

# Using Visual Aids in the Grammar Class

by Dennis Cone

A group of teachers was once asked, "What is the most effective classroom visual aid?" A variety of responses was given but the most common was "the chalkboard." They completely overlooked the obvious fact that even in this era of sophisticated audio-visual computer-assisted instruction, the teacher is still the most effective visual aid in any learning situation. For this reason a visual aid should never be regarded as anything more than exactly that—an aid, not an end in itself. It can assist in a multitude of ways, but the teacher should never stop trying to create natural communicative events based on the real people, emotions, actions, relationships and objects in the instructional environment. Of course, there are numerous occasions when this is not possible or practical. It is at these times that visual aids ought to be employed.

## Reasons for Using Visual Aids

There are probably as many reasons for using visuals as there are instructional aims, but generally there are two main reasons a teacher should consider using pictures, flashcards, realia, and so forth. First, visual aids increase the effectiveness of almost any lesson because they clarify meaning instantly. The old adage about one picture being worth a thousand words is nowhere truer than in the foreign language classroom. This is obviously the case in teaching basic vocabulary (particularly at the beginning levels), but can also apply to grammar. Carefully selected visual aids can help students understand grammatical relationships. Also, they often convey a great deal of cultural information which might be difficult to put into words. Another and perhaps more significant way in which visuals enhance teaching/learning effectiveness is by increasing motivation. Visual materials stimulate interest and, if used properly, hold the viewers' attention.

They have the capacity to generate a lot of natural communicative language.

These same reasons justify the use of visual displays on classroom walls and bulletin boards as well as the portable aids brought in and used for a particular lesson. Research has proven that people learn better in attractive rooms. Large colorful maps or posters not only stimulate learner language but can also help the teacher be more creative verbally. Many times a picture already on display can be used spontaneously to provide items for a substitution drill or example sentences to answer questions raised by students. These visuals should remain on display long enough for the students to fully explore them but should be changed often enough to be interesting.

Most teachers tend to associate these kinds of visual aids with younger learners or with lower level classes where words alone don't communicate efficiently. This is unfortunate because experience shows that visuals can be employed just as productively with adults at intermediate and advanced levels of instruction. Of course, teachers must choose visuals with appropriate subject matter, but more important than that, they must carefully plan their presentation and adjust the level of difficulty of the task according to the learners. Lower level students might be asked simply to identify actions in a picture, whereas more sophisticated learners could be required to draw inferences, make predictions, or describe complex situations. If the teacher regards visuals as useful tools the students will generally accept them and use them in the same attitude.

## Pragmatic Criteria for Using Visuals

Many books about audio-visuals go into great detail concerning the criteria to use in selecting or making materials for classroom use (El-Araby 1974, Wright 1976).

They normally consider such variables as content, composition, color, tone, movement, realism vs. symbolism, and so on. Three pragmatic criteria, however, should take precedence over these technical concerns:

1. The top priority should be the appropriateness of the visual for teaching a particular lesson or part of a lesson. In other words, the main thing is how well it works to introduce or clarify or practice the target structure. Naturally, a number of technical factors will influence how well it functions, but if the visual really "fits" a particular structure, there's usually a way to make it work.
2. A second criterion to consider is the size and "display-ability" of the item. If the visual aid is too small to be seen by all the students, it won't be an aid but a hindrance. The same will be true if it is too flimsy to hold easily or if for some reason it can't be fastened to the wall.
3. Finally, clarity must be considered. In most cases simplicity is the ideal. A cluttered or ambiguous presentation will make it difficult for the learners to focus on the exact feature or aspect being emphasized.

### A Functional Classification of Visual Aids

There are various ways of classifying visual aids, but a functional approach is the most helpful to the teacher. This functional classification includes three different types:

1. Display visuals (usually a larger item attached to the wall which can generate a number of sentences)
2. Series visuals (usually a group of smaller items held in the hand with each one stimulating one response)
3. Realia visuals (actual objects brought into the classroom).

These types of visuals can perform three basic functions in the grammar classroom:

1. Contextualizing (introducing a new structure in such a way that student can

understand it without recourse to translation)

2. Explaining (clarifying and illustrating grammatical principles)
3. Cueing (providing cues for drills and exercises).

Display visuals (the chalkboard, posters, charts) can fulfill all three functions and so can realia. Series visuals, however, are most effective in cueing drills.

### Possibilities of Homemade Visuals

A variety of visuals are available from publishers (see the list of sources below), but some of the most valuable are those produced by teachers themselves. Here are some examples of what you can do with homemade aids.

#### Display Visuals

The chalkboard is, of course, one of the most versatile. Its effectiveness, however, depends on careful planning. Anyone can learn to draw stick figures that are useful

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for presenting dialogs, showing grammatical relationships, and so on. Simple time lines help in explaining tenses and time words (See Figure 1). Many grammar points can be illustrated by boxes or circles labeled appropriately (See Figure 2).

It takes considerable artistic ability to produce an attractive poster, but often travel or other advertising-type posters can be obtained free. Hint: Before displaying these, put some masking tape on the back at each corner. To stick an item on the wall, make a small loop of tape (sticky side out) and place it on the tape. When you take the item down later, the tape loop can easily be removed without harming the poster.

One aid that's useful in teaching word order (basic sentence word order, direct/indirect objects, or frequency adverbs)

is a set of cards that can stand up along the blackboard chalk tray. Label each card with a part of speech. To make it more interesting, each card can be designed as a railroad car. For example, SUBJECT can be the engine, VERB the coal car, OBJECT a box car, PLACE a tank car, and TIME the caboose. There are numerous possibilities for additional cars and the train serves as a basis for a variety of exercises involving student participation.

A cardboard clock with movable hands is, of course, useful in teaching the vocabulary and structures for telling time, but it can also be used to give the cues for a number of different drills. In practicing the present perfect continuous, for instance, two such clocks could be used: one clock shows the beginning time and the other shows the "present" time. Students then make statements like: She has been watching TV for two hours.

### Series Visuals

Different sets of cards with one word or phrase on each can be used to cue various drills. To add interest each student can be given a card or two, etc. The following are

the most useful sets: modals, action verbs, places, question words, linking verbs.

Along the same line, cards using various symbols are great for enlivening transformation drills. For example, a minus sign signals a change to the negative. Changes of subject are indicated by "pronoun cards," where a lone male stick figure stands for *he*; two females means *they*, and so forth.

Slightly more elaborate pictures (stick figures and outline drawings of objects) have many more possibilities for exercises. you can make your own or buy them (Kreidler 1973.) These have several advantages. Since they use only stick figures, you can assume it's the same person in each picture and put together six or eight in a series to tell a story. Hints: Write your cues on the back of each picture. When using them in a drill, always take the back card and move it to the front (rather than taking the front and putting it behind the others). This way you know which picture is next.

Magazine and calendar pictures can be mounted on cardboard and used in the same manner. Be sure they are large enough to be seen. They work best when chosen

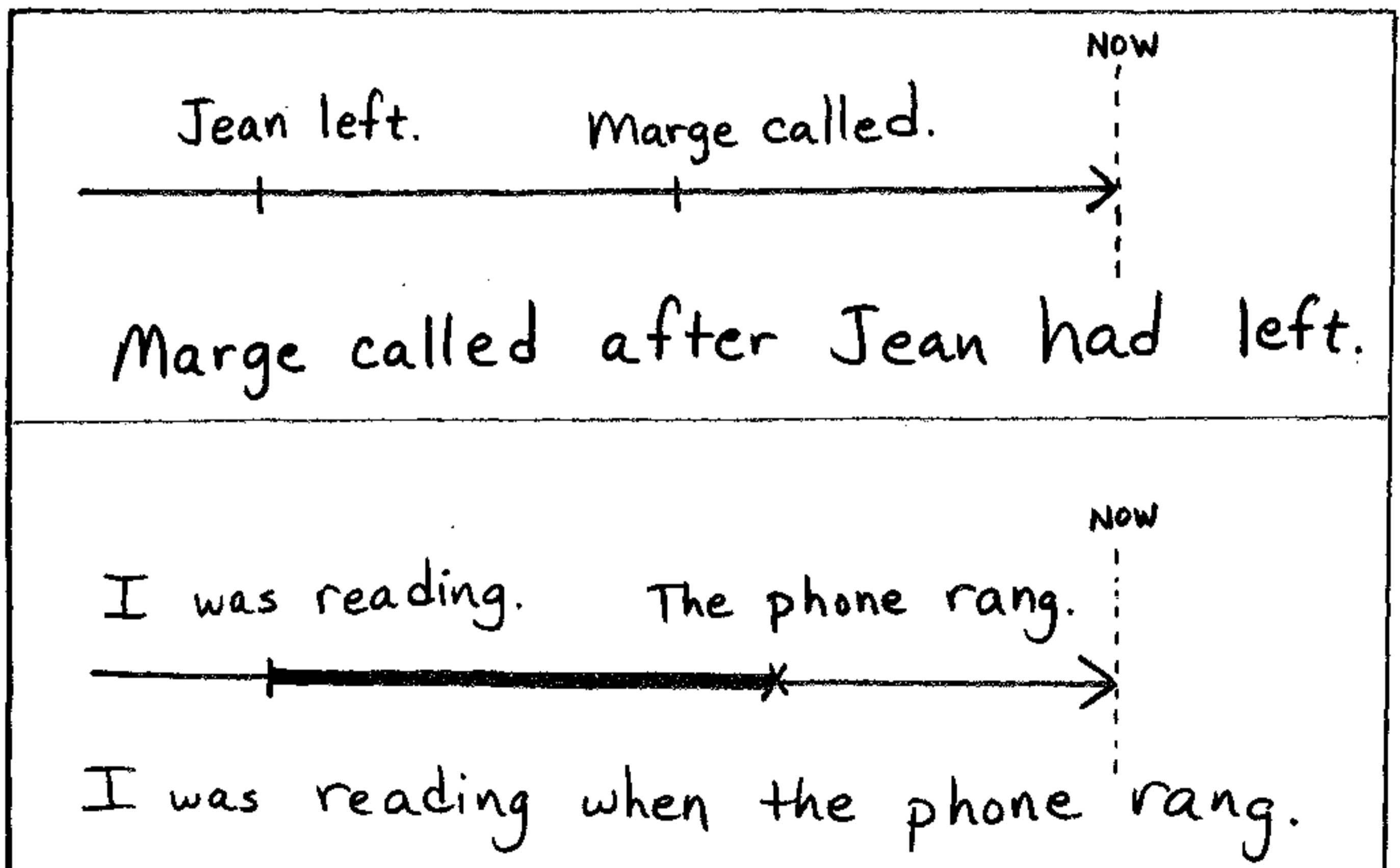


FIGURE 1

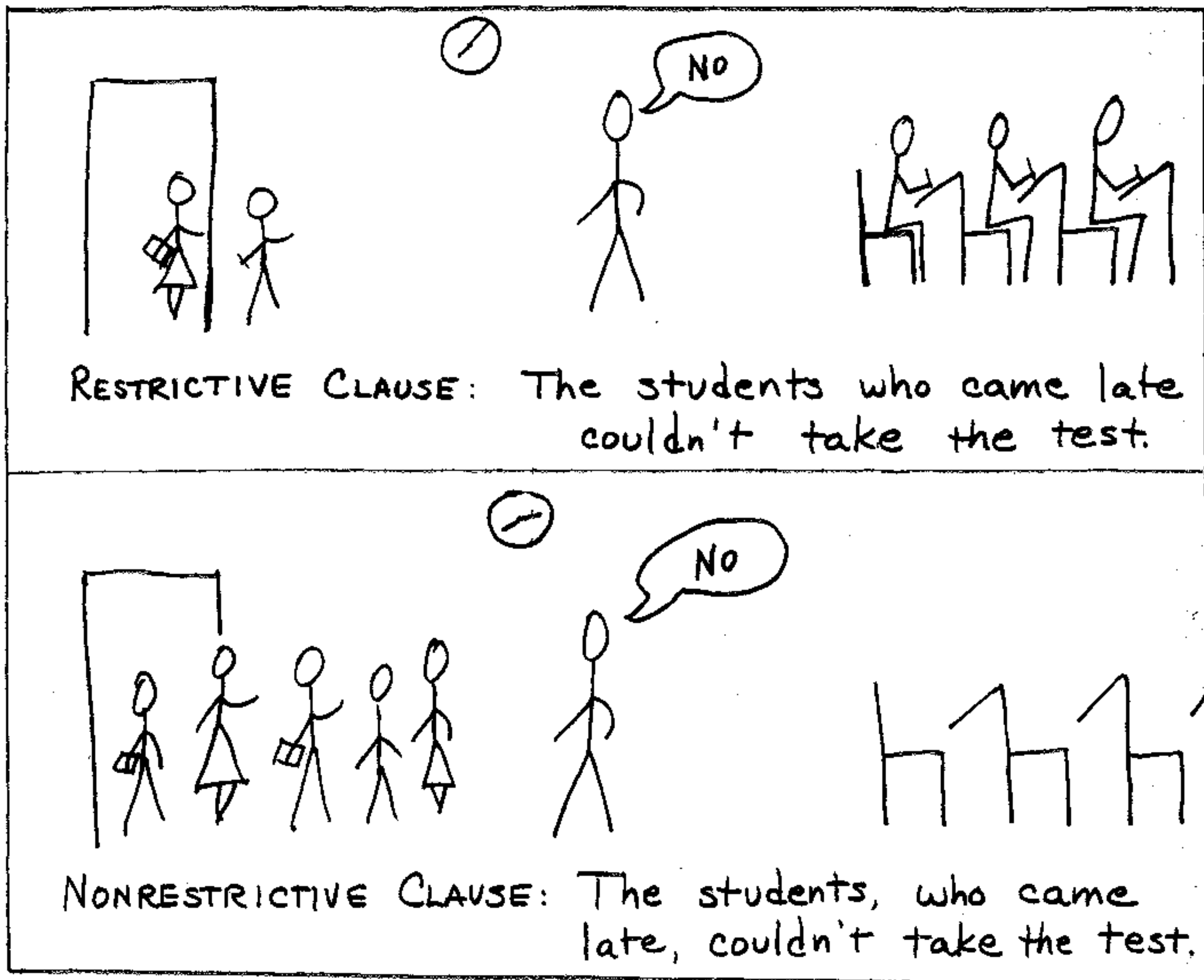


FIGURE 2

with a particular structure in mind. For example, assemble a set showing situations which can be described using the passive.

### Realia

Every teacher should have a collection of small interesting objects that students can handle. Besides teaching vocabulary, they can be used in many ways.

Distribute items to students and have them ask each other (how much/how many) questions about the objects.

Pairs of objects can be used effectively to illustrate some grammar patterns. For example, a matchbox and a baseball could be used to illustrate *too* and *enough*: "The box isn't big enough for the ball."

Give each student an object with instructions to perform some action (eat an apple, read a newspaper, count paper clips, etc.).

Have them ask each other, "What are you (is he) doing?" Then ring a bell and tell them to stop. Now they can make statements in past continuous ending with "when the bell rang."

Bring in materials and equipment to do a simple science class experiment. During the process students can describe each step using a specified structure, such as passives or conditionals.

These suggestions are just a beginning. The possibilities for enhancing the effectiveness of ESL grammar teaching by using visuals are practically unlimited.

### References

- El-Araby, Salah. 1974. *Audio-visual aids for teaching English: an introduction to materials and methods*. London: Longman.

Kreidler, Carol. 1972. Pictures for practice. In Kenneth Croft, (Ed.). *Readings on English as a second language*: 378-387. Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers.

Wright, Andrew. 1976. *Visual materials for the language teacher*. London: Longman.

### Appendix

Addison-Wesley Publishing Company  
Reading, Mass. 01867

- Picture cards (12 x 16 in.) to accompany Books 1 and 2 of the *New Horizons* series

American Book Company  
450 W 33rd Street  
New York, N.Y. 10001

- *Let's Learn English* charts and *American English* charts; both available in free-standing display binder

American Guidance Service  
Publisher's Bldg.  
Circle Pines, Minn. 55014

- "Story and *I Wonder* Posters" from Peabody Language Development Kits. Three levels, each set \$10. Write for catalog.

Easy Aids, Inc.  
256 S. Robertson Blvd.  
Beverly Hills, Calif. 90211

- "Vocabulary Through Pictures" ditto masters and/or transparencies

Follett's Michigan Bookstore  
322 S. State St.  
Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106

- *Flash Pictures* by Carol J. Kreidler (252 stick figure and line drawings on 7 x 10 in. color-coded card stock)

Harper & Row  
Keystone Industrial Park  
Scranton, Penn. 18512

- "Discussion Pictures for Beginning Social Studies" by H. J. Durrell about \$60 for 80 large pictures

LINC (Language Innovations, Inc.)  
2112 Broadway, 515  
New York, N.Y. 10023

- "Picture Pages" by Linda Ann Kunz (9 different ones; order in sets of 20 or one set of ditto masters)

Longman Inc.  
19 West 44th St.  
New York, N.Y. 10036

- *Wall Pictures for Language Practice* by Donn Byrne and Douglas Hall
- *Progressive Picture Compositions* by Donn Byrne
- *Situational English Language Picture* series (Request catalog entitled *Audio-Visual Aids from Longman—free*)

National Textbook Co.  
Skokie, Ill. 60076

- "Language Visuals" set of 8½ x 11 cards (in color) showing simple objects, articles of clothing, etc.

Newby Visualanguage, Inc.  
Box 121  
Eagleview, Penn. 19408

- Life Concepts Flashcards
- Flashcards for Verbs, Adjectives, and Pronouns
- Flashcards for Idioms (Some of these are on 8½ x 11 paper masters and some are available on 5 x 7 card stock)

Regents Publishing Company, Inc.  
2 Park Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10016

- Posters for Books 1, 2, and 3 of the Lado English Series (also available on 35mm color slides)

Scott, Foresman & Co.  
Glenview, Ill. 60025

- *English Around the World* display cards (7 x 8 in.) some in color
- *English Around the World* posters (24 x 36 in.) all 16 in color