
Title	Picture composition and target text
Author(s)	Heath, Robert
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 6(2)21-24
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

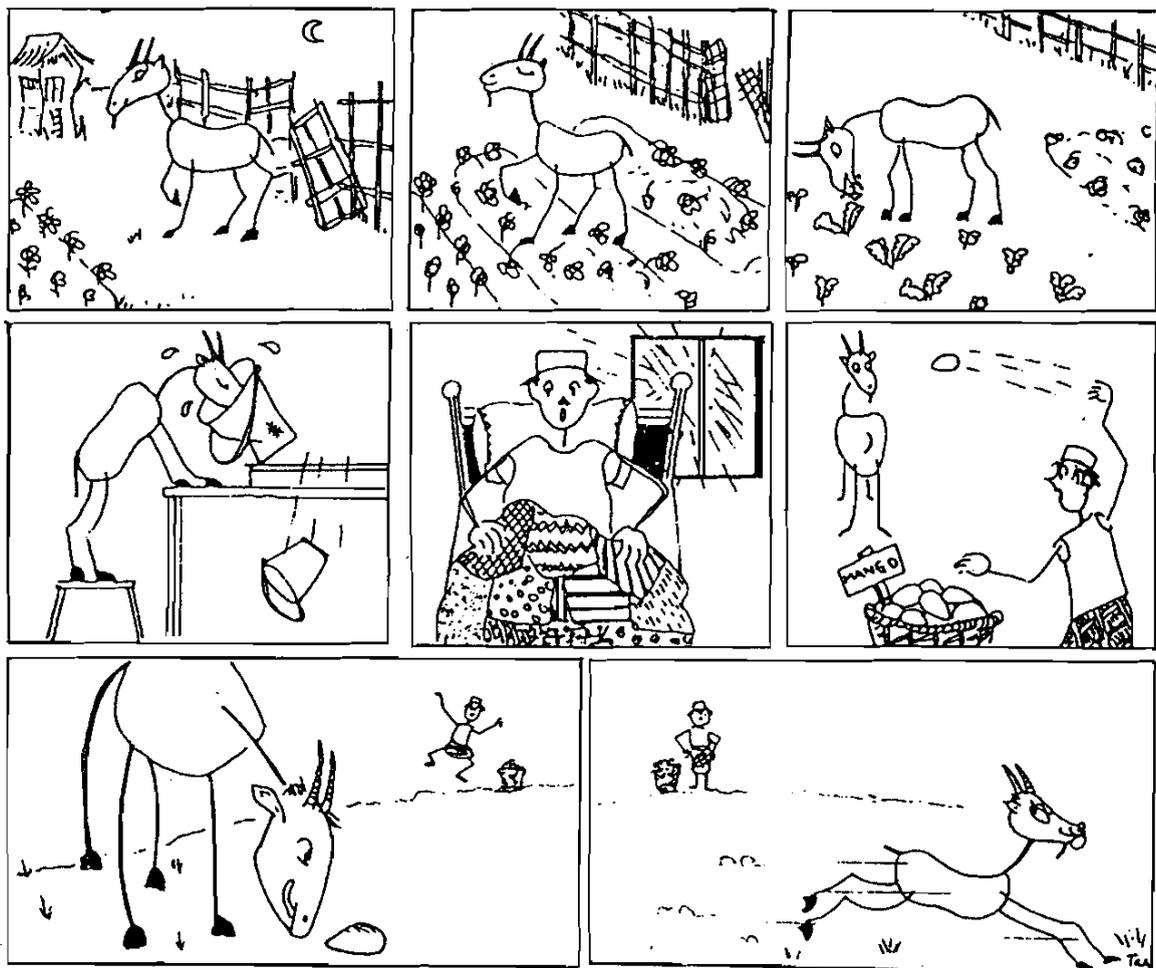
The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

PICTURE COMPOSITION AND TARGET TEXT

ROBERT HEATH

The problem

Many teachers are disappointed with the compositions children write when given pictures as an input. After all the teacher's hard work going through the story, helping with vocabulary, and asking questions they find that the written results are often not very satisfying. Here is a sample¹ based on the pictures below²:



1. The errors in the child's composition have not been corrected.
2. The pictures were drawn by Tan Kean Aun, FPCE 1982.

Mr Ahmad and the Goat

In this picture I can see one goat. I can see some vegetables. The goat is walking through the gate. The gate is open. The goat is walking on the vegetables and eating them. The goat is drinking some milk from a bucket and the bucket is falling down. Mr Ahmad wake up. I can see a basket of mangoes. Mr Ahmad is throwing a mango to the goat. The goat looks at the mango and is running away with it in his mouth.

Why is the result not what the teacher had hoped for? On the surface the composition is reasonable: there are no spelling errors, the punctuation is accurate, and the grammar is acceptable apart from *wake* (instead of *wakes*) and *throwing to* (instead of *throwing at*). So we must look deeper and beyond the sentence. The real problem with this piece is that there is a mis-match between what the teacher wants (a past tense narrative with time sequence markers) and the questions asked by the teacher to elicit the story (present simple and present continuous tenses). Most likely the teacher went through the pictures one by one in sequence asking these questions:

- What can you see in this picture?
- What is the goat doing?
- What can you see in the next picture?
- What is Mr Ahmad doing?
- . . . and so on.

All over the world primary teachers of ESL children ask questions like this when dealing with pictures. There is no problem when they take one picture at a time. But when the child strings the present continuous tense answers together, as in the sample, the results are unsatisfactory as written discourse. What can be done?

A possible solution

One way round the difficulty is to use a target text. This technique has been described in detail by Bruton and others. To construct a target text the teacher sits down and writes out what she is aiming at, at what the children could reasonably be expected to produce. Experienced teachers can do this in their heads but beginning teachers and those trying out this method for the first time are advised to write out the target text in full. Here is what a good target text for the *Mr Ahmad* story would look like:

Mr Ahmad and the Goat

One night a goat broke into Mr Ahmad's garden. First it walked over his flower beds. Next it ate his vegetables. After that it drank the water in a pail. At the same time it accidentally knocked another pail down.

The noise woke Mr Ahmad up. He got out of bed and rushed to the garden. He picked up a mango from a basket and threw it at the goat. He was very angry.

The goat looked at the mango. Then it looked at Mr Ahmad. Finally it picked the mango up in its mouth and ran off.

Note that the text uses the past simple tense, the past continuous tense, and a variety of time sequence linkers (first, after that, at the same time, finally). If the teacher is aiming at this text then her questioning will not feature the traditional "What is he doing?" questions but will follow the target text:

- One night, what happened?
- What did the goat do first?
- Next what did it do?
- And after that?
- Finally, what happened?

The answers to these questions when strung together will produce a satisfactory past tense narrative with varied time linkers.

Conclusion

Using a target text solves the problem of a mis-match between teacher oral questions and the final written product. For very weak pupils the questions can be given in written form for them to follow. From experience in the classroom the results are usually very encouraging. Those worried that such a method will restrict and suppress the creative child can be assured that imaginative children, in practice, nearly always find a way to show their flair for writing even within very structured tasks such as this one.

References

- Byrne, Donn. *Picture Compositions: A Fresh Look in Modern English Teacher* Vol 12 No. 3 (1985).
- Heath, R. W. (ed.) *Picture Composition For Singapore Primary Pupils*, Institute of Education (1982) (unpublished).
- Bruton, Anthony S. *Helping The Teacher With Limited English To Teach Composition in English Teaching Forum* Vol XXI No. 3 (1983).