



## Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication Part Three

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## Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication – Part Three

David John WOOD

Student photo examples (See below for a discussion of their use in class)

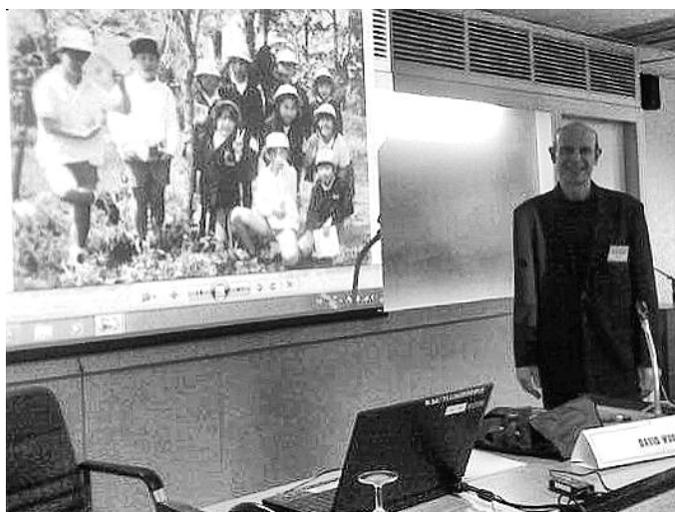


Photo 1



Photo 2

## Introduction

*With some 600 students, 400 contact hours and 12 courses a year, to understand and teach individual learners better, one motivating and memorable way has proven to be to ask students to use their own photographs interactively and communicatively. To date, this project has been employed in half of all the courses of this current writer over the period of the last 3 years. A measure of its popularity has been how class sizes have swelled as students express interest, while comparable text taught classes shrink. In addition, some students who complete one course using their photos choose to take exactly the same course again after enjoying the first experience so much, not for academic credit, but purely to practice and improve communication skills. This is most likely because the high level of enthusiasm was sustained and fulfilled during their first experience of what is a markedly different style of teaching and learning, when compared to the more frequent kinds of text-driven spoken English class that dominate mainstream foreign language education in Japan and abroad. What distinguishes this, the third consideration of the use of still images for spoken English communication, from the first two studies is that it ventures beyond the previous range of essentially travel oriented photographs to give a free choice of topic, as well as more technological scope and with more mature and career minded students. The reasons for limiting the original subject area and presentation style of student photos were discussed in the two related and previously published studies. In this latest and final study, the presentation style was customized for a more technologically facilitated approach by using a computer room to allow editing and explore more innovative styles of discourse.*

*Both students who had taken classes before and those who had not were eligible to apply for a new style graduation seminar based on student demand, with a focus on English spoken communication, the only one of its kind on offer. The response was overwhelming. 20 students applied (from a choice of 10 different seminars, 4 with native English speakers) in its first year and 30 the next, making this seminar the most popular in successive years attracting 25% of all seniors. New photo subjects included part-time jobs, home towns, high school events, restaurants, sports, weddings and friends. Travel remained the most motivating choice of all. In addition, the number, range and connectivity of subjects increased as student confidence grew, with a commensurate rise in keenness to develop their spoken communication. An example detailed later is the time shift pair of photos (1 and 2 above) depicting a student's friends and teacher at elementary school and on Coming of Age Day. Using students' photos may be the most promising, yet most untapped resource. Students are able to both communicate confidently and retain the English that they encounter in class perhaps better than in any other way. Pictures become so deeply absorbed into their memory that the accompanying linguistic interactions*

*also attach themselves to their psyches. This makes for one of the most enjoyable experiences possible in the spoken English classroom, and qualifies the approach as one of the most valid available. While my research has now successfully entered its fourth year of implementation, my only disappointment is that language teaching professionals in general seem enslaved to texts, delegating their classroom content to materials most often prepared by people they have never met, and who know nothing of the individual student's real circumstances, needs or interests.*

## **Some background, seminar content and procedure**

Texts often use sumptuous photos, but their impact is fleeting compared to students' personal pictures that tell their own stories, and about which they are the best qualified to talk more authoritatively and with much more interest and conviction than when using texts. The interactions that arise have the potential to be more memorable, durable and meaningful. Developing from the third year conversation classes, the fourth year seminar classes required students to bring their personal photos to class. Leading up to this, the first few weeks of classes were aimed at general introductions to help students get comfortable and accustomed to speaking to each other, as many rarely communicated face to face with each other before even in their own language. Thus the first classes were for preparing and thinking about how to introduce themselves, then for a rehearsal presentation, and finally, the actual introductions which were recorded on camera for later listening practice. This allowed students to watch and listen to each other repeatedly by replaying the recordings until they could grasp what each other wanted to say. In fact, the level of attention as a result was spontaneously very high as students seemed to fully enjoy both listening to others and being listened to by them in this format. As distinct from the third year classes, the senior students' introductions could be screened on the individual monitors in the computer room. This then led to gathering in a circle, both to review what had been said, and to enjoy a quiz about the content, as well as to have students ask each other questions for more detail, motivated by the previous viewings. The next stage was for students to provide as many pictures as they liked about any aspects of their lives which they were willing to share with the others. They could e-mail them as attachments, which was the most popular method as all students had their own smart phones, or, in those few cases where this was not possible, they could bring actual hard copies in the form of original pictures or copies thereof. The pictures could then be scanned for various uses in digital form. An average of two to three students brought their pictures for use in each class. While they sat at the front operating the master computer and displaying their pictures on the individual monitors, the other students thought of their own questions to ask.

This allowed for optimal viewing as the students at the front could enlarge and edit their pictures to make them clearer to all students at the same time. The teacher stood at the back to allow the class to proceed smoothly and independently, except when any assistance was requested or required.

## Interaction example

The pictures illustrated above from a presentation on using still images for spoken English communication were taken at Chulalongkorn University's National Seminar on teaching English in November 2012. They are the time shift pair of pictures of a student's elementary school friends and teacher (**Photo 1**) repeating their gathering on Coming of Age Ceremony Day (**Photo 2**) mentioned in the **Introduction**. They provide a perfect and natural example of comparing the past and present. As with all interactions, students have the responsibility of keeping interchanges going until enough in-depth, significant and informative discoveries are revealed. Thus answers that are short and negative have to be re-directed until something of substance emerges ( "No, but . . ." ) The interviewers must therefore ask several connected questions, each one dependent on the information that is forthcoming, both from their own and other students' questions. Interviewees for their part did not stop when they had to reply "No" to a question, but instead tried to continue in order to offer either related information or just completely change the subject to something that they could talk about. However even "No" answers can be turned around by asking "Would you like to?" and so on, so that students come to understand how to make conversations continuous, interesting and productive.

Typical student- generated question examples for the parallel pictures include:

"Who are the children in the picture?"

"What were you doing?"

"Where was it?"

"How did you feel?"

"Why did you take the photo?"

"Which was your best friend?"

"Do you ever visit your old school?"

"Are these the same people as the first picture?"

"Why did you get together again?"

"How is your teacher?"

"Tell me about them."

"What jobs do they do?"

“Are any of them married?”

“How did you feel when you turned 20 (when adulthood begins in Japan)?”

“When will you see them again?”

“How often do you contact them?”

“Has your best friend changed?”

## Conditions of the survey

- The 20 students in the seminar were asked to answer the questions that follow about their 4 years at university in the same format as year 3 conversation classes. Results were processed and presented in the same way.
- About half of them had previously taken one of my text free spoken communication classes using students' own photos as the central stimulus for conversation. The others chose the seminar based on word of mouth.
- The ability range was wide, with a third of the students of above average ability, a third below, and the remaining subjects all of average ability.
- They were asked to complete the survey at the end of their final year of undergraduate study under the same circumstances and within the same time.
- Unlike the other courses surveyed, these students had taken a full year's course of 30 classes all of 90 minutes instead of 15 classes over half a year.
- As they spent half of each class on spoken communication activities and the other half on the other special study of the seminar which was not spoken communication, however, they in fact spent exactly the same time as the half yearly junior students, making some degree of direct comparison possible.
- Direct comparison was also facilitated by the large number of students in the seminar, making it of similar size to my year 3 classes, in contrast with some seminars which only manage to attract a handful of students each year.
- One of the main differences was the range of photos used, as students were given a completely free choice of what kinds of picture to use, compared to the travel photos used in third year classes. (See the list in **Introduction**.)
- The teaching configuration was also different as students used a computer room to display the pictures on monitors and could show them in new ways.
- They were not surveyed at the half year stage as senior students are much more pressed for time, especially because of hectic employment activities.
- Owing to time constraints, the survey was conducted two months after their final classes

during their graduation ceremony. This ensured one hundred per cent attendance, something which was not always possible in regular classes.

- As with year 3, no forewarning was given to avoid any unnecessary bias.
- Unlike year 3 students, the senior students were not able to give any other form of feedback as the academic affairs committee decided some years previously that seminars should not be part of the school-wide evaluation system, which is hard to reconcile with the importance seminars should have.

## Comments on the results

The results are consistent with the previously conducted surveys in terms of the positive reaction to this approach, even under the changed conditions. Point-by-point interpretations are given below, and the full summary appears as an appendix at the end of this paper for reference (**Collated survey results**):

Points 1 and 2 - As for the number of text-based versus non text-based courses taken, as expected, the same result as before emerged, only one out of all such courses not using a textbook, namely this researcher's. The way students counted courses was by a whole year, which in fact may only apply to seminars, as students often switch teachers or even discontinue a course after one semester, a problem highlighted in Part 2 of this series as Year 3 students have the option not to take conversation at all. While students have to take a seminar for a whole year, they may have some claim to the right to switch though this has not yet occurred.

Point 3 - Students most often used the textbook to listen to the teacher, followed by filling in blanks, neither of which activities is enough to improve students' spoken communication ability, the latter more suited to a reading class.

Point 4 - As with all previous surveys, at least 80% of students stated their preference for the non-text approach, with some students undeclared about which they preferred, studying with or without a text, as they saw some value in both.

Points 5 and 7 - Taking these two points together can help us compare students' relative appraisals of text bound versus text free approaches. The students could only cite memorization and pronunciation practice (repeating after the teacher) as clear purposes when it came to using a text. This sense of a lack of clear direction was further underscored as the majority of students left their answer spaces blank, suggesting that most respondents could see no purpose at all in using a text for spoken communication. This was in stark contrast to the majority of responses regarding the main purpose of not using a text as "for real English

conversation.”

Points 6 and 8 - As with the two points above, points 6 and 8 can also be taken together to indicate the clear gap in perceived worth between the two methodologies. Again the majority of students could identify no clear result from using a text for spoken communication. Those that tried, approximately a third, could only specify grammar improvement, another aspect of language that by itself is insufficient to achieve significant spoken communication development. Again a majority of students were able to identify multiple benefits from a non-text based approach, such as for improving English communication skills, and for improving their listening ability, both of which support text free study.

Point 9 - This was a wide ranging measure of the various kinds of communication often associated with conversation. Students could rate each aspect of communication on a Likert scale, 1 meaning very bad, 2, not very good, 3 average, 4 good and 5 excellent. Overall the text-book based approach was rated as in previous surveys below average or 2.75 overall, while the text-free approach scored nearly the maximum at 4.65. Thus those points with over a 2.0 disparity between respective student ratings merit some comment as follows.

Point 9(c). There was a 2.2 score difference for communicating how students feel, suggesting that the non-text approach which they experienced was better for expressing their emotions in English. This may be due to the propensity for this approach to help students personalize their interactions and thus to get in touch better with the way they feel even in a foreign language.

Point 9(d) The difference in evaluations for using gestures was very high at 2.5. One likely cause for this was that the non-text approach emphasizes face-to-face communication, which makes students not only more aware of each other’s paralinguistic movements, but also more inclined to follow suit, as it were, and accentuate their own gestures to communicate more effectively.

Point 9(f). The other highest scoring difference at 2.5 was for communicating real culture. This may have been as students became used to and more skillful at talking about themselves in terms of their own culture, which no text book could achieve as texts cannot cater for each individual’s situation or background.

Points 9(h) and (i). These two points can be taken together as not only are they related, but they also scored 2.3 higher than student ratings for the text approach. Students likely rated the communicative effectiveness of a non-text approach significantly more highly for using useful English vocabulary and for using expressions appropriately as they could acquire many new words and ways of speaking from their peers, and thus would feel that such language was both better suited and more important for their own expressive and

communicative needs.

Point 9(j). There was another significant difference in relative evaluations for speaking in English happily at 2.2 higher for a non-text approach. Indeed this may be the most important of all the purposes of talking for students at this stage as they need extra motivation to persist in seeking to improve their communication skills in a difficult job market that stresses this very ability.

## **Student comment examples**

As with the comments received from students in the first two parts of this series of studies, the comments about the positive aspects of the text free personal photo approach proffered by fourth year students were plentiful. They provide a clear indication of the significant student confidence in their experience, while comments about using the text-based approach were sparse and generally critical. The seminar students' comments listed below from 2013 echo those from Year 3 Conversation classes, and offer even more mature insights in some cases.

*"We could enjoy talking freely in English."*

*"The problem with a text is that it dictates the way we speak and think."*

*"The only way to learn spoken communication is by listening without a text."*

*"We could achieve real communication without textbooks."*

*"It's easier to have real conversations without a text."*

*"Textbook language is unrealistic and we can't use it anywhere else."*

*"I could enjoy talking with other students because we didn't use a text."*

*"We enjoyed talking to each other more because it was real."*

*"By not following a text, we could speak more naturally and spontaneously."*

*"Without a text we had a stronger sense of authentic communication."*

*"Textbooks oversimplify communication by controlling everything."*

*"It was easier to communicate because we could enjoy continuous eye contact."*

*"Not using a text helped me acquire more practical communication skills."*

## **Relevance of the approach to seminars:**

When asked about their criteria for selecting new employees, most major companies rated communication as most important of all, followed by the ability to take action and none of the companies mentioned students' grades in their responses (Japan Times Business news

March 25, 2013.) During the course of the seminar, one student founded an employment support group which is still popular. Therefore both of the most relevant criteria quoted by the majority of Japan's major's companies seem to have been addressed directly or indirectly by the current researcher's approach.

### **Most recent class evaluations**

While students' only seminar and their final and most important course has been excluded by the academic affairs committee from evaluations, the third year conversation classes for the same period at least can indicate the relative satisfaction that students feel compared to a text-driven approach quantitatively. As with the previous studies, the most valid comparison is between experienced full time teachers with the same classes switching from the first to second seminars. The measurable indicators are the student evaluations and the class sizes. Findings are consistent through six courses spread over three years.

For the fast track year 3 conversation class which has a limited size of around 20 or so, the non-text based full time teacher (the current author) had a class well above the school average, and received a student evaluation that was also well above the school average. The same teacher received the same well above average number of takers and student evaluation for the class of lower level year three students in the next semester, giving an overall ranking and enrolment that was well above average for the period 2012 to 2013. These results indicate again clear approval for the non-text based approach adopted that used students' photographs. For the class of lower level year three students taught by another teacher of equal experience and similar background, the class size was below the school average, and the evaluation well below, while for the fast track third year conversation students, the same teacher got a student evaluation well below the school average, and a class size that was seriously below average. The overall assessment of students of the text-based approach was thus well below average.

As these results are consistent with previous studies, they clearly show student preference for a non-text approach. The teaching ability of both teachers is not an issue. Both are competent veteran teachers. The salient factor is the stark exposure of what really appeals to students in terms of teaching methodologies. The special circumstances that have allowed for this include the fact that only third year conversation students can opt to take or reject their classes, as previous conversation classes that they took were compulsory. On top of this was the initiative shown by a several students in taking the non-text class again although they were not supposed to. For the sake of their English proficiency development, the current

author allowed such students to switch on the basis that their motivation was a positive one, namely to choose a class that they believed would help them more. Such motivation should not be squandered as they would simply have dropped out of conversation studies altogether otherwise. (As the exact ratings are reserved for internal uses, verbal descriptions only are given above simply to clarify the popularity of non-text versus text-bound approaches.)

## **Class size**

Class size has been an issue throughout this 3 part study so requires some comment to put the class sizes mentioned into final perspective. It has also been a major international issue in The New York Times (Sara Mosle “Does class size count?” May 4, 2013) to the effect that any kind of class near 30 is regarded as unteachable, and numbers higher than that seen as symptomatic of developing countries. In nearly every situation, student numbers tend to be variable, but teacher performance is (or should be) constant. As a professional most class sizes should be viable, but communicative techniques that work for smaller classes may fail in larger ones. Current literature on TESOL class size suggests that a total of 40 or more students in a class create major problems and 50 plus is impossible to explore and nurture students’ emerging English language identities, the responsibility of every professional teacher. But seeing classes in terms of excessive numbers may risk ignoring other vital elements. As concerning as large classes are those where the number of takers is a fraction of the total number of all the potential takers as this suggests students have not been motivated to develop their foreign language ability. There may be various factors beyond the teacher’s control, but every effort should be made to attract all interested students, and then to do the utmost to live up to student expectations. Especially when a class is in single figures, alarm bells should go off as this may indicate serious problems, and it is ultimately the teacher’s responsibility to ascertain and attempt to correct such problems, even if they are not of his or her own making. From the opinions on class size widely available, problems begin when classes drop down to 7 students or less, and are seriously compromised at 4 students or under.

## **Pair versus group versus whole class arrangements**

Leading on from issues of class size are class study arrangements. Central to the 3 part study has been the idea of an all class communication arrangement with students sitting facing each other in a circle, first recommended by students themselves as explained in my previous studies. This is possible with classes of from 20 to 30. Over 30, pair work and presentation

style follow up is more viable. There are several reasons why whole class activities seem to be the most effective for classes of up to 30 students in size, which have been supported by long term student feedback. With a whole class approach, teacher and students have the same input so there is a common base of knowledge. Of course each student may assimilate that knowledge in different ways and at different levels, but even that is better than pair work where only individual pairs have definite access to the content, and no matter how much a teacher may circulate to observe or follow up by having students report their interactions, the original events may remain distant if not irretrievable. With everyone listening to the same content, remediation becomes much more effective. Attempting pair remediation can be as futile as it is frustrating. The aim of a class should be for all to share and thus benefit from the same input. To this extent, classes of about 20 have the most to offer because of the energy, range of experience and the associated vocabulary. While students have to take turns, successful co-operative approaches can be the most rewarding of all. Naturally a large part of their experience will be listening, which may be ideal as it concentrates pressure on just a few students interacting at a time with other students being able to absorb more of what they hear in a relaxed state to process input and formulate their own subsequent contributions.

### **Interaction example (May 2013)**

A recent example of an actual interaction is presented below. The student interviewed had three travel pictures, one of herself plus another female about the same age at a flower park, one of a mountain view and a third of a meal they ate.

*Q 1:Who's that in the photo A1:That's my twin sister.*

*Q 2:Are you identical twins. A2:No, in fact I'm one minute older.*

*Q 3:What does she do? A3:She studies and works part-time.*

*Q 4:Where?A4: A video rental store. My favorite film's The Devil wears Prada.*

*Q 5:Where does she live? A5:We live together, but I do most of the housework!*

*Q 6:What did you do in the park?A6:We held animals like rabbits and ducks.*

*Q 7:What was the location? A7:A sunken volcano plain, the largest in the world.*

*Q 8:What else did you do there? A8:We took pictures from the top.*

*Q 9:What's the meal? A9:It's French buck wheat crepe with grated cheese.*

*Q10:Where did you eat? A10:It was a French café but the owner is Japanese.*

*Q11:When did you go? (The answer is slow. The interviewee seems unsure.)*

*Are you ok? Was it this year or last year? Can you remember?*

*A11: Uh it was 2 weeks ago - it was a holiday . I think I'm getting Alzheimer's!*

(This was the actual interaction as it occurred between 1 interviewee and all the other students who took it in turn to build on the conversation from the previous questions asked by choosing 1 photo at a time to ask a new question about.)

## Conclusion

Having conducted surveys of students' evaluations of and reactions to using their own photos for spoken communication over 3 years with multiple classes of a wide ability range, it is clear that this approach has great potential in TESOL. While individual instructors' characters may influence the approach's outcome, the conditions of the survey have been conducted impartially and years 3 and 4 students have had enough experience to make an informed and objective verdict. The style of teaching and learning has now been long enough established to deserve taking up by any teacher genuinely interested in students' development and not afraid either to try a text free approach or to invest time to achieve results. There must be many possible text free approaches, and surely some are likely to be better than using photos, so it is hoped that not just this particular application be pursued, but also many other styles in addition. To see students communicate face to face and comprehend each other's intent without the obstruction of texts has been a rewarding experience in itself, and one that I can strongly recommend. As spoken communication is not the only goal of TEFL or TESL, the next direction for the use of text free teaching should be written communication. Accordingly, the current researcher has started a follow up project to apply some of the principles to a reading and writing class, although obviously the specifics will vary greatly. I hope in due course to report how the use of photos fares in written communication, and will do my best to explore all possible variations of this format. Finally, as my school has supported my efforts to disseminate my findings in the form of assisting both with presentations and publications in Japan and abroad, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude.

## Collated survey results

(Unless otherwise indicated, box numbers are students numbers.)

1. How many spoken English communication classes did you take in the 4 years?
2. How many of these classes were taught with textbooks?
3. How did you most often use the textbook?

- 10 listening to the teacher 4 filling in blanks 6 unspecified
4. Which do you think is better, using a text or not using one?  
16 not using a text; 4 undecided
5. What is the main purpose of using a text?  
2 for memorization 5 for pronunciation 13 unspecified
6. What is the main result of using a text?  
7 grammar improvement 13 unspecified
7. What is the main purpose of not using a text?  
12 for real English conversation 8 unspecified
8. What is the main result of not using a text?  
6 communication 5 improving listening 9 unspecified
9. Rate the communicative effectiveness of these as:

(The following box numbers are the average ratings assigned by all students)

4.0 ~ 5.0 very good;

3.0 ~ 3.9 good;

2.0 ~ 2.9 not good; or

1.0 ~ 1.9 very bad

for using / not using a text:

- (a) 3.0 / 4.8 for speaking to others in English
- (b) 2.8 / 4.5 for communicating what you want to say
- (c) 2.3 / 4.5 for communicating how you feel
- (d) 2.3 / 4.8 for using gestures to communicate
- (e) 2.5 / 4.6 for using real English
- (f) 2.4 / 4.9 for communicating real culture
- (g) 3.0 / 4.3 for communicating about real people
- (h) 3.3 / 4.6 for using useful English vocabulary
- (i) 3.3 / 4.6 for using expressions appropriately
- (j) 2.6 / 4.8 for speaking in English happily

**Average rating for using texts = 2.75 (not good)**

**Average rating for not using texts = 4.65 (very good)**

## Related presentations and publications

- Wood, D. (2011) "Teaching Without Texts".  
CamTESOL, 7.
- Wood, D. (2011) "Customizing Curricula".  
JACET, 50.
- Wood, D. (2012) "Detextualizing Japanese College Conversation Courses".  
IATEFL, 46.
- Wood, D. (2012) "Textless TEFL for Increased Communicative Competence".  
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute Annual Seminar.
- Wood, D. (2012) "Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication".  
Chikushijogakuen Report, 23.
- Wood, D. (2013) "Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication – 2".  
Chikushijogakuen Journal, 8.

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