

# Uses of Picture Stories in ESL Instruction

by Ronald F. Holt

Picture-story materials represent an extremely flexible resource for the ESL teacher. They can profitably be used for developing a whole range of language skills with students at very different levels of proficiency (from minimal to advanced) and of different ages (from children to adults).

Like visual aids generally, picture-stories possess the advantage of "immediate communication"; that is, verbal language is not necessary for the comprehension of the message. At the same time, when we wish to verbalize this message we have a clear, unambiguous reference for our efforts. Further, when a story contains wit of some sort it possesses a powerful motivating force, so that when we invite even the more reluctant speakers amongst our students to verbalize a picture sequence there is some 'point' to the exercise. An example of such a story is given in Figure 1.

It is, of course, quite difficult to come up with witty stories, especially when the contents have to be reduced to a few unambiguous frames. However, quite prosaic stories can still be demanding and enjoyable.

Generally speaking, stories can be classified as either 'implicit' or 'explicit' depending on the amount of inference needed on the part of the individual viewer to arrive at a coherent story or chain of events. The first story (Figure 2) below, for example, is relatively explicit or literal in the sense that the simple details of each picture add up fairly clearly to an easily discernible, connected sequence of events. On the other hand, in the second story (Figure 3) below, the viewer has to do a good deal more 'connecting' between each individual picture-frame; it is more implicit or inferential. It has been found that this latter type of picture-story contains a certain communication-motivation which would appear to be

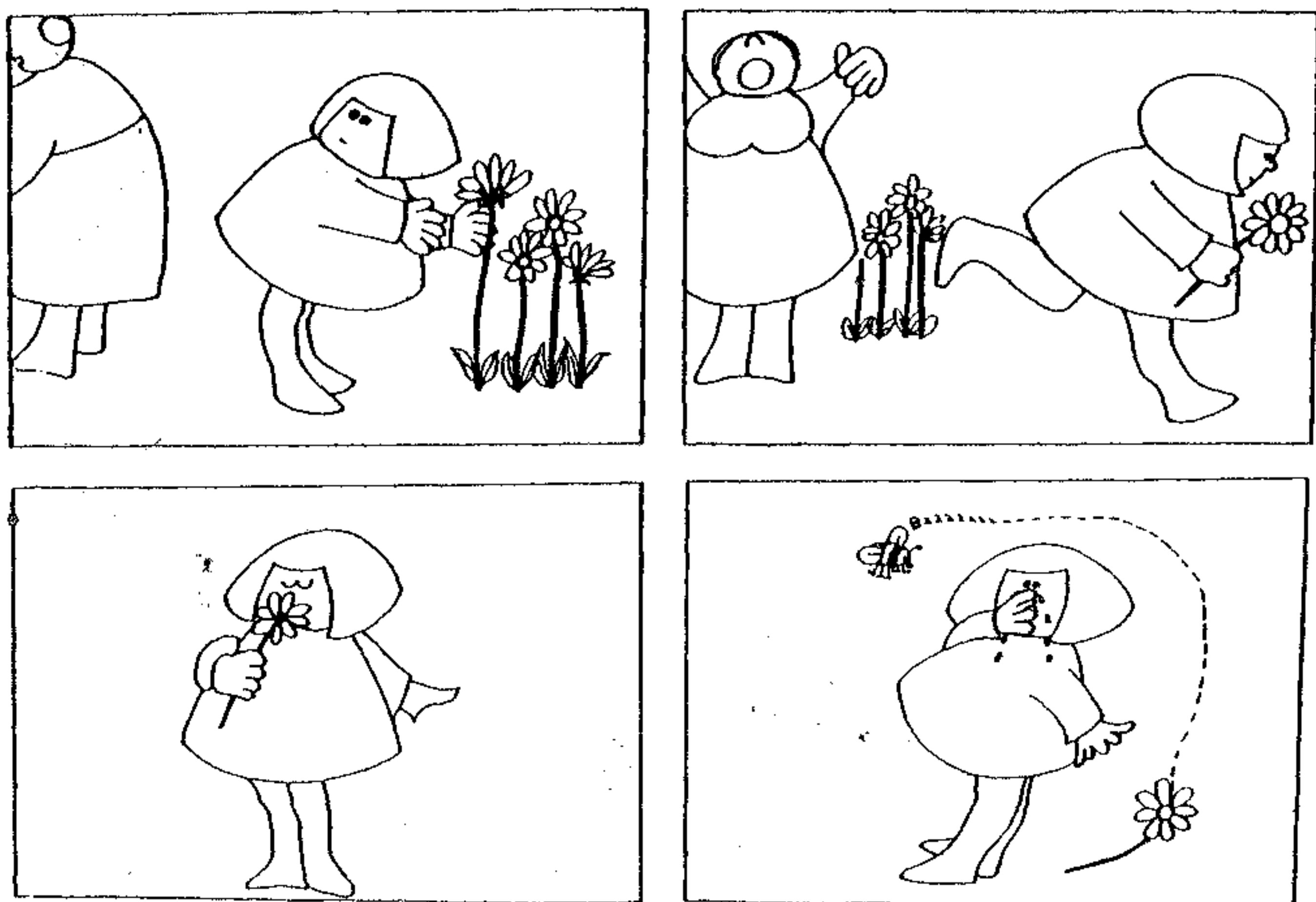


FIGURE 1

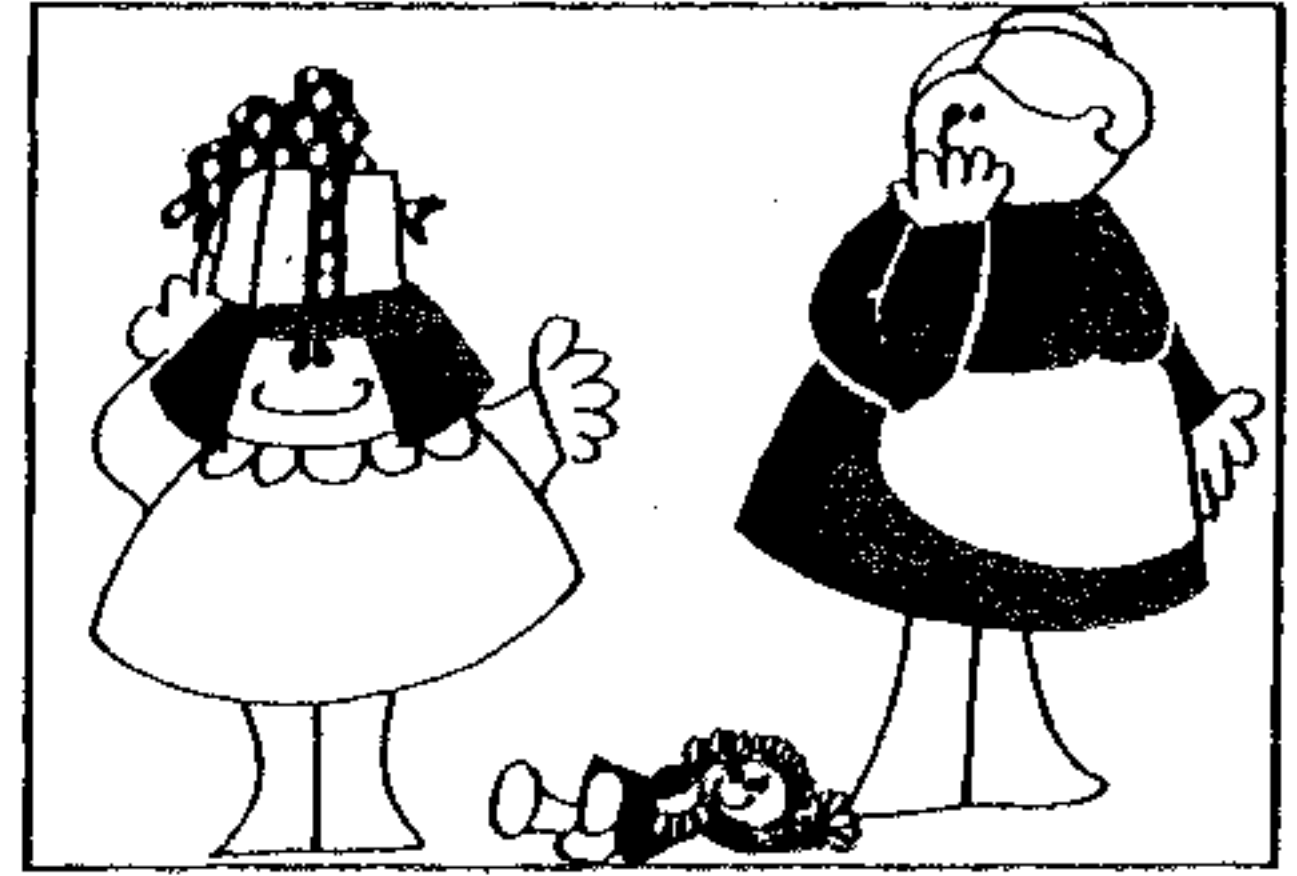
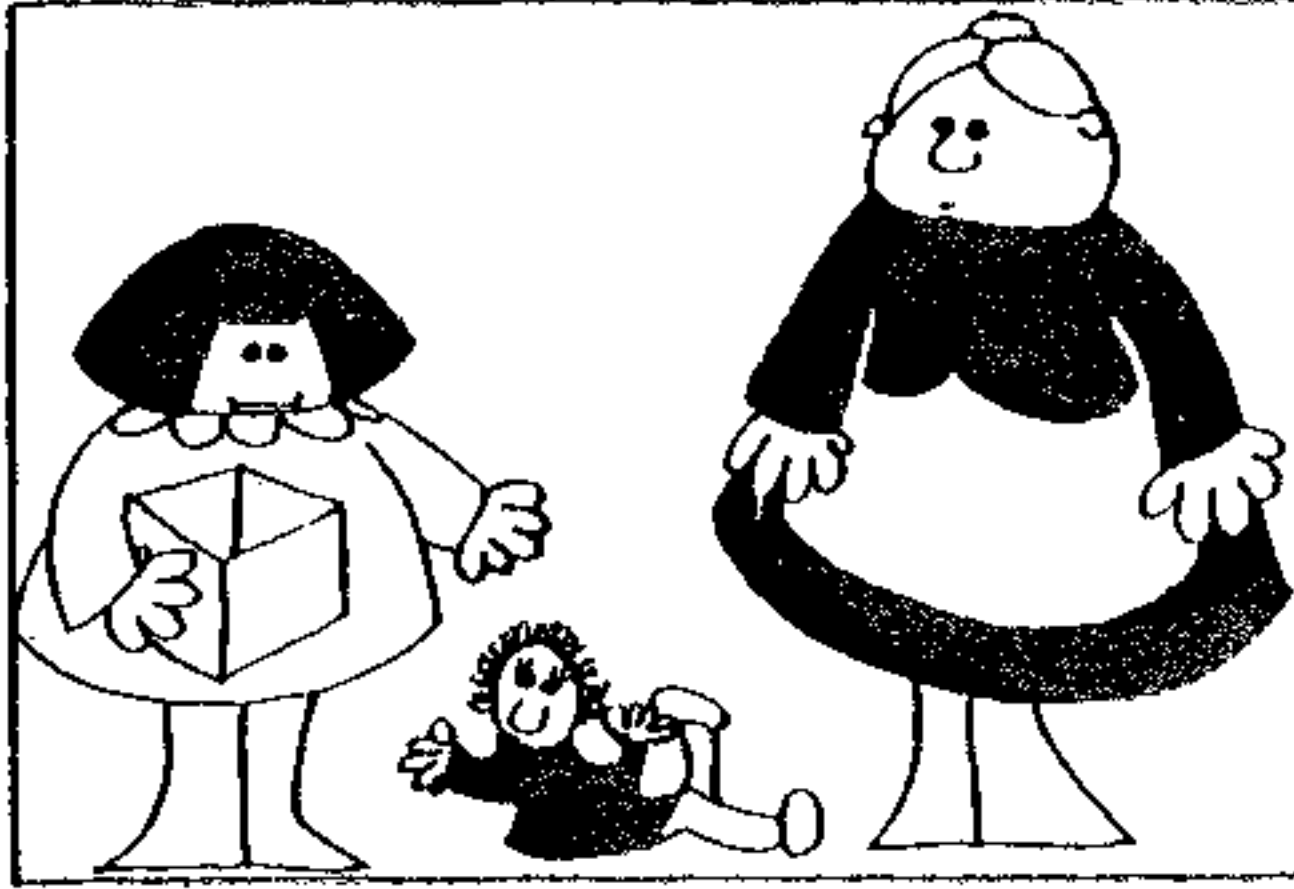
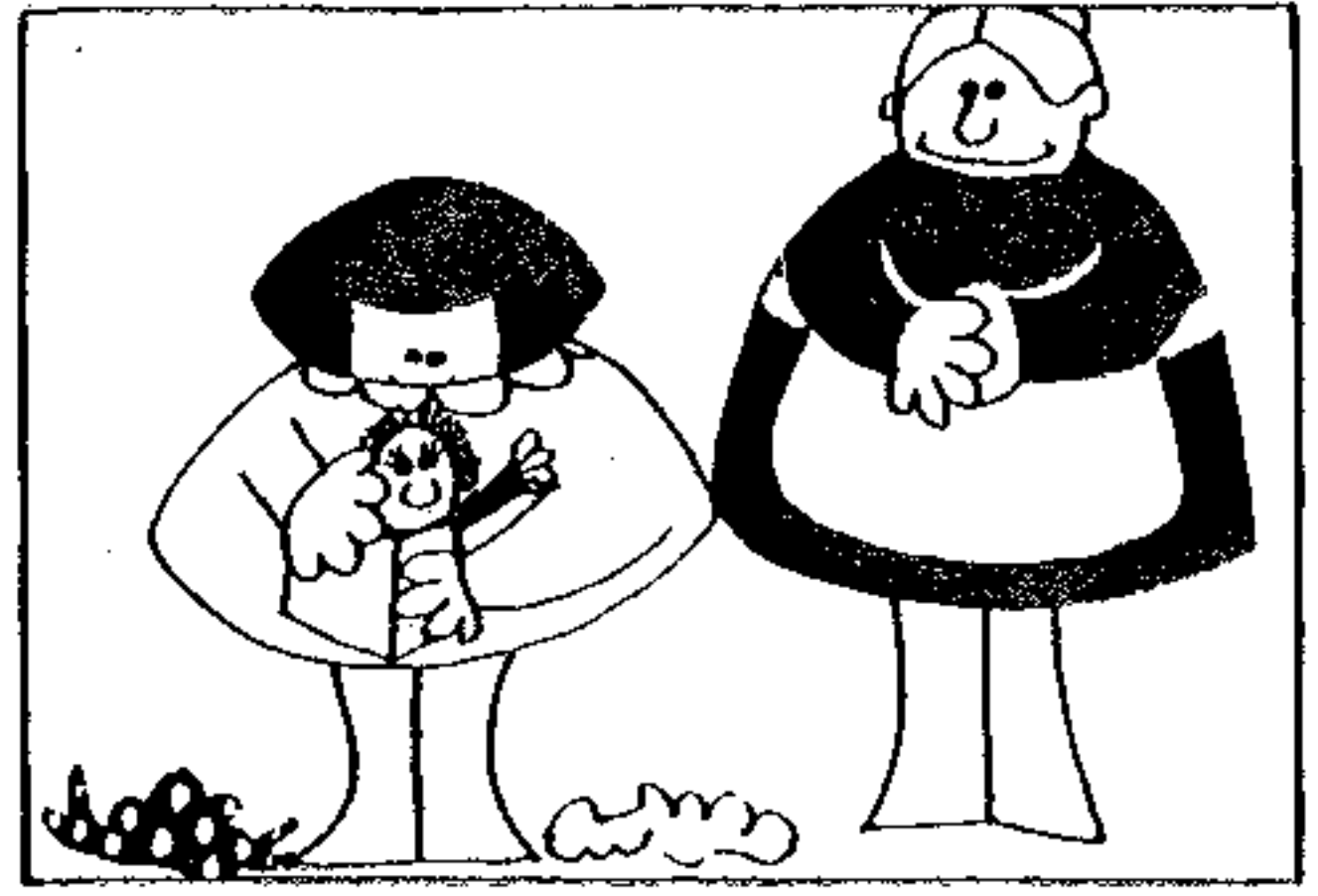
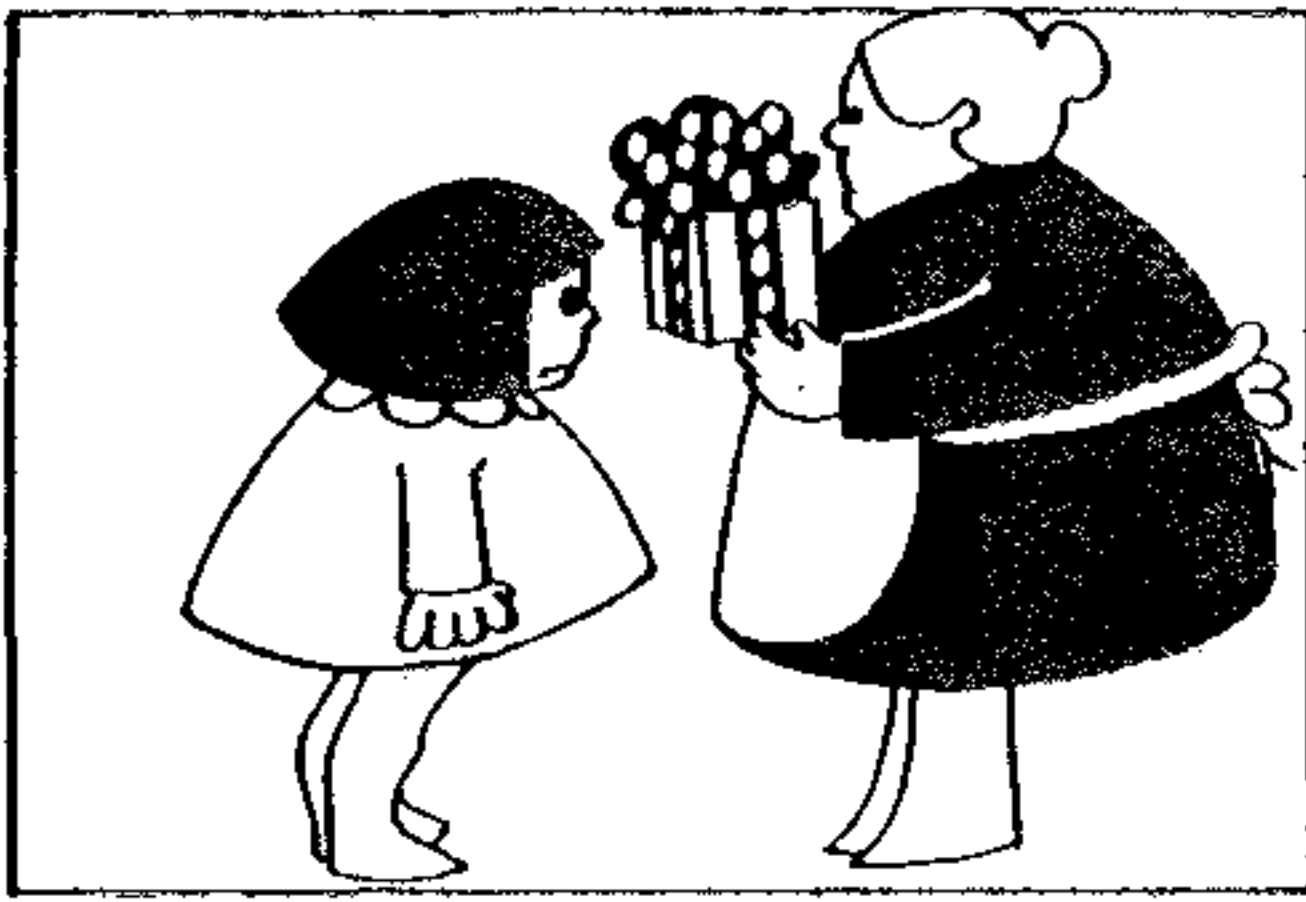


FIGURE 2

connected, again, with the afore-mentioned wit-factor.

It has also been found from experience that the style of illustration for picture-stories generally is important. As drawings they need to be relatively simple and uncluttered so that the student has more freedom to 'fill in/out' any of the details incidental to the simple story itself. That is, too much detail can inhibit both the student's attempt to summarize an action or a situation and to extrapolate from the simple to the more complex and personally relevant.

The main use of picture stories is thought to be for speaking. In addition, however, such a resource is useful for activities in the other three primary language skills: listening, reading, and writing. It is understood that this separation of language into four skills is for conceptual convenience only; in reality they are highly interrelated. Thus, although suggestions are made below for using picture-stories in terms of separate language skills, it should be clear that lots of speech activity is integral to, and should always precede, the

literacy activities; likewise, within literacy, reading activities can proceed from writing and vice versa.

In other words, it is not proposed that picture stories be used necessarily for only one sort of language skill; a particular picture-story could equally well be used for a series of activities, culminating in writing.

The aim of the various activities suggested below is to contribute over time to the student's development as an efficient communicator in both speech and print. It goes without saying that the following suggestions are proposed as only one, effective way of pursuing this aim—along with many other possible approaches.

### Speaking

1. At the simplest level, a picture story can be used, one frame at a time, to extend the student's vocabulary. Systematically, one might concentrate on nouns and related adjectives first, then on verbs and related adverbs, finally on complete sentences which might involve a particular structure. For

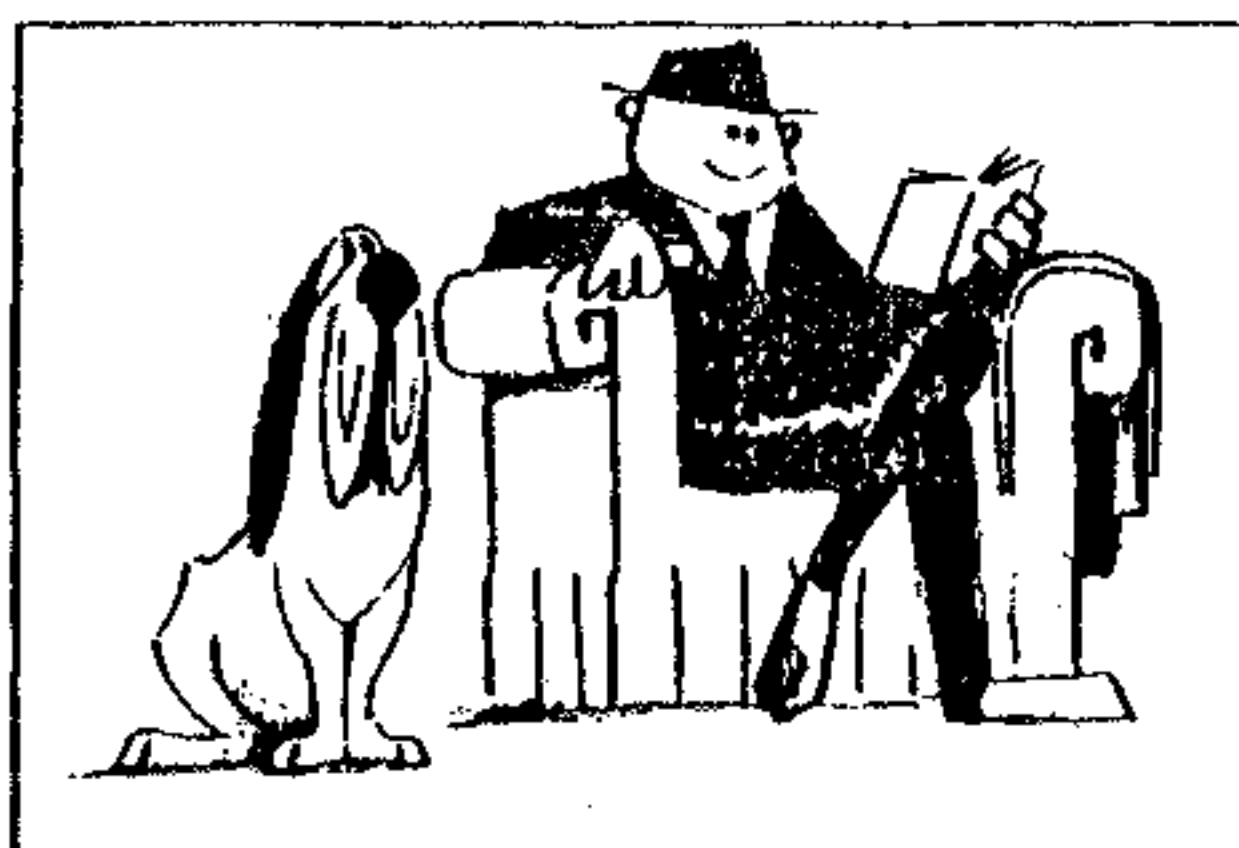
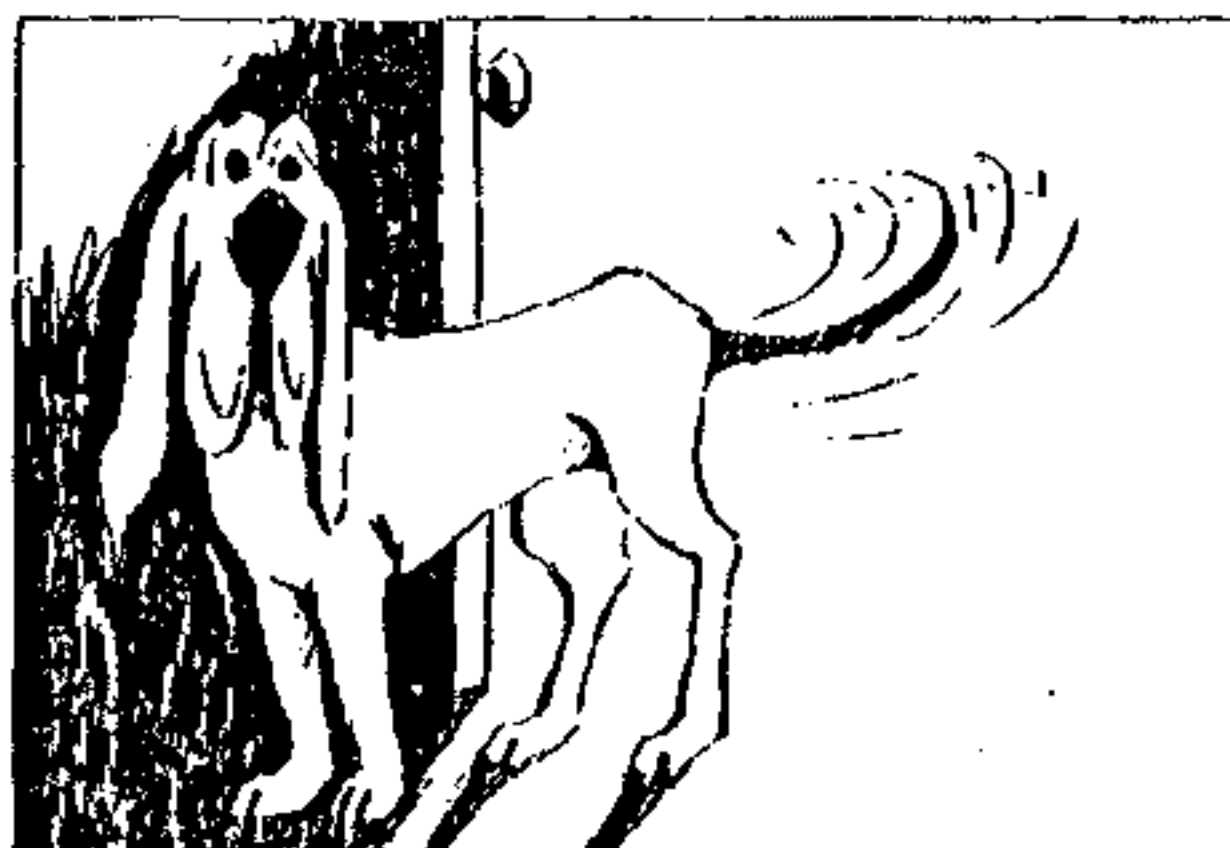
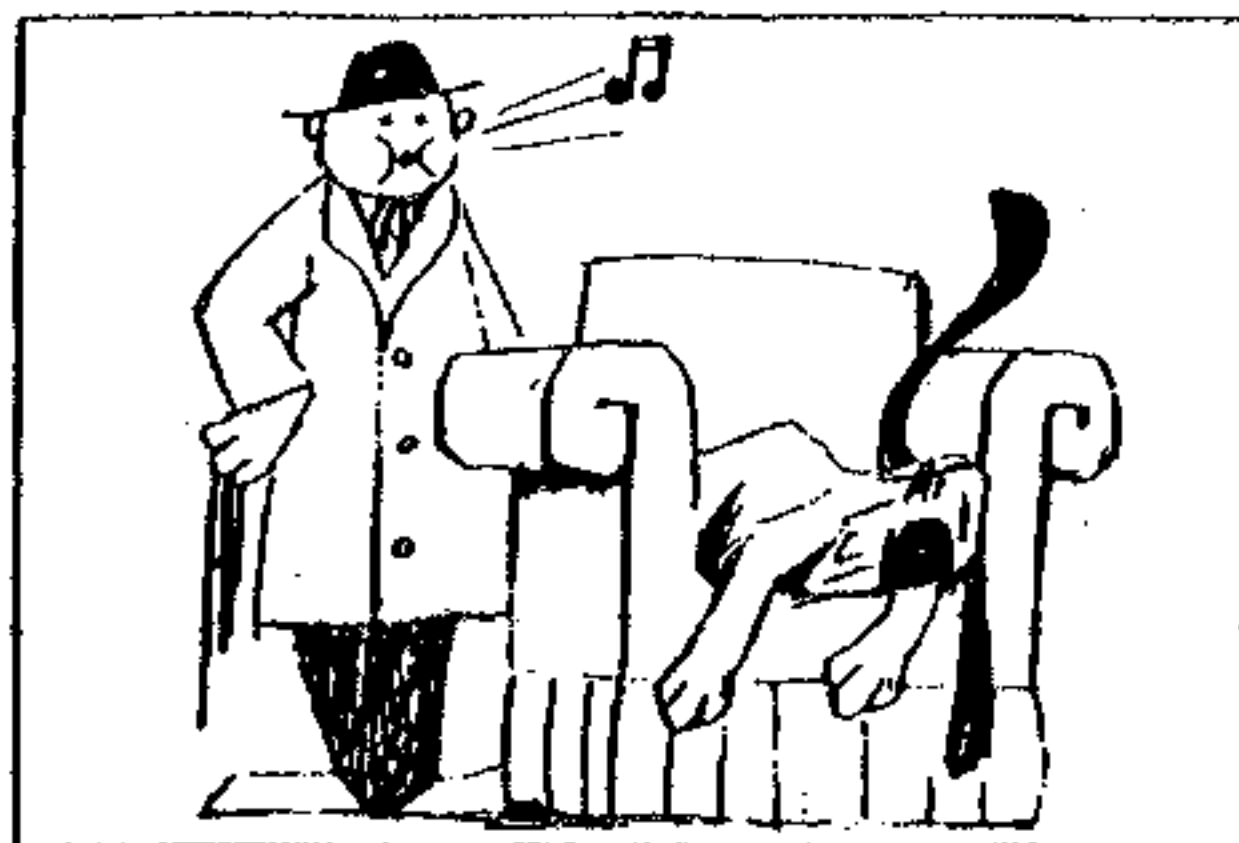
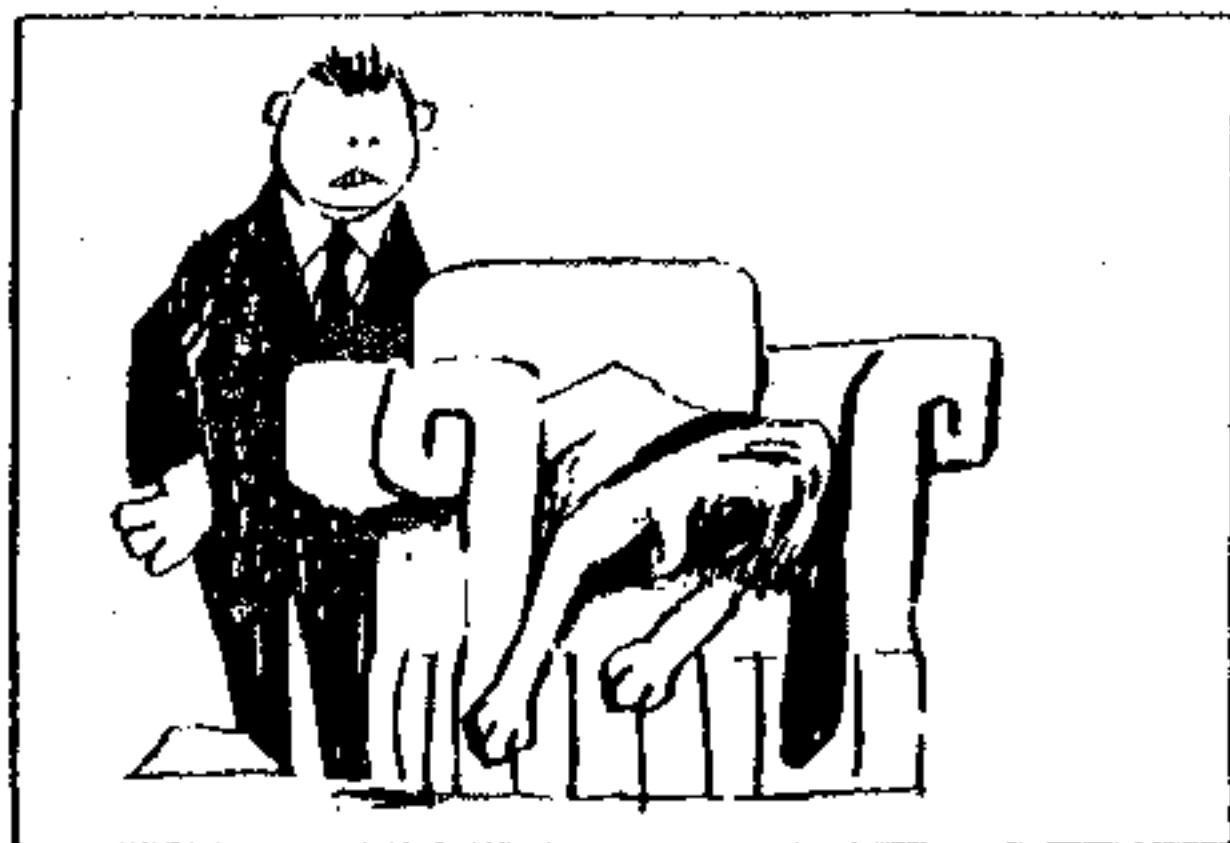


FIGURE 3

example, in the picture story shown in Figure 4 this could be achieved at the minimal level, with reference to the first frame or picture, by teacher-prompts like the following:

- What's this? (pointing to bike, shirt, shorts, boy, etc.)
- What's the boy doing? (with his legs, arms, eyes)
- How old is the boy?
- Describe him! (his clothing, hair, expression, etc.)

At a more extended level, the following sort of prompts could be used:

- What do we call these things on a bike (pointing to handle-bars) that we hold on to?
- What do we call the light on a bike? What's it used for? Why do we need one?
- What are these things (pointing to pedals)? What do we do with them? Why are they important/needed for riding a bike? etc.

2. After this general process, at the level appropriate to a particular class, has been applied to each frame in the picture sequence,

the teacher refers again to each picture in turn and requests details and formulations of a more general nature, such as (referring again to picture 1 in Figure 4):

- What can you see in this picture?
- What is he doing?
- Why is he doing that?
- What might he be thinking?
- How can he do that? (how is it possible to ride a bike without holding onto the handle-bars?) etc.

This sort of procedure would be pursued for each picture in turn again, so that each frame is thoroughly understood and described.

3. The next step would be to attempt to elicit individuals' connected accounts of the whole sequence of frames. In this, the use of connecting expressions (such as: 'then', 'later on', 'but', 'because', etc.) will be called for to give both fluency and focus to the event as a whole. If students revert to stereotyped simple sequence patterns, more or less describing one picture at a time as an isolated event, then the teacher will need to supply and provoke such "continuity" expressions.



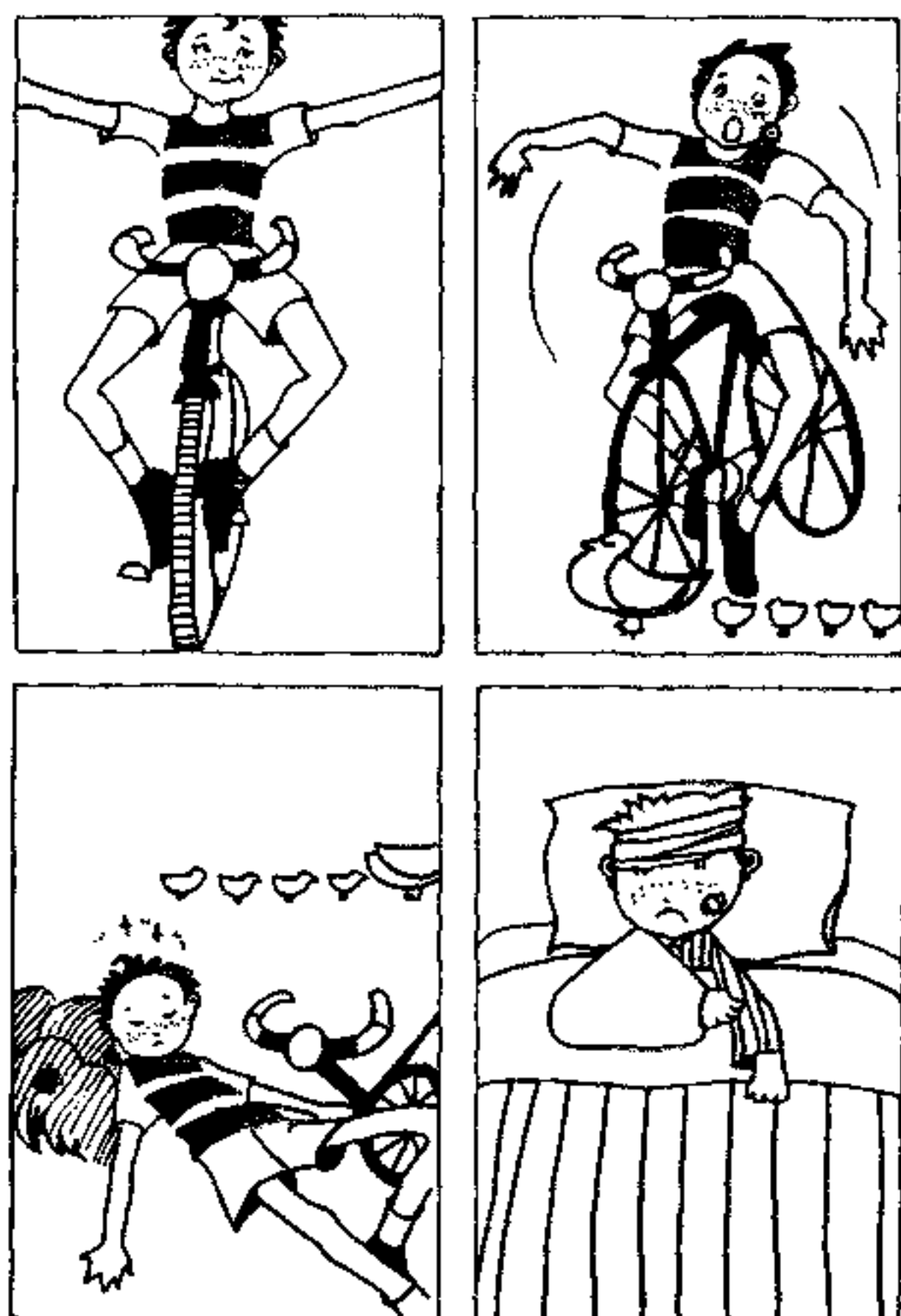


FIGURE 4

Students will vary, of course, in the degrees of detail, fluency, expressiveness, etc. with which they render the whole story, so that it is important to encourage many reformulations by different individuals. This will ensure their hearing of fuller, more interesting, and/or more grammatical accounts.

4. Variations on this simple procedure might be:

A. The whole story is retold (or told without any preparation) by a series of students; each is allowed to say only one sentence ('one thing') about the story.

This may be a 'circular' process in that the group selected is small, say three to four, so that each person has several turns as the sequence goes around the group a number of times.

Alternatively, it may be an open-ended process in that each speaker is succeeded by someone who has not spoken before — so that a large proportion of the whole class is involved by the end of the story.

B. The story is retold by each student saying only one sentence (as in A above) but this time one of the following rules is added:

1. each speaker must try to say as little as possible that contributes to the story development;
2. each speaker tries to say a sentence which is as long as possible—either by virtue of the number of descriptive words used or the number of details incorporated.  
(To ensure that the whole story is not exhausted in this manner by a single speaker the sub-rule can be added that a speaker may not describe/discuss more than one picture from the series.)
3. each speaker tries to re-tell the whole story as briefly as possible and without leaving any significant details out.

C. Each student is asked to suggest an apt name or title for the story. The class can discuss which suggestions are more fitting and why.

D. Students are invited to vary the story by:

1. suggesting a different ending;
2. suggesting an event, connected with the story but occurring much later on (i.e., projecting into an imagined future).

E. Students are invited to reflect on and speak about associations from their own or others' experiences (including fictional characters/events). Such associations may involve parallel or similar sorts of happenings or quite distant, more personal connections. In general, the sort of invitation intended is:

"Does this story make you think of something that happened to you or someone you know?" etc.

These simple steps parallel to a large extent what Garvie (1976: 5F) has called the basic steps in concept development generally:

1. Identification—simple labelling or naming of things
2. Qualification—describing things, expressing their qualities and attributes
3. Relation—comparing and associating different things.
4. Classification—grouping, categorizing things
5. Manipulation—using all of the four processes above to produce more and more elaborate ideas, such as: cause and effect, possibility, preference, remembrance, association, etc...

### Listening

Obviously, the activities suggested above for speaking involve a good deal of listening. There are, however, possible uses of the picture stories which involve a more pointed focus on listening—which, in short, place more emphasis on comprehending the spoken word alone.

1. At the simplest level, the teacher tells the 'story' of a picture series in his/her own words. The students are then shown one of the pictures which is out of sequence (that is, it is not the first picture). They are shown another picture (again out of sequence) until one has all pictures in the series in a row—visible to the students but out-of-sequence. One person can be invited to place them in their correct order, or as a whole-class activity, the pictures can be numbered (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4) and each student required to write the correct order (which, for example, might be 2, 1, 4, 3).
2. A listening-talking activity is easy to set up by pairing off the class and providing one from each pair with a picture series (small format cards). The one with the cards has to tell the story to the other 'listener' who is not allowed to see the cards which are being described. At the conclusion of the story, the speaker thoroughly mixes the cards so that they are out of sequence and hands them to the listener who must place them in correct sequence. (The students may then

change roles and the picture series may be rotated from pair to pair, etc.)

### Reading

For young, pre-literate ESL pupils it has been found that picture stories can be used successfully for beginning reading instruction via the language-experience approach. That is, the picture story forms the basis of a common experience or is an experience-surrogate for the children.

Steps in this process would be:

- A. a lot of talk about the story (along the lines advocated in the sections on speaking and listening)
- B. the production of a text (i.e. a story version) which might consist of an individual child's or a whole group's shared account
- C. the writing of this text onto word cards—by teacher and/or pupils
- D. the proper sequencing of these word cards in sentence-makers
- E. individual and/or group practice in reading the text
- F. possible further variation of the text and re-reading.

### Writing

At the more advanced level it has also been found that picture stories can provide useful, enjoyable practice in writing.

Steps in the process would be:

- A. thorough oral entrenchment of the story—and with young pupils, even some previous reading activities of the type advocated in the above section on reading
- B. the writing of more difficult words (from the points of view of spelling, grammar, or vocabulary/reading) on either the blackboard or word cards—so that each writer has ready reference to more difficult terms he/she may wish to use
- C. the students are then encouraged to write and to vary any details or the ending of the story (along the lines suggested above in variations D and E

in step four in the above section on speaking)

- D. the students should be encouraged to read their particular versions aloud.
- E. final editing for publication/display.

In general, length should not be treated as important and 'understandability' should have a higher value placed on it than grammatical accuracy. That is, phases (C) and (E) should not be confused. The former is concerned with expressing, an inventive process which needs to be as untrammelled as

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possible. Phase (E) is primarily concerned with the text's surface characteristics (which phase (D) can also aid if a spirit of helpful criticism can be encouraged) and needs to occur as a separate, final stage. The confusion of phases (C) and (E) is termed 'hypercorrection' and it will deter students from productive 'risk taking', and inculcate

the unfortunate view of writing as mere 'error avoidance'.

The main advantage of this suggested process is that students of differing ability/motivation can be stretched to their particular limits. At the very minimal level they can at least construct a written text which relies heavily on key words provided at the more creative level (which hopefully would more frequently be the case) they can be much more personal and free-ranging, and explore all kinds of ideas which may be only marginally associated with the initial picture-story stimulus.

### Conclusion

Such picture story materials represent a valuable resource for practising a number of purposeful oral, reading, and writing activities. They also afford the opportunity to practise a number of language functions: interpreting (reporting on fictive and personal events and experiences), reasoning or explaining, projecting (predicting, imagining, and empathising through encouraged identification with picture characters

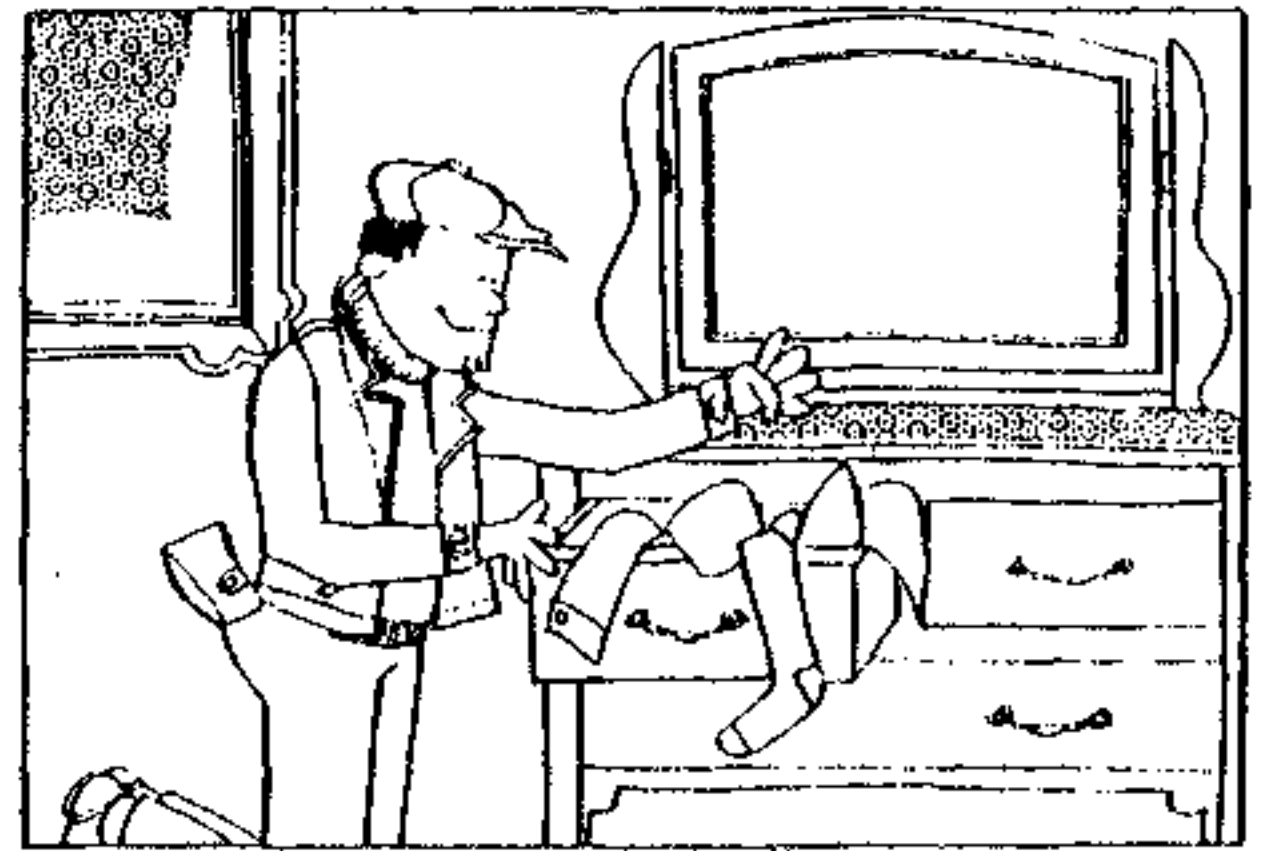
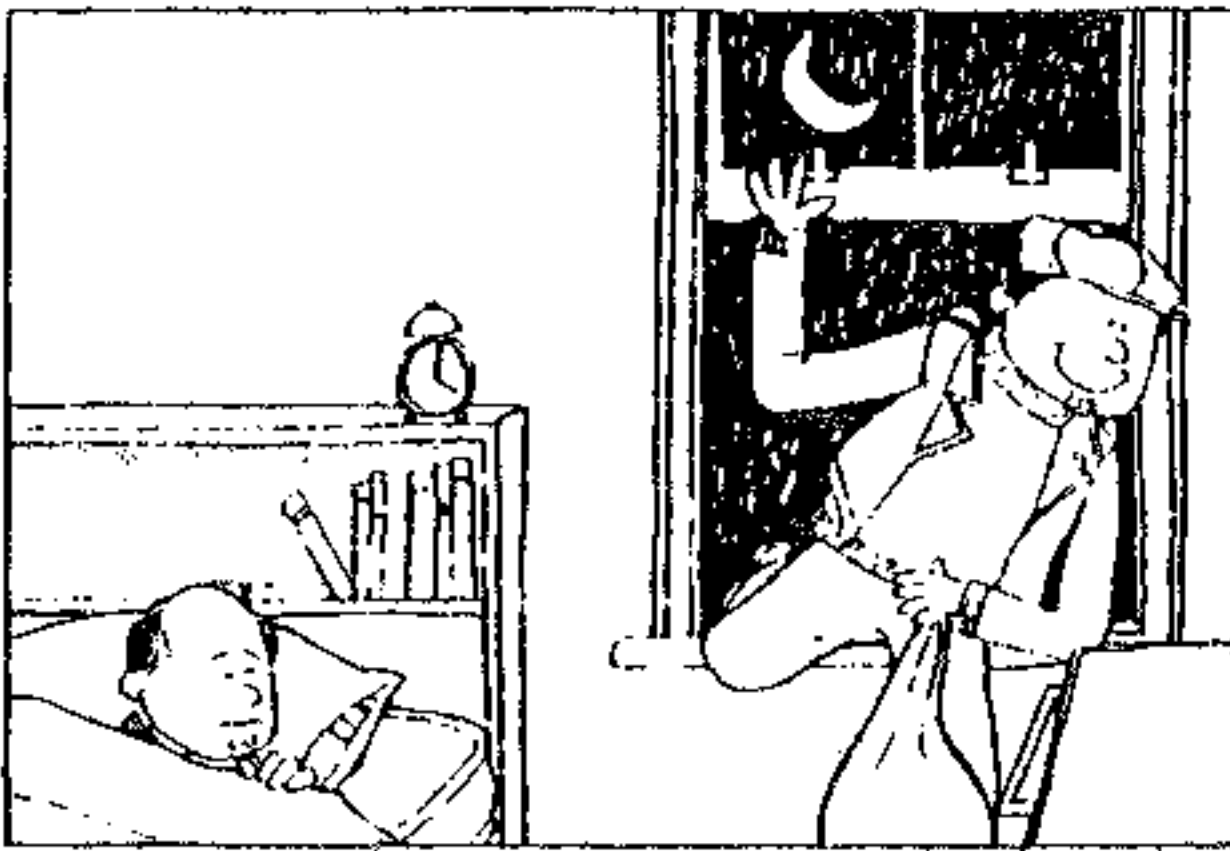


FIGURE 5



and events) and relating (or making personal connections) (see also Tough 1977, Ch. 5).

The suggestions above are, of course, only the broadest of guidelines. The most effective use of such materials, as in all teaching, would depend chiefly on the teacher's ability to encourage students' spontaneous responses and, in turn, to respond spontaneously to those responses, and so on. The best picture story is that which facilitates such responding.

Note: The author has developed a set of 23 such picture stories (five of which have been reproduced above) for ESL instruction with varying age

groups. They are available in large format (each frame in A4 size, 8½" x 11") and small format (each story on one A4 sheet) from:

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### References

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