Most of the ideas used in TEFL reduce the use of still images to one-off, gimmicky or stand-by classes, with zero or insufficient consideration of their potential for being fleshed out into a maturing and fully growing course. Furthermore, jumping into the deep end, so to speak, and using moving pictures like movies may overwhelm teacher and student alike without the requisite expertise and application, unless the aim is to actually avoid teaching altogether. Until a teacher has been able to fully apply him or herself to the true potential of still imagery, it is better to limit one's efforts to the latter, and in order to bring students back into the classroom motivationally, what is called for is a more open-ended and personalized approach that can be extended and sustained unlimitedly.

Starting with the simplest format in the early sessions of the course, a variety of styles can be gradually phased in, while constantly reviewing the initial styles to ensure students' grasp of all the target communication is being constantly reviewed, reinforced and developed. The priority items should be introduced early on so that they become almost automatic facets of students' communicative repertoire, and these should also be the main content of the exit interview that can replace a formal test. More than random one-off questions, students' sense of what constitutes a natural and sufficiently conclusive exchange needs to be elaborated and made a fluent part of their linguistic framework. There may be limitless verbal formulae for achieving the same goal, but the overall emphasis must be on the frequency of the approaches used to increase the potential level of their international comprehensibility in as many contexts as possible.

The appeal of using photos for students is that they enjoy expressing themselves freely and without the constraints of conventional textbook approaches. They are the expert in content terms which motivates them to communicate with authority and satisfaction. Their ability to speak and write in detail increases when using photos as they feel confident about what they want to say and their recall is maximized. The observations that students make in their feedback reveal a number of frequently recurring items. As a result of their experience, their ability to comment reflectively matured and surpassed that of students in previous years. On a writing continuum of grammaticality through creativity they were able to achieve improvement in both directions, thus developing greater accuracy and complexity from the same approach. By combining diary writing with photo essays (see **Recent Example 2**) they felt they progressed

more than with a text changing their view of how writing acquisition evolves. They indicated more satisfaction with all aspects of their use of their own photographs and their overriding impression was one of real communication with each other, adding that they wanted to share their photos even more in future, something few students say about texts. Initially their questions were limited, but range and complexity increased rapidly. With 20 written questions to choose from, students enjoyed answering those that they most wanted to write about. This led to more student interaction, for example by using a central computer monitor to display individual photos, then e-mailing each other their questions and comments. All students expressed a strong preference for photos over texts in their comments because they equated photos as “real things” leading to “real” and “more effective communication”. For students, photos epitomized treasured experiences helping them to convey in detail “the atmosphere at the time”

Recent Example 1 - Conversation

Increase in fluency, accuracy and confidence is indicated by 2 samples below, taken from early on and then in the latter half of in the 15 week course from a class of nearly 30 low intermediate to intermediate level students. Both subjects scored below 300 on TOEIC, approximately STEP 3 in their most recent test, but progressed well. Their communicative competence and confidence displayed assurance and composure thanks to the personal photo approach (errors and are omissions parenthesized):

Sample 1 - October 2014 (Class 5)

Q: What is your favorite food in Nagasaki?

A: *My favorite food is “udon” (noodles) and “castella”. (Cake)*

Q: How was it?

A: *It was very delicious.*

Q: What's your favorite place on your school trip?

A: *My favorite place is a park () view is pretty.*

Q: Where do you want to go next?

A: *I want to go abroad because I have never gone abroad.*

Q: For example?

A: *For example I (went) France& Australia.*

Q: Was that your first visit to Fukuoka?

A: *Yes.*

Q: How was it?

A: *Fukuoka is () very big city and () a lot of shopping malls.*

Q: What did you learn in Nagasaki?

A: I learnt nuclear bomb is very horrible.

Q: How much did you spend in your trip?

A: I use (money) about ¥3,000. It's just presents.

Time: 100 seconds; 9 interchanges - 1 every 11 seconds; 5 decelerant mistakes

Sample 2 - January 2015 (Class 10)

Q: Who made this? (picture of a cake)

A: It was her. (pointing to her friend)

Q: How was it?

A: It was very delicious.

Q: Do you like alcohol?

A: Yes, I can drink, I like "shochu". (Japanese spirits) How about you?

A: So-so. I like beer.

Q: What did you do in winter vacation?

A: I went to a "bonenkai" (year-end) party.

Q: How was it?

A: It was fun. How about you?

A: I worked part time every day.

(Pointing to a photo of a location in the city)

Q: Could you tell me your recommended illumination place?

A: I recommend JR Fukuoka. How about you?

A: I recommend Fukuoka Tower

Q: What is your favorite illuminations place?

A: I like Fukuoka Tower How about you?

A: Me, too.

Q: Did you eat any Xmas food?

A: I ate Xmas chicken. How about you?

A: I didn't eat Xmas food because I have a part-time job.

Q: Do you like Xmas?

A: Yes, I like (.).

Q: Why?

A: Because I can present, give Xmas presents.

Time 120 seconds; 15 interchanges - 1 every 7 seconds; fewer significant mistakes

In addition to the significant increase in interaction indicated by a much faster rate of questioning (from 1 question every 11 seconds up to 1 question every 7 seconds) the increased 2-

way activity of the latter conversation shows a major increase in confidence levels, even though the confidence level of the former sample itself was already high. Question types also increased. The highlighted answer is of particular interest as it was a deliberate joke as the subject's first choice of a favorite place to view seasonal illuminations (though Xmas isn't a holiday, superficial points like this are widespread in modern Japan) changed as a direct result of the previous interchange, and the fact that the consecutive questioners both worked part-time at Fukuoka Tower! Such development is unusual in EFL communication and improbable in scripted textbook recitals about non-existent people and places which fail to inspire students. It indicates that language develops most through the interaction between and among peer learners.

Recent Example 2 - Writing

The final photo essay of my most recent writing course (January 2015, comparing high school and college winter holidays) by the same subject whose work was analyzed in the preceding study (see ERIC document 555638 cited in **Appendix 2**) can help gauge the signs of development from her previous May and July 2014 photo essays:



We ate special foods on New Year's Day and many rice cakes. Normally we spend New Year with our family and this is the special food. Let me tell you about my favorite winter memory before I came here. Basically every winter I spent with my family. My hometown has a big fireworks festival in winter so I saw fireworks around Christmas day. Also I often went skating in () amusement park in my hometown!

Next let me tell you about my winter this year. I went to the city center on Christmas Eve to join the party with my dance team. It was () special party because my seniors retired in this party!

*So we were really grateful to them and ate a lot at the party! To be honest, before I went to the party I cut my hair because I really wanted to! It looks like no change, but actually I lost 15 centimeters! Also I watched the movie **Big Hero 6** the same day! I really like it because the picture was so pretty and the characters were so adorable. Sometimes I felt sad but the end of the story was super exciting so I really recommend it to everybody! I ate "Osechi" which is New Year's food in Japan on New Year's Day, but my mom bought it! Basically my family buys it every year so we don't make it because it's hard work for my family! My favorite New Year's food is "kazunoko" which is something like fish eggs and it tastes like bubble wrap! I absolutely prefer this winter to the one before I came here because I could spend a fun wonderful and amazing Christmas! I could watch Big Hero 6, had my hair cut and joined a party! Also I could spend time with my family on New Year's Day! This winter I could also study English and do the things that I like the most every day!*

Essay May 2014 Words: 400/ per sentence: 9.9

Conjunctions: 19; Types: 6 errors: 22; Dependent clause per sentence = 0.13

Verb morphemes per sentence = 0.97;

Essay July 2014 Words: 400/ per sentence 13.3

Conjunctions: 16; Types: 9 Errors: 5; Dependent clauses per sentence = 0.83

Verb morphemes per sentence = 1.26;

Essay January 2015 Words: 327/ per sentence: 17

Conjunctions: 24; Types: 9; Errors: 2; Dependent clauses per sentence: = 1.3

Verb morphemes per sentence = 1.89

Table 1 Indicating Continuing Development from Previous Study:

Photo Essay	Words	Verb morphemes	Errors	Dependent clauses
May 2014	9.5 per sentence	0.97 per sentence	6	0.13 per sentence
July 2014	13.3 per sentence	1.26 per sentence	5	0.83 per sentence
Jan 2015	17.0 per sentence	1.89 per sentence	2	1.30 per sentence

Although writing and speaking are distinct in many ways, the analyses above suggest that using students' personal photos to get students to interact communicatively can exert a positive effect on both skills. While photos were the main medium for interaction in conversation, in the second round of questioning, students mostly communicated without direct reference to them. In the writing class, their photos were mainly a starting point for the whole photo essay which was made up of several sections. In addition, their diaries were independent of photos, though they sometimes overlapped. While the writing class students were two years younger than the conversation students and quite new to college study of any kind, their photo preparation was more intense (4 photos each, but only 1 for conversation students) so there was some parity in the

amount of time they used their photos for. As using photos for writing class students has only been tried with two classes so far, it remains to be seen how those students who used photos in their first year writing course differ in their use of photos for conversation on the basis of their experience, in comparison with those who have no prior experience, either in previous years or the same year, as the composition of students in the class changes, so that about half of them will have taken my writing course and half of them will not. Both writing and conversation class students seemed to adapt to and flourish in the atmosphere of largely independent learning.

To a comparable extent the younger writing students became as self-motivating as their seniors. Most of their classes involved them working together with minimal direction from the teacher. There were sustained periods of teacher silence during which students could often be seen supporting each other, a study habit actively recommended. Not only did they maintain concentration right until the end of each lesson, many continued even after classes finished as they were intent on writing more. Equally, their homework ethic was superior, suggesting the photo-based approach can succeed. Overall ratings for these classes exceeded school averages. All teaching styles have merits, but even teachers successful with texts could do more with photos. Effective complete and partial text-free teaching is feasible, but has yet to be recognized in mainstream ideology. Student progress documented in my studies so far was less due to individual ability variation than actual in-class development, as confirmed by the parallel progress in questions. Though samples are limited, they confirm each other and previous studies so cannot be dismissed. Using photos was based on students' express aim to achieve interpersonal communication. As all the alternative methods are text-book based, not requiring communication as a primary goal, it is difficult to compare approaches, but analyses suggest students develop linguistic/communicative competency in speaking and writing English by using their own photos. The feedback that resulted indicated greater confidence and satisfaction without texts than with them. Regardless of how convenient they seem (the texts used change little from year to year) they are neither the only nor best way to improve EFL communication.

Washback?

Without texts or conventional tests, there is no "washback" (the reverse influence that exams can have on the way their related courses are taught). As their activity intensity took up all the class time and beyond it, students were told each class was "the exam" as the communication therein was both the aim and its own evaluation. The detailed and various forms of feedback received suggested that formal testing may be of less importance than widely believed in TEFL circles. For the first time since students' evaluations began here over 10 years ago, my speaking and writing classes both received maximum scores. While my classes are always at least as highly

graded as other teachers', the maturing impact of the approach made this even more evident. Students maximized their efforts to communicate, and their developing performance suggests in-class motivation may be best ensured by making the main goal of their study the communicative act itself, not a single self-contained event that only tests a student's condition and one-off ability on any given day. While "washback" may not be necessary at class level, it might help indicate the objective validity of the approach by checking for changes in proficiency in external assessments in the form of TOEIC which all Years 1 through 3 department students take every school year's end.

Indicators of the Still Images Approach's Potential

We can infer the effects of the approach over several years of annual department TOEIC results as they suggest it may have had a positive effect. While the approach has achieved both national and international acceptance, the internal Japanese research application process blocks international communication development. In-class evaluations indicate near unanimous approval ratings for the approach over the course of the 6 main papers selected nationally and internationally for full dissemination. Numerical ratings were comprehensively reinforced by the student comments already detailed there, but one recent comment is worth noting as it indicates the full potential of the method. The following student went abroad to study for half a year immediately after taking my spoken English class. She wrote the following during her stay:

Before I took Conversation, it was difficult for me to continue conversation in English because I did not come up with correct words quickly. However, I understood that it is important to say something and continue conversation even if grammar is wrong. After I came to Australia, I use the things which I learned in Conversation to communicate with people and I enjoy a conversation with international students now. Your class gave me a realization of important things in English.

Students experiencing still images for communication in their Year 1 Reading and Writing class for a full year and their Year 3 Conversation class (half a year, and in most cases the only Conversation class they take as third year students) since 2012 have displayed clear trends of progress in TOEIC, their annual year-end test. Trends in the related linguistic skill proficiency areas are presented and discussed below. The implicit and explicit aims of both of this writer's classes are not technical proficiency but creating communicative confidence through interaction between students in English, which many rarely or never experience in other wholly text-based classes judging by the syllabus and students' school-wide feedback. This implies that improvement in the former area, proficiency, may derive in large part from improvement in the latter, the confidence gained from peer communication. TOEIC result trends for students taking the courses in question since 2012 illustrate a clear difference in their progress:

- In Year 1, I teach only Reading and Writing April to December when students take TOEIC Bridge, a shortened version of the exam, scored out of 90 for both the Listening and Reading sections. They have Year 1 Conversation with other teachers, and no other compulsory classes related to these foreign language skills. Their other classes are somewhat below 30 students, smaller than mine (which is on average 30 students) so there is no size advantage for the latter. After up to 30 classes of 90 minutes each for both Year 1 Conversation and Reading and Writing, my 30 Reading and Writing students' average score for successive years compared to the other 70 is as follows:

Target group students (Wood's): Listening 76.0/Reading 80.0=R+4

All the other same year students: Listening 69.5/Reading 68.5=R-1

While the class I teach is streamed, the same students take Conversation together with another teacher. After a year of Photo Communication versus textbook teaching, their Reading scores are higher than their Listening scores. While the calibration system weights Listening scores more highly than Reading scores on the shortened TOEIC Bridge version of the full TOEIC (see **Appendix 1** for the official TOEIC score mapping system, source ETS 2006, relevant to the analysis of the target and rest of year group scores) achieving higher Reading than Listening scores is unusual as the Reading section of TOEIC Bridge, like that of the regular TOEIC, is more difficult according to both ETS, the test designers, and to the millions of scores on record. This is further indicated by the opposite result for all other students whose Listening and Reading scores are much closer and even reversed in many cases.

- This writer only teaches Year 1 Writing and Year 3 Conversation. As Conversation is optional from Year 2 on, the average number of students taking Conversation classes since the courses began has dropped dramatically, while the number taking Reading and Writing remains the same throughout as all Reading and Writing classes are compulsory. Despite the drop in Conversation class numbers from Year 2 on, my third year class is the most highly attended (between 90 and 100% of the maximum possible number compared to between 10 and 20% for the same class in Semester 2) the majority therefore only taking my class in Year 3, which makes the subsequent TOEIC data the more valid, as their listening development is largely restricted to my Semester 1 class in Year 3. The average ratio in the years in question was 25 students for my Semester 1 class and fewer than 5 for the same class taught by another teacher in Semester 2.

- By analyzing the TOEIC scores for the same students up to Year 3 (the last year of Conversation and Reading and Writing classes) a marked difference becomes evident. The results show a reversal of proficiency levels in Listening and Reading (out of 495 points each) with Listening progressing significantly and Reading declining discernibly.

Year 2 to 3 Target Group Change (Wood's Year 3 Conversation students)

Listening as Year 2 students: 300/Reading as Year 2 students: 233

Listening as Year 3 students: 327/Reading as Year 3 students: 213

Listening change, Year 2 to 3: up 27 / Reading change Year 2 to 3: down 20

Year 2 to 3 Overall Change (All Other 70 Year 3 students)

Listening, all Year 2 students: 276/Reading, all Year 2 students: 181

Listening, all Year 3 students: 278/Reading, all Year 3 students: 171

Listening change, all others, Year 2 to 3: up 2 / Reading change: down 10

Table 2 Summarizing Changes Above in Listening (L) and Reading (R):

As Year Group	Target Group	All Others
Year 2	L = 300 / R = 233	L = 276 / R = 181
Year 3	L = 327 / R = 213	L = 278 / R = 171
Change	L = +27 / R = -20	L = +2 / R = -10

L/R Gap Years 2 to 3 for Wood's Year 3 Conversation students = +47 points

L/R Gap from Years 2 to 3 for all the other 70 Year 3 students = +12 points

Overall L/R Gap Difference: Wood's class cf. others = +35 points

(See Appendix for ETS descriptors of up to L 300 and R 250.)

• Thus according to the above data, there was a 35 point swing improvement for my Conversation class as compared to the whole year average in their listening ability, which suggests that the increased improvement in photo communication students' reading shown by the results for Year 1 is echoed by a marked increase in listening ability for Year 3 Conversation students using this method. Returning to successive target groups' averaged TOEIC Bridge scores, according to ETS, Wood's Year 1 Reading and Writing class score of L 76.0 = TOEIC 285, and R 80.0 = TOEIC 235. This shows that Reading is calibrated as a more difficult skill than Listening. If we compare these approximate equivalent scores to the target group's Year 3 results, they support the above findings regarding the approach's impact.

Table 3 Target/ Other Group's Bridge/TOEIC Score Comparisons:

As Year Group	Target Group	All Others
Year 1	L = 285 / R = 235	L = 240 / R = 140
Year 3	L = 327 / R = 213	L = 278 / R = 171
Change	L = +42 / R = -22	L = +38 / R = +31

L/R Gap Years 1 to 3 for Wood's Year 3 Conversation students = +64 points

L/R Gap Years 1 to 3 for all the other 70 Year 3 students = +7 points

Overall L/R Gap Difference: Wood's class cf. others = +57 points

Though TOEIC measurements contain standard error ranges, the results from 3 year groups of 100 students each arise under conditions as controlled as possible. As a 3-year cycle causes

fluctuations in target group size, only those taking the class each year are included in the sample (n = 20). The approach described had a discernible effect on both listening and reading proficiencies, influencing students' learning potential positively. In Year 1, the method appeared to accelerate students' reading proficiency acquisition which, when the conventional textbook approach replaced it, deteriorated markedly compared to other students. Without it, students' listening ability in Year 1 seemed more limited, but when they experienced it for the first time in Year 3 Conversation, their ability accelerated compared to other students between Years 2 and 3. Thus the method warrants careful research to ensure rigorous scrutiny by an external statistical expert. The promise of this innovative method is in jeopardy, however, as it requires appropriate recognition and support locally to help restore confidence to Japan's nationally ailing English education system. The motivation to write this study arose from students' enthusiasm. Their feedback has both encouraged me and guided the development of my teaching since 1975 when I started teaching English in the UK. Some 40 years later I remain convinced after having taught more nationalities, and age and ability groups than I can remember. I hope that some of the precepts and insights that I feel I have imparted to date will encourage future teachers and students to rethink and reform how they teach and learn. While this research has focused exclusively on college level students of English, with younger students increasingly having their own phones with cameras, and primary and secondary schools expanding their use of computers, the potential for extending the use of photos to any language and age group has thus expanded exponentially. The research summarized above shows that students overwhelmingly prefer non-text alternatives, like using their photos to facilitate meaningful communication in English between each other. While the methodological details described have been specifically customized to the particular situation and circumstances of the classes involved, the underlying principles are transferrable both from spoken to written communication, and to any teacher committed to teaching his or her students better. The entire approach is open source and relevant to nearly any student or language teacher who has a photo of himself or herself. The examples suggest that such an approach has significant potential, which has been recognized internationally but not yet internally. The student satisfaction, motivation and the positive self and class evaluations consistently arising during and after each of the many courses researched has combined to present a convincing argument for fundamentally reforming the way we think about, and should pursue, TEFL.

Conclusion

Using still images for English communication stimulates students to interact fully and know

more about each other in a language other than their own. Many advantages become obvious the more I use this approach. For example, the quality of the photo and the limitations of what it might show are never a barrier, but quite the reverse, provoking greater interaction as students strive to fill in the blanks through their own language-learning efforts. Perhaps the greatest of all the possible positives with using students' own photos instead of a text is the lasting sense of satisfaction in the 2-way communication it allows, students uniting to conquer their mutual linguistic limitations. The primary subject remains travel, near or far, as a stimulus for communication and discovery. Like learning a language, when we go anywhere new, we leave a new part of ourselves there, which we can only find again by re-using our thoughts, revisiting that place in our minds and sharing it with others, a process so close to students' hearts that it maximizes both their motivation and memory.

Appendix 1 – Listening & Reading Descriptors

(ETS Bridge Score Comparisons)

For TOEIC Scores of over L300

- The basic context of short spoken exchanges can be inferred if the associated vocabulary is simple enough.
- The gist of extended spoken texts is comprehensible with enough repetition and paraphrase.
- Short spoken exchanges can be understood with intermediate level vocabulary.
- They can understand details in extended spoken texts when the information is supported by repetition and when the requested information comes at the beginning or end of the spoken text. They can understand details when the information is slightly paraphrased.

For TOEIC Scores up to L300

- The basic gist of short spoken exchanges is ungraspable, even without linguistic distractors.
- Extended spoken texts are incomprehensible when information is spread out and vocabulary is intermediate or above.
- Short spoken exchange details are incomprehensible with intermediate vocabulary or above, with complex syntax or in negative constructions.
- Extended speech details are incomprehensible when they occur mid-text.

For TOEIC Scores below R250

- Written text information is beyond comprehension
- Paraphrased factual information is incomprehensible.
- Even sentence level information connections are impossible.
- Vocabulary range comprehension is limited.

- Easy grammatical constructions are incomprehensible with difficult vocabulary.

Appendix 2 – 50 Years of ERIC

ERIC, the US government's Education Resources Information Center (now in its 50th year, having begun in 1964) has featured all recent studies on still images for writing as follows, making them permanently available online worldwide:

[Using Still Images for Written English Communication, Part 1](#) (2014 ed 5554061)

[Using Still Images for Written English Communication, Part 2](#). (2014 ed 554583)

[Still Images for Written English Communication \(Part 3\)](#). (2015 ed 555638)

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Wood, D.J. "Customizing Curricula." *JACET*, 50. Japan. 2011.

Wood, D.J. "[Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication Part 1.](#)"

Ronsetsu Shiryo Hozonkai: E46-23221-66197-12-4015, 2012.

Wood, D.J. "[Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication Part 2.](#)"

Ronsetsu Shiryo Hozonkai: E47-32082-76199-12-5008, 2012.

Wood, D.J. "[Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication Part 3.](#)"

Ronsetsu Shiryo Hozonkai: E47-32084-76200-14-5008, 2013.

Wood, D.J. "Detextualizing College Conversation Courses." *IATEFL*, 46. 2012.

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