



## Effects of Using Pictures on Collaborative Brainstorming in ESL Writing Classrooms

Nguyen Thi Le Phi

Lecturer of English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment,  
Vietnam

Email address: [ntlphi@hcmunre.edu.vn](mailto:ntlphi@hcmunre.edu.vn)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.1)



### Article info

Article Received: 02/03/2025  
Article Accepted: 07/04/2025  
Published online: 15/04/2025

### Abstract

There is no doubt that a picture is worth a thousand words. So why don't ESL teachers employ this meaningful and effective material in their classrooms? Since many ESL learners usually struggle coming up with ideas to write in English, a picture could serve as a good source of ideas for them. If every picture tells a story, then open-ended pictures could do even more since they provide more room for different interpretations. Meanwhile, as fun and enjoyment are important constructive factors in any language class, funny pictures should be used for in-class writing tasks. This paper, motivated by research on effects of pictures on language learning and illustrated by a two - hour lesson plan, advocates the employment of pictures in teaching L2 writing. The target population, working in groups, are encouraged to be creative first in collaborative brainstorming and then in comparison-contrast writing based on the assigned funny open-ended picture(s).

Key words: picture, writing, collaborative, brainstorming, learners, teaching.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Due to the increasing number of ESL students in the world in recent years, there has been a pressing need to examine the difficulties these students encounter in studying English, especially in writing, the highest outcome of mastering a language. Writing is a complex and complicated activity that requires various writing skills and practices. Writing assignments in the classroom can be difficult and challenging for native English speakers.

Writing in English is even more challenging for ESL learners who are struggling to achieve an academic goal. Knowing those learners' writing problems and how they develop their writing skills in English, ESL teachers can apply more suitable teaching approach as well as employ more effective instructional materials and/or techniques in teaching writing to them. Therefore, it is fairly safe to say that how much and how well ESL learners, especially those in the beginning or intermediate levels, develop

their English writing skills basically depend on how much and how well they are taught and trained in the writing classroom.

Research in the field of language learning has shown ample evidence of the effects of pictures on learners' free production such as speaking or writing (e.g., Vail, 1975; Lee, 1994; Hu & Commeyras, 2008; Evans, 2009; and others). In language classrooms, pictures are often used to introduce a theme that learners write about and they may even be used as the writing prompt. However, pedagogical arguments that are carefully thought out about the use of pictures in ESL writing instruction are insufficient. Indeed, research about the impact of pictures on adult ESL learners are rare since the majority of the existing very modest number of those studies have been focused on children's language learning. Therefore, it would be useful to have a closer look at effects of pictures on adult L2 learners. This persuasive paper is an advocacy to the employment of pictures in teaching writing to ESL college pre-intermediate and high intermediate students. At this proficiency level, most ESL learners have a fair volume of English grammar and vocabulary. Yet, when it comes to writing, most of them report having a hard time producing a written product in English, even in small assignments such as writing short paragraphs or journal entries. In most cases, insufficiency of ideas to write is one of the most frequent claims as a reason for those learners' writing difficulties. This paper suggests that using open-ended pictures in practices of collaborative brainstorming not only can assist ESL learners to enrich their ideas for writing but can help them to be more creative in thinking as well.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Investigating how pictures can be used as an effective guided writing tool to facilitate ESL students' writing process, Lee (1994) argues that writing from viewing a picture(s) focuses on "functional skills" that require learners to use the target language in a meaningful way, and

thus proves its effectiveness in L2 teaching and learning. Besides, the study also highlights that many ESL students consider the use of pictures in L2 writing as making a significant contribution to other skills, prominently creative thinking in collaborative work. This is a very interesting point of the study since it emphasizes the usefulness of pictures in L2 writing settings and, as a result, implies a suggestion that this pictorial approach should be employed in ESL language classrooms.

Also discussing the effects of pictures in ESL classrooms, Hu & Commeyras (2008) indicates that wordless pictures or picture books are particularly promising for learners who wish to achieve a higher level of both reading and writing in a second language. According to this article, wordless pictures or picture books are the perfect teaching materials to provide ESL learners with not only ideas to construct a story but the concept of the story structure as well. Similarly, (Vail, 1975; Evans, 2009) contends that wordless pictures help motivate learners in improving their L2 writing skills since the absence of many unfamiliar words in English would allow the learners to learn in a way that is most comfortable for them and thus enhance their confidence in learning to write in the target language.

In addition to the argument in favor of effects of wordless pictures on L2 learning, Hu & Commeyras (2008) also emphasizes that reading pictures and storytelling through writing helps develop creative thinking as well. According to this research, creativity is a mental and social process involving the discovery of new ideas or concepts, or new associations of the creative mind between existing ideas or concepts. However, with respect to academic settings, creativity is not simply the act of making something new but the products of creative thought, indeed, should have value and reflect appropriateness simultaneously.

Since this persuasive paper is meant to highlight the effects of using pictures on collaborative

brainstorming in ESL settings, it should be also helpful and relevant to have a look at research on brainstorming practice(s) in language classrooms. Brainstorming is best considered a device for stimulating the production of ideas. Indeed, it is a discussion technique usually practiced by a group whose size may range from as many as several hundred to as few as two (Coon 1957). According to this research, although brainstorming works well in business field, where it originated, its importance and effectiveness are even greater in education disciplines. In language classrooms, brainstorming usually involves cooperative thinking by groups and is mainly used to elicit the production of learners' new ideas upon those already expressed.

Obviously, the above-mentioned pedagogical implication by Coon (1957) is one of the most important usages of collaborative brainstorming since one idea originated by a student can help elicit another from his/her group- or teammate. By that way, several ideas will be added up to the original one until the whole group get the job done. Just like that, one expressed thought by a student might first draw an immediate attention and then a finger snap from his/her peer(s) since it is exactly the same idea that might have not been well developed in his/her mind due to a language barrier or situational factors such as time limit on the assignment or stress. In several cases, the first idea by one group member might help generate or ignite completely new ones from the others and thus make up a list full of interesting ideas ultimately. Therefore, by assigning brainstorming practices in ESL classroom, teachers can stimulate in students more creative and original thoughts which are necessary for their writing assignments. Then, towards the end of the course, students will have achieved something of major importance - improving their second language writing skills.

Based on Coon's (1957) ideas about brainstorming, Lindgren & Lindgren (1965) makes one step further to examining

collaborative brainstorming. It is affirmed in this article that group members in most general disciplines can benefit from group interactions since collaborative discussions (brainstorming, in other words) do facilitate creativity. In addition, group brainstorming is also viewed as a kind of learning situation in which an individual gets a better idea of the nature of the task and learns how to produce better ideas since he/she can think up twice as many ideas as when working with a partner(s) than when working by him-/herself. Thus, Lindgren & Lindgren (1965) concludes that group brainstorming not only helps to raise a participant's interest level in the task but also subsequently facilitates creativity for each group member.

Also prompted by previous studies on the impact of collaborative brainstorming in language classrooms, Clawson (1993) examines the writing process of junior high students as well as their attitudes toward writing in collaborative work in the classroom. The study points out that many of students' writing problems stem from their lack of interpersonal skills such as creative or critical thinking about the topic or lack of confidence in their ability to write alone. The study also found that developing students' interaction skills, especially through collaborative work, could significantly contribute to their improvement in writing. It is also indicated in the study that interacting with peers in writing not only helps develop students' thinking and understanding about the topic but also helps boost their confidence and strengthen their weakness(es) in writing.

Obviously, research on language learning has shown ample evidence of the effects of pictures on learners' free production. Indeed, it has been well documented that in language classrooms pictures can be used to not only help facilitate learners' writing skill(s) but also stimulate their creative thinking. However, there has been very few research about open-ended pictures particularly. If every single

picture in general tells a story and thus could serve as a good source of ideas for writing for language learners, then an open-ended picture in particular could do even more since it provides more room for different interpretations and/or discussions. As a result, open-ended pictures could provide language learners with more chances of being creative in both thinking and writing. Therefore, it is suggested that more research should be done on the impact(s) of open-ended pictures on language learning, especially in EFL/ESL settings.

### LESSON PLAN

- Course: Writing Class
- Number of students: 25
- Level: Intermediate
- Topic of lesson: In – class writing task (Students are asked to write a Comparison – contrast essay to compare the two classroom environments)
- Objective: This two – hour lesson plan is designed to help students be used to the process of brainstorming in collaborative writing in L2 classrooms. The lesson plan also includes activities of outlining, drafting, and revising/editing. After the lesson, the students can create their own outlines

#### • LESSON OVERVIEW 1 (The first fifty minutes)

STAGES	TIME	TEACHER	STUDENTS
1	10 minutes (Consolidation)	Teacher briefly reviews the concept of organization of an essay (Introduction – Body Paragraphs – Conclusion)  Suggested questions:  What is a hook?  What is a thesis statement?  What is a topic sentence?	Students listen and take notes

with points of comparison using the given pictures, and also they can have their drafting which will be revised later. Students will be able to do all steps of the process writing model, especially brainstorming based on a provided open-ended picture, and to compose creative and meaningful comparison – contrast essays based on the brainstormed ideas as well.

- Preparation:
- Hardware: laptop, projector
- Software: power point
- Others: pictures, blackboard, chalk, microphone.
- Procedure:

Before this period, the students were already taught the organization of a Comparison – contrast essay, and they come to this period in two and a half hours for practice what they have learnt.

- Skill area: Writing, vocabulary, and speaking.
- Materials: papers, pens or pencils, pictures for classroom assignment taken from course book, Effective Academic Writing 2, second edition by Alice Savage and Patricia Mayer.

		Teacher lists all of the information reviewed on the board	
2	25 minutes (Brainstorming)	<p>Teacher divides students in 4 groups and gives 1 picture to each group. There are 2 different open-ended pictures (Appendix A).</p> <p>Teacher shows the picture on the slide and asks the students to name the two pictures for corresponding classroom environments and interpret them.</p> <p>Teacher asks 4 groups to pass their notes as well as the pictures to another group for more brainstorming.</p> <p>Teacher divides the board into 4 columns for the groups to write their notes.</p>	<p>Two groups will work on the same picture and do identical activity.</p> <p>They are asked to name the pictures and interpret the pictures by eliciting the distinguished features of the pictures.</p> <p>Each group will share their notes on the board.</p>
	15 minutes (Outlining)	Teacher asks the groups to look at the pictures on the slide and the information on the board to recognize the similarities as well as the differences between the two classroom environments. (The above-mentioned similarities and differences are considered as points of comparisons in the essay.)	Each group will work together to find out the similarities as well as the differences from the given pictures and provided information.

• LESSON OVERVIEW 2 (The next fifty minutes)

STAGES	TIME	TEACHER	STUDENTS
1	20 minutes (Drafting)	<p>Teacher reviews the terms of <i>drafting</i>, <i>revising</i> focusing on content and organization, and <i>editing</i> focusing on grammar for students' better understanding.</p> <p>Teacher asks students to think up an appropriate hook for the topic, and keep working on the drafting step based on peers' brainstormed ideas and outlines to finish the three main parts of their essays.</p>	<p>Students listen and take notes</p> <p>Students work on their drafts individually</p>
2	20 minutes (Revising and Editing)	Once again, Teacher asks the groups to sit together to pass their newly-written essays to one another for revising (focusing on content and organization),	Students use the provided checklist (Appendix B) for revising and editing.

		and editing (focusing on grammar and vocabulary)	
3	10 minutes (Refining - the final version)	Teacher asks students to re-write the final version	Students work on their revised-and-edited essays individually

### Assessment:

During the activities, Teacher observes the groups to see how quickly and how well they are able to work collaboratively on brainstorming, outlining, and drafting with the provided pictures. Also, teacher walks around to see whether the students are able to compose and then revise/edit their peers' essays. After all the activities, Teacher assesses whether all the objectives are met.

Note: The checklist is adapted from the Editor's Checklist taken from the course book. (Appendix B)

### DISCUSSION

The above-mentioned 2-hour lesson plan does serve as a specific guideline for process writing instruction with a focus on collaborative brainstorming aided by open-ended pictures. First, the given pictures help explicit stimulation of the students' imagination about distinguished features of the given pictures and thus strongly invite creativity in the production of ideas. Next, the brainstorming activities, based on cooperative group work, are meant to help the students build and improve upon ideas already expressed. Since students' experiences as well as feelings towards identical assigned picture(s) might be different, the picture(s) could give them several opportunities to collaborate with each other to come up with the best ideas.

In the meantime, students could enjoy the fun and interesting classroom environment since the writing prompts and the writing activity itself are fun. Given such an enjoyable and stress-free classroom atmosphere, students

could enjoy themselves enthusiastically participating in the activity and thus enjoy writing in English, which is also an important element for L2 learners who wish to become more fluent writers. Then, the employment of open-ended pictures which provide writers with plenty of room for different interpretations also helps build up students' self-confidence when writing in an L2; students are strongly encouraged to be creative in doing the assignment and indeed they could feel free to come up with any interesting ideas they have about the assigned picture(s), not being controlled in a sense that the teacher provides guidelines/requirements for production.

In addition, other than the fun writing activity, students also have several opportunities to practice speaking in the target language going through process writing steps. In the meantime, as per the lesson plans' procedures, besides several chances of doing brainstorming, there are also some room for peer revising as well as editing from which the students can profit more for content, organization, and specific grammar errors. These two techniques of first looking for error(s) in their peers' work and then fixing them can help solidify their own knowledge of Comparison-contrast Essays in particular and thus improve their L2 writing skills in general. Plus, the lesson plan provides the students with a chance to learn some L2 vocabulary in contexts as well. Also, by assigning several practices of brainstorming in class, ESL teachers can stimulate in students more creative and original thoughts along with a greater understanding and tolerance for the ideas of others. In that respect, ESL teachers will have achieved

something of major importance which is beyond the specific academic goals/objectives of the class-whether or not the students reach any final conclusive solutions in their brainstorm sessions.

As being consistent with previous research about the influence of pictures on L2 writing, this paper strongly recommends that ESL instructors should use these meaningful instructional materials in language classrooms. Besides the prominent advantage of highlighting specific characteristics of the writing assignments, pictures also provide great opportunities for collaboration in classroom settings. Furthermore, other than their usage in eliciting learners' ideas for writing, pictures could be an excellent companion that provides L2 teachers with effective tips/hands-on to teach writing traits: ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and even presentation in some cases. In addition, they also help teachers easily monitor the activities in class as well as the writing products after all. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that ESL instructors should employ both the team-work technique and pictures, the helpful and effective teaching material, in language classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this paper could contribute to the understanding of how pictures, especially open - ended ones, aid ESL students in collaborative work for creative ideas about an assigned topic in writing, and thus help develop their English writing skills ultimately. Besides, this paper is aimed to identify the instructional needs that are pertinent to the writing development of ESL learners. It is also expected that this paper will help teachers and educators to understand the patterns of writing development of ESL students, to become better informed about the struggle and frustration that recent ESL students face, and to develop writing instruction that is adequate to help improve the writing of these students.

For ESL composition instructors who are teaching process-oriented writing, this paper supports the necessity for teachers to emphasize to the students the importance of producing a "good" working draft. Generating ideas and using the correct grammar to express them in an early draft is very important for ESL writers, especially those at intermediate level, as they are not skilled enough to find all of their errors in later drafts. Moreover, if an early draft has not been carefully written, students might find themselves faced later with such a high rate of errors to be worked on that they may become overwhelmed and be less likely to correct a good percentage of them.

## References

- Clawson, S. *The Impact of Collaborative Writing on the Individual*. Teaching & Change, 1, 1993, pp. 55-69.
- Coon, A. M. *Brainstorming - A creative problem-solving technique*. Journal of Communication, 7, 1957, pp. 111-118.
- Evans, J. *Talking Beyond the Page - Reading and Responding to Picturebooks*. NY: Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.
- Hu, R. & Commeyras, M. *A Case Study: Emergent Biliteracy in English and Chinese of a 5-year-old Chinese Child with Wordless Picture Books*. Reading Psychology, 29, 2008, pp. 1-30.
- Lee, L. *L2 Writing: Using Pictures as a Guided Writing Environment*. Research in the Teaching of English, 13, 1994, pp. 67-88.
- Lindgren, H. C. & Lindgren, F. *Brainstorming and Orneriness as Facilitators of Creativity*. Psychological Reports, 16, 1965, pp. 577-583.
- Vail, N. *English: Motivate with pictures*. Instructor, 9, 1975, pp. 50-57.

APPENDIX A

Picture 1



Picture 2



APPENDIX B - Revising and Editing/Proofreading Checklist

**A. Content and organization**

1. Does the introduction include a hook to get your reader's attention?
2. Do you provide a background information?
3. Do you provide a thesis statement? Does it compare two objects?
4. Does each body paragraph have a clear topic sentence and include details to support the topic sentence?
5. Does the conclusion summarize the points of comparison and/or contrast?
6. Is the purpose of the essay clear?

**B. Language**

1. Does the essay include connectors to add coherence?
2. Does the essay use the correct form of comparatives?
3. Check to make sure punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are used correctly (e.g. whether commas are used after time words/phrases; whether there is a period after every sentence, etc.). Then, correct the errors (if any).
4. Check for fragments; S-V agreement; verb tenses (e.g. whether the verb tenses are consistent); prepositions; pronouns; articles; etc.