Hidden Pictures: An Integrated Speaking and Listening Activity

by HEATHER GADDIS

LEVEL: Beginner to Advanced

TIME REQUIRED: It depends on the level of the learners. The activity can take anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes.

GOALS: To describe images as precisely as possible, depending on each learner's language ability; to listen to peers' descriptions for comprehension, ask questions for clarification if needed, and identify the images being described

MATERIALS: At least one set of similar images and a way to share them among students (on paper or electronically); a note-taking template for each student; pencils or pens—or a device for taking notes

BACKGROUND: This integrated speaking and listening task is an information-gap activity. Learners will describe a photo they are given, then listen and take notes while other learners describe their own photos. Finally, learners will match their notes to the images.

The speaking subskills developed include using functions—particularly describing—along with accuracy with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, as it is important that the images are described clearly and with sufficient detail. Learners also develop the subskills of repetition and repair, as they need to be able to repeat or rephrase parts of their description that are unclear for their classmates. The listening subskills developed primarily involve listening for detail and note-taking, which require learners to organize the information that they have heard for later access.

PREPARATION

You will need to find five or six pictures that are similar. For example, you can look for pictures that have groups of people in a library-type setting. Or you might look for pictures showing a table full of different foods, such as plates of meat, cheese, and vegetables. The images should be similar enough that learners have to give detailed descriptions in order for other learners to differentiate between them.

Each image should be labeled using a letter (A, B, C, D, E, and F). For use in the face-to-face classroom, you can print out the images or have students access them on their own camera-equipped devices via QR codes you create.

You can create QR codes for the images by searching for a free QR code-generator site, such as https://www.qr-code-generator.com/. I recommend uploading the images you plan on using to a shared space, such as Google

Drive, so that students will have access to them. You need to copy and paste the link to each image into the QR code generator and download the codes. You can then share the QR codes for the images by inserting them into a presentation. It is recommended to put only two or three QR codes on the same slide, as the codes will be difficult to scan if they are too close together.

If you are teaching online, you will need to save the images as individual files and name each one using the letter you have assigned to it. You can then send them to students individually via chat, email, or another communication channel.

Figure 1 shows an example of four pictures that can be used for this activity.

Photo by cottonbro studio: https://www.pexels.com/photo/people-studying-6344239/

Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko: https://www.pexels.com/photo/three-college-students-in-the-library-9572550/

Photo by Kampus Production: https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-diverse-students-coworking-on-laptop-in-library-with-assistance-of-female-teacher-5940704/

Photo by Andy Barbour: https://www.pexels.com/photo/students-in-a-group-study-inside-a-library-6684550/

Figure 1. Four sample pictures that can be used for the activity

Beginner-Level Learners

Example description (Picture A): *There are three people. They are in a library. There are many books behind them. The people are sitting on a couch.*

Questions to ask learners:
   a. Who is in the photo? (Example responses: students, men, a woman, young people)
   b. Where are the people? (Example responses: the library, a school)
   c. What are they doing? (Example responses: reading, talking, studying)

Advanced Learners

Example description (Picture A): *In this picture, I see three young people who are sitting on a couch in a library. Behind the young people, I see many shelves of books.*

Prompts for learners:
   a. S: There are three people sitting on a sofa.
      T: Tell me about the person who is sitting on the right.
      S: The person who is sitting on the right is wearing a blue shirt.

   b. S: I think the young people are working together on something.
      T: Why do you think they are working together?
      S: I think they are working together on a group project. There are stacks of books on the table in front of them. Also, they are all looking at the table. I think the boy on the right is explaining something because I can see him pointing at a piece of paper on the table.

Figure 2. Sample descriptions, questions, and prompts that can be used to introduce and model the activity

PROCEDURE

1. Show an image that is similar to the images students will describe. Model describing the image and elicit additional descriptions from learners. Figure 2 gives examples that are based on Picture A in Figure 1.

2. Write key vocabulary on the board for learners to use during the activity. To make the vocabulary easier for learners to access later, you can divide it into categories, such as descriptions of people, descriptions of place, colors, actions, and so on.

3. Tell learners they are going to get an image. They will describe their own image and listen to other learners describe their images. They will take notes about other learners' images.

4. Show students the note-taking template (Figure 3) and have them write it in their notebook or give it to them as a photocopy.

5. Tell students that the image they get will be marked with a letter (A, B, C, D, E, or F) and emphasize that *they should not show the image to anyone else*. Give students their images as a photocopy or as a digital image.

Adult learners in an A2 class in Lithuania engaged in the activity. Note the QR codes on the screen and the key language written on the whiteboard.

6. Allow students a few minutes to look at their images and take notes for describing their own image. Direct them to write their notes in the correct place on the note-taking template, based on the letter of their image; for example, a student with Picture C should write their notes in the space for "Picture C: Description." Students will use these notes later to aid their oral descriptions.

7. Put students into pairs or trios to take turns describing their images and taking notes. You could also model the activity—before putting students into pairs or trios—by having one learner come to the front of the room, say the letter of their picture, and describe their image while the rest of the class takes notes. Tell students they should all begin their descriptions by saying the letter of their photo (A, B, C, D, E, or F) so that the other students know where to write their notes. Lower-level students will likely read most of their descriptions from their notes, while more-advanced learners will use their notes as an aid

during their oral descriptions. Tell students they should try to describe their image in one or two minutes, and let them know that listeners can ask the person who is describing to repeat a word or phrase, if necessary.

8. Monitor to make sure students are writing their notes in the appropriate place on the template and to help with any breakdowns in communication. You can also make notes of language being used by students to include later in feedback.

9. Have learners change pairs or groups until they have taken notes on all of the images. The first turn that students take describing their images and then taking notes will likely take the longest. It is recommended to give about two minutes per student, so if students are in pairs, give students four minutes to describe their images and then take notes, and if they are in trios, give them six minutes before asking them to change partners. It is likely that some pairs or trios will

Picture A: Description
Picture B: Description
Picture C: Description
Picture D: Description
Picture E: Description
Picture F: Description

Figure 3. Note-taking template

finish faster than others, so you can monitor to see which pairs or groups have finished and then direct students to find new partners to hear the descriptions of the other images. For large classes, it will be helpful to have learners talk with people sitting next to them, then control when learners change pairs by using a timer. For small classes, it is possible to have learners mingle to change partners.

Students should use their notes to keep track of which picture descriptions they have heard.

10. Show all of the pictures in random order, either via a handout or on a projector, and have learners individually use their notes to match the letters to the correct images. Learners can then compare their answers with those sitting close to them. Encourage learners to explain why they

All of the students are actively listening and speaking to each other and negotiating meaning throughout the activity. … Related to this is the fact that all of the language is generated by the students.

labeled an image with a particular letter. For example: "I think this is Picture A because the person said there are three people sitting on a couch."

11. Conduct open-class feedback by asking learners to say which letter corresponds to each picture and to use their notes to give a brief description of each picture. You can check the answers with the students who described each image. For example, you can say, "Who had this picture? Is this Picture A?" You can also use this time to give feedback based on what you heard while you were monitoring the activity. That is, you could write sentences with errors in the use of vocabulary or grammar on the board and have learners correct them, or you could write phrases or short sentences used to describe the images and have students combine them to form longer, more-complex sentences. You can write, "There are three people. They are sitting on a couch. They are smiling." These sentences can be combined to form, "There are three smiling people who are sitting on a couch." Another way to write this is, "Three smiling people are sitting on a couch."

EXTENSIONS

1. *Historic people or places.* For the main activity, you can use images of historic people or places. Then extend the lesson by having students read about the people or places in the images. It is important to choose historic people or places that your students cannot identify just by seeing the image. In a lesson I

taught during African American History Month, I chose leaders from the African American community that students in my teaching context were not likely to recognize, such as Mae C. Jemison, the first African American woman in space.

2. *Class discussion.* Use the images to prompt a class discussion on the topic that the images relate to. For example, in a lesson I taught on popular Christmas movies in the United States, I chose movies that learners had likely not watched. After matching the descriptions to images from the movies, I had students read short summaries of the movies, discuss which movie they wanted to see, and explain why.

3. *Writing practice.* After students complete the note-taking and speaking task, have them write paragraphs or short texts describing their images or similar images. This helps them practice text organization, use of tenses, vocabulary usage, and related skills.

FINDING IMAGES

You can visit a site like Pexels or Shutterstock to find collections of photos that you can use for this activity. You can use a search term, such as "food on a table" or "people in an office," to find photos that are similar. The more similar the photos are to one another, the more accurate students will have to be with their descriptions.

Here are links to another set of similar images (you can see these images in the Appendix):

Picture A: https://www.pexels.com/photo/close-up-shot-of-assorted-fresh-vegetables-9275193/

Picture B: https://www.pexels.com/photo/close-up-shot-of-assorted-fresh-vegetables-9275195/

Picture C: https://www.pexels.com/photo/close-up-shot-of-assorted-fresh-vegetables-9275180/

Picture D: https://www.pexels.com/photo/close-up-shot-of-assorted-fresh-vegetables-9275179/

Picture E: https://www.pexels.com/photo/close-up-shot-of-assorted-fresh-vegetables-9275176/

MY OWN EXPERIENCES

As a teacher, I enjoy doing this activity for several reasons. The first is the authentic need for communication that the activity creates. All of the students are actively listening and speaking to each other and negotiating meaning throughout the activity. While giving their descriptions, learners have to make sure they are speaking clearly, and they may occasionally have to repeat themselves if one of their classmates needs to hear a word or phrase again. While listening to other students' descriptions, learners have to constantly check their own comprehension of what has been said and ask questions if something is unclear.

Related to this is the fact that all of the language is generated by the students, so it is a rich activity for teachers to informally assess the use of vocabulary and grammar in the context of speaking; they can then pull out emerging language to highlight or reinforce areas that caused a breakdown in communication. It is also an opportunity for learners to practice vocabulary and structures they have learned in an integrated way.

Another reason this is an activity I come back to again and again is that it is versatile. I have used it as a speaking activity for students to practice using vocabulary related to people, places, furniture, and food, to name a few topics, and to practice grammar structures such as the present-progressive tense and adjective clauses. I have used it as part of classes related to American culture—for example, to highlight important women during Women's History Month by choosing images that feature accomplished women.

In addition, I have used this activity with learners with proficiency levels from A1/A2 to C2. With beginners, it is important to ensure that the images include vocabulary that students know, to scaffold the activity by providing vocabulary on the board, and to give planning time for students to look up vocabulary and make notes to support their speaking. For advanced learners, the activity can be made more challenging by choosing images that are very similar and that depict less concrete topics, and by requiring students to use certain grammatical structures, such as reduced relative clauses, or certain vocabulary related to picture descriptions, such as *foreground* and *background*.
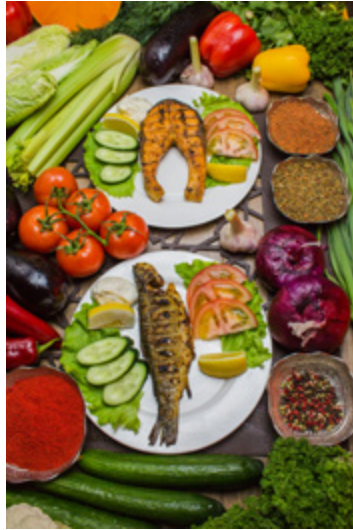
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APPENDIX: A Set of Similar Images Featuring Vegetables

A

B

C

D

E