



50 CREATIVE

# ESL activities with pictures

(AND 10 WITH MAPS)

*to get your students speaking*



‘Well, I like the way we learn vocabulary, but I don’t need the pictures. I’m not a child, you know.’ Actually, the student who told me this couldn’t be further from the truth. He DOES need pictures to remember vocabulary. For one thing, our brains are designed to process visual information 60,000 times faster than text. Need some evidence? How long does it take you to figure out what’s being described on the right?

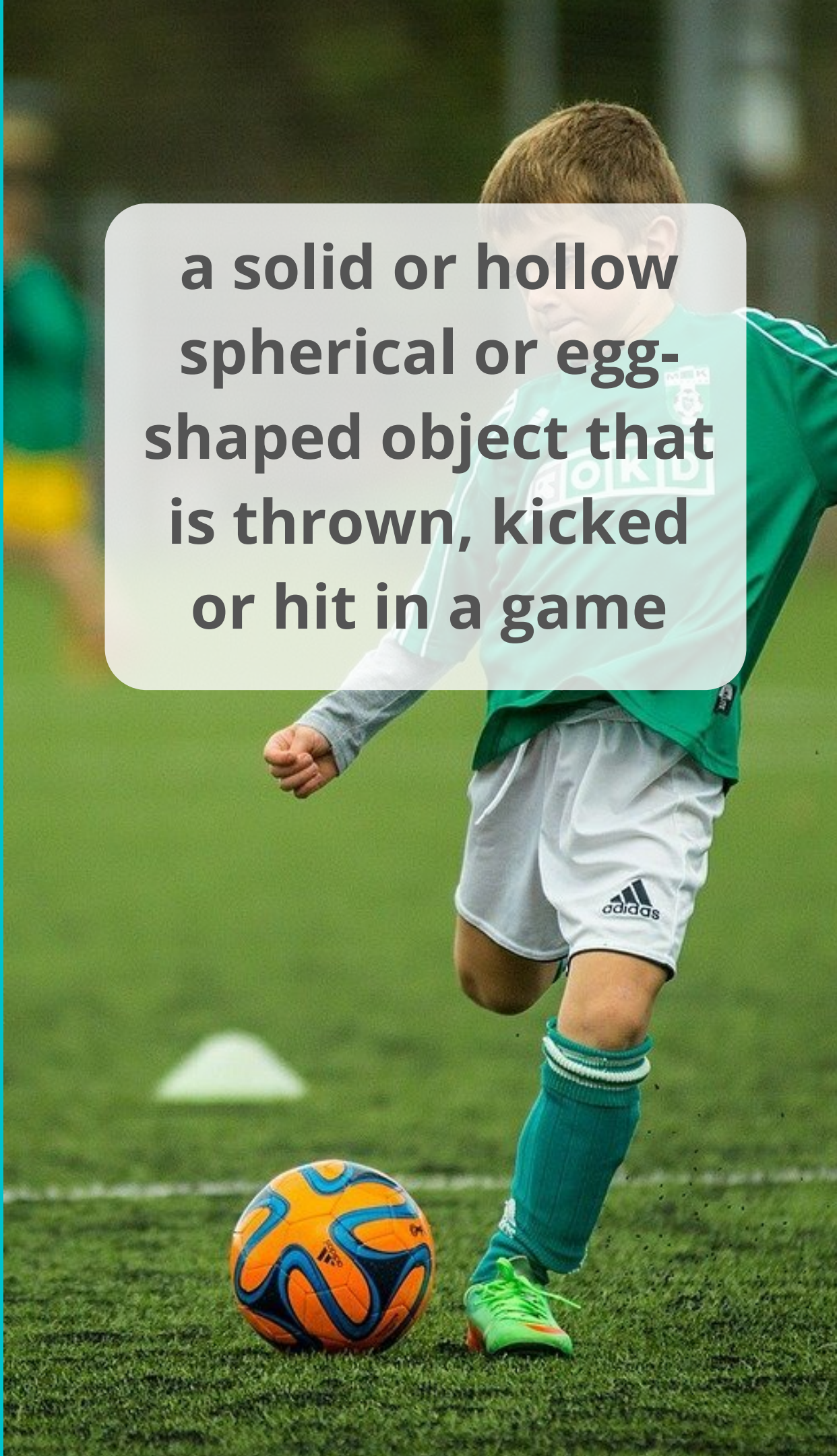
65% of people are visual learners and engaging them in a visual activity is crucial for their progress. Plus, if two senses are simultaneously involved in a learning experience (sight and hearing), we’re five times more likely to retain the information. Still not convinced? Other studies have shown that learning using pictures is as much as 83% more effective than using plain text!

But research aside, if I were to name the main reason to use pictures in lessons with children and adults alike, I’d say it simply brings variety, motivation, and attention to what you, the teacher, have to say and want the student to take away from your lesson.

So here’s a collection of my 50 favourite activities to use with pictures and 10 with maps, not just as a warm-up, but to spice up your lessons at any stage.

Have fun!

Radka Malá



**a solid or hollow  
spherical or egg-  
shaped object that  
is thrown, kicked  
or hit in a game**

these symbols will  
help you search:

online activity 

f2f activity 





gira  
mon  
do

-1-

# GUESSING GAMES



## What's in the picture? #1

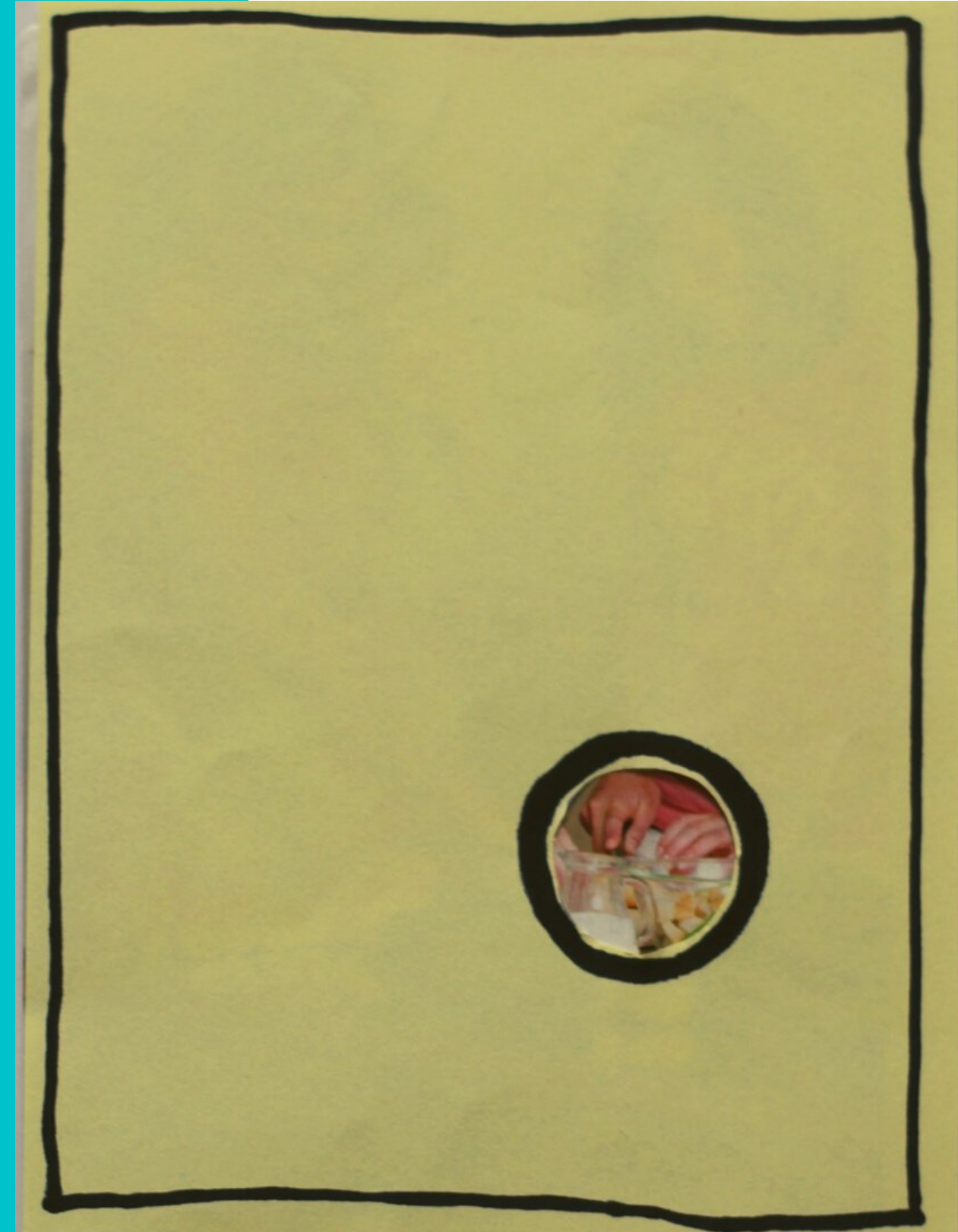
Show your students a detail of a picture and encourage them to speculate about what it is. Use this activity as a lead-in to a new topic or to practise specific vocabulary such as animal body parts.





## What's in the picture? #2

Cover a picture with another paper sheet with a circular hole. Shift the upper paper and let students guess what the picture below shows.







## Reveal a picture slowly

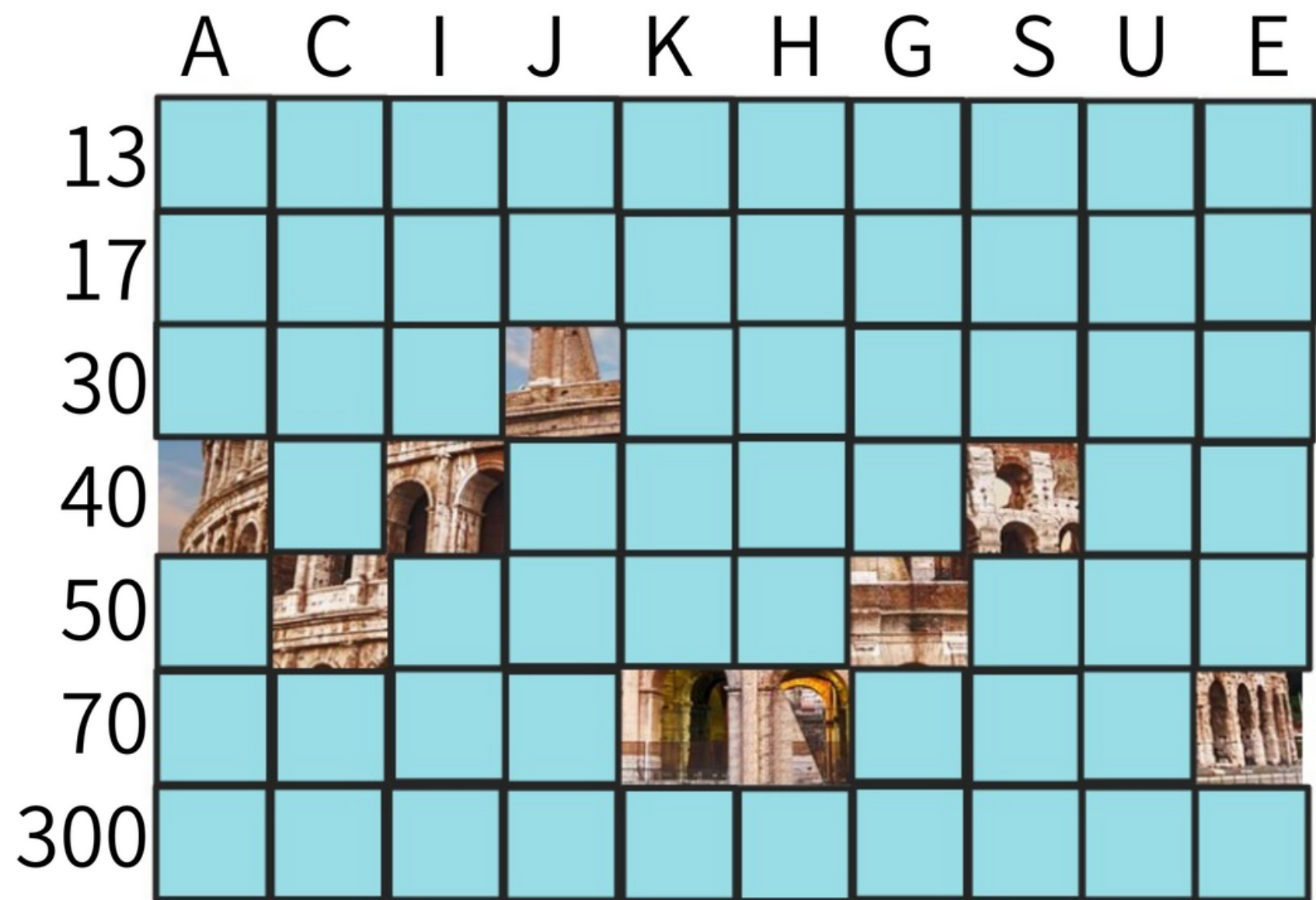
Begin with a picture covered by another piece of paper. Reveal the picture bit by bit and let the student guess what it is. In addition to vocabulary, these games are a great opportunity to practise language for speculation.

Online: copy and paste a picture on a virtual board and hide the picture with a shape from the toolbox. Then manually move the shape, uncovering the picture bit by bit.



## Coordinates

Instead of you uncovering the image, in this game, the students give coordinates on a grid you create, you uncover the corresponding squares, and two teams compete to guess what's in the picture. It might take a while to prepare, but once you create a virtual board template, all you need to do is change pictures and you're good for any future class. If you don't want to make your own template, you can use an online image reveal tool. This game is ideal for beginners who still need to practise their letters and numbers. (By the way, who says you have to go ABC? How about using letters that your students struggle with instead?)





## Guess who I am #1



Choose a nice big picture with lots of people. Student A describes what 'he/she' is doing or wearing, student B looks for their 'alter ego' in the picture.

Alternatively, student B asks questions to find out who student A is. A great game to practise present continuous!

## Guess who I am #2



Prepare multiple pictures of a similar kind (movie posters, fashion models, celebrities, everyday activities, household chores, etc.). Student A describes one of the pictures, student B guesses which one it is. You can use this activity to practise film genres, fashion or physical appearance vocabulary, household objects—anything that is in the picture can be talked about. Students can use past simple to talk about film plots, or present simple to talk about repeated actions. Everything is fair game!







## 20 questions



Student A chooses one picture from a group, and student B can ask up to 20 questions to find out which one it is. The only rule is student A can only answer yes/no.

## Blur the image



As a warm-up activity, show your students a blurred image of the lesson topic and let them guess what it shows and what the people are doing. Then, show them the sharp original and compare.



## Secret postcards

Prepare several postcards and ask students to send each other secret messages from mystery locations. The messages can be as obvious or as cryptic as they like. When they've finished writing, they 'send' the postcard to someone else in class. The recipient guesses 'where' the postcard was sent from.





A person with a backpack is seen from behind, looking out over a mountain landscape. The person is wearing a yellow hoodie and a black backpack. The background is a blurred mountain range with a bright light source, possibly the sun, creating a hazy atmosphere. A large teal rectangle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the text and page number.

gira  
mon  
do

-2-

# SPEAKING TRIGGERS



## Update me



A great activity to build up current affairs vocab! Create a collage of pictures illustrating some recent events and pretend you haven't seen the news for a while. The student's task is to pick two pictures and update you on the world events.

## Compare and contrast



This activity is a household name for all of you who teach exam preparation. Students are shown two pictures on a similar topic (e.g., two celebrations, two ways to spend a weekend) and their task is to say how similar and how different both pictures are. Remember to ask lots of follow-up questions such as which situation they'd prefer and why.





## Critical thinking

Instead of asking the usual descriptive questions such as, 'What is in the picture?', or 'What is he looking at?', ask more thought-provoking questions: 'Why is he there? What might he be looking for? Do you think he's having a good time there?'





## Like/dislike?

Prepare several pictures showing similar activities (e.g., sports) and have a discussion with the student about which of them the student likes and dislikes. This works especially well as a prompt for a lead-in conversation to a topic, as pictures often generate more interesting content than text alone.



## Talk for 1 min

This activity is a great tool to build speaking fluency and confidence. Set a time limit of 60 seconds and tell the student they have to talk about the picture for exactly one minute. They shouldn't worry about mistakes, the important thing is not to stop speaking. While one minute might seem incredibly long at first, they'll soon find out that it's something they can actually do!

PS: Mistakes are fine here, so don't correct the student's errors after this activity. If you don't want to skip the feedback stage, focus on the positives and pick a moment or two when they used an expression you liked or coped with an unknown word successfully.



## Lead-in conversation



Very similar to like/dislike, this activity is more engaging than just a list of words or questions. Show several pictures related to the lesson topic (e.g. bad habits) and ask the same questions you would normally ask in a lead-in conversation: 'Which bad habit is the worst, in your opinion? Which of these habits do people around you have?' Or personalise the lead-in, e.g., when you talk about summer activities: 'Which picture looks most like your summer?'

## Tell me a story



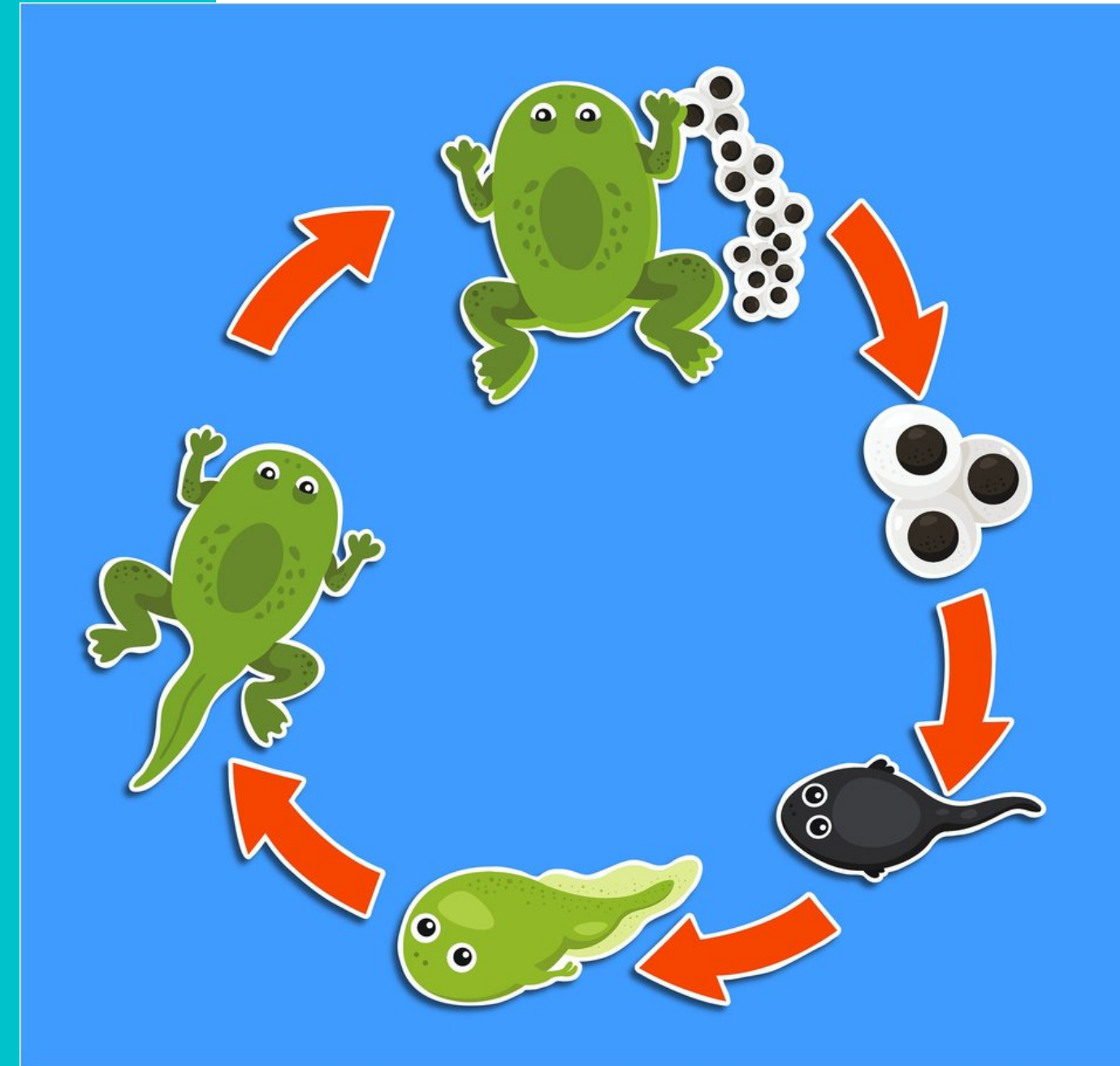
Use an image as a starting point to invent a story around it. You can leave the story all up to the student's creativity, provide them with outline questions, linking words to use, or you could create the story together, taking turns after each sentence.



## What do you know?

Pictures are also a great way to find out what the student already knows about the lesson topic. Let's say you're having a lesson on the frog life cycle (true story!). Use this picture to check whether the student knows the key vocabulary such as 'tadpole' and how much content they're already familiar with to avoid unnecessary revision.

An image will make a world of difference compared to merely asking, 'So, what do you know about the topic?'





## What happens before/after?

We've borrowed this tip from Carol Read, a household name in teaching children. However, it works just as well with adults: take a picture from the middle of a story or video and let students predict what happens before and after the events in the picture. Then simply read/watch and check.



## Personalised pictures

The best thing about this activity is that it requires no preparation whatsoever (plus the personalised aspects means the student's increased motivation and ownership, of course). Ask your student to show you some pictures they took on their phone and tell you about them. Just be careful with reserved students who don't want to share their lives outside the classroom!



## Bloom's taxonomy



The name of the activity sounds terribly technical but don't worry. All you have to do is to ask 6 questions about the picture built on Benjamin Bloom's increasingly complex hierarchy. Still kind of difficult to picture? Here's an example:

- Knowledge – Which of the objects in the picture can you name in English?
  - Comprehension – What are the people doing?
  - Application – Imagine this is a newspaper photo. What caption would go well with it?
  - Analysis – Where do you think the people are?
  - Synthesis – What might they be thinking?
  - Evaluation – Is what they're doing dangerous? Why/why not?
- Those of your students who like to think about things will love it!



## What's the product?



Show your students an advertisement without the company logo and let them guess what the product is. What story/message does the advertisement have? Do they think it's a good one? Why/why not? What would they change?

## Cartoons



Get your students out of their seats right at the start of the lesson! Before they arrive, put some cartoons (or any other pictures) on the walls, all of them somehow related to the lesson topic. As a warm-up, students go around the class and discuss the cartoons, answering questions you prepared.



## Find the missing half

Cut pictures into halves and distribute them among students. Students mingle, describe their pictures to each other (no showing!) and try to find the missing part. Depending on the level of your students, you can limit what they're allowed to describe (e.g., the atmosphere of the room but not the furniture). And if you're really up for a challenge, cut the pictures into quarters!





gira  
mon  
do

-3-

# TAP INTO YOUR SENSES





## Turn on the TV

While originally created to help students prepare for an exam, this activity works whenever you work with a picture. Create a TV template similar to the one you see on the left and put a picture in the middle. Then, let the student 'turn on the TV' and describe the picture, using the four buttons as an outline: 'What can you see in the picture? What can you hear? What are the people doing? How are they feeling?'





## Step into the picture

Tap into your students' senses and make use of their sight, hearing, touch, smell and even taste in lessons. Let them choose one of three pictures to work on. When you clap your hands, their task is to close their eyes and picture being in the image, focusing on all five senses. When they open their eyes again, have them describe what they could see, hear, feel, smell, and taste. Research shows that even picturing different sensory perceptions significantly helps to remember vocab. Trigger senses to trigger memory!



## Colours, colours, colours

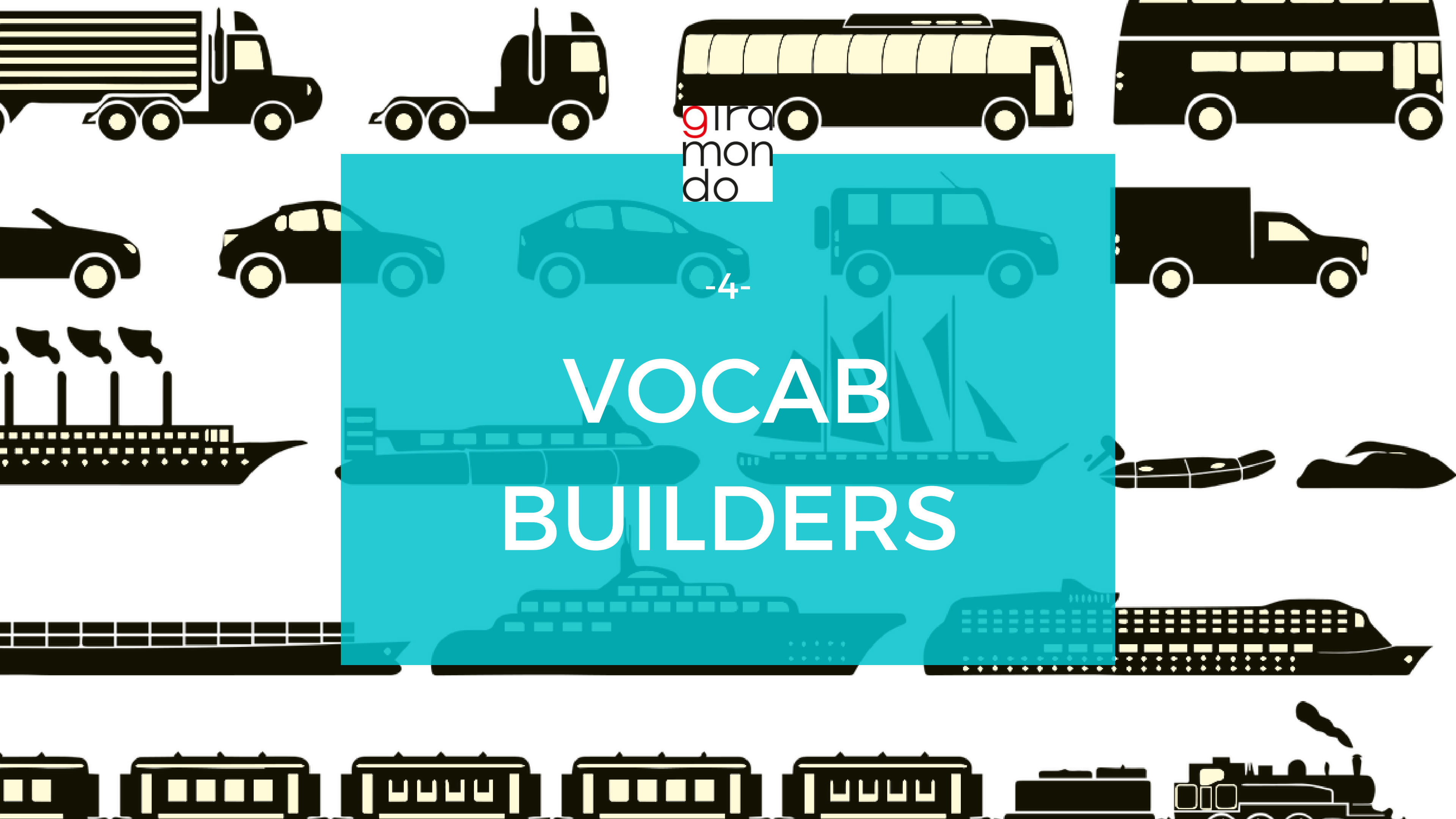
When you show students a picture, ask which colour is dominant. Then do a little brainstorming and association activity: 'What objects and animals of the same colour can you think of? What do you associate the colour with?'



## You won't believe what happened to me yesterday!

Each student chooses a person in one of the pictures and tells a story from that person's perspective. Encourage them to include emotions and sound as natural as possible, as if they were telling the story to a friend. Alternatively, you can use just one picture showing multiple people and practise telling the same story from different points of view.





gira  
mon  
do

-4-

# VOCAB BUILDERS



## Half a second



Tell your student you're going to show them a picture and you'd like them to describe it in as much detail as possible. When they're ready, show them the picture for about half a second. After they tell you what they saw (probably not much at this point), show them the picture again for about one second, then make the showings longer and longer until they're able to describe more or less everything.

## Mind maps



Students describe objects they see in the picture and then create a mind map with collocations (e.g., if they see 'ice' in the picture, a collocation they may think of is 'break the ice').

## What word begins with...?

Students name one thing that they see in the picture and then try to come up with a word beginning with each of the original word's letters (e.g., if they see a 'bear', they might come up with 'B for beetle', 'E for email', 'A for apple', 'R for race').



## Begins with – ends with

Prepare one or more pictures with lots of details, then take turns with the student to make a 'word chain' naming things you see in the picture: each word has to start with a letter that the previous word finished with (e.g., 'chair – rug – glass' etc.). Gets quite challenging after a couple of rounds!



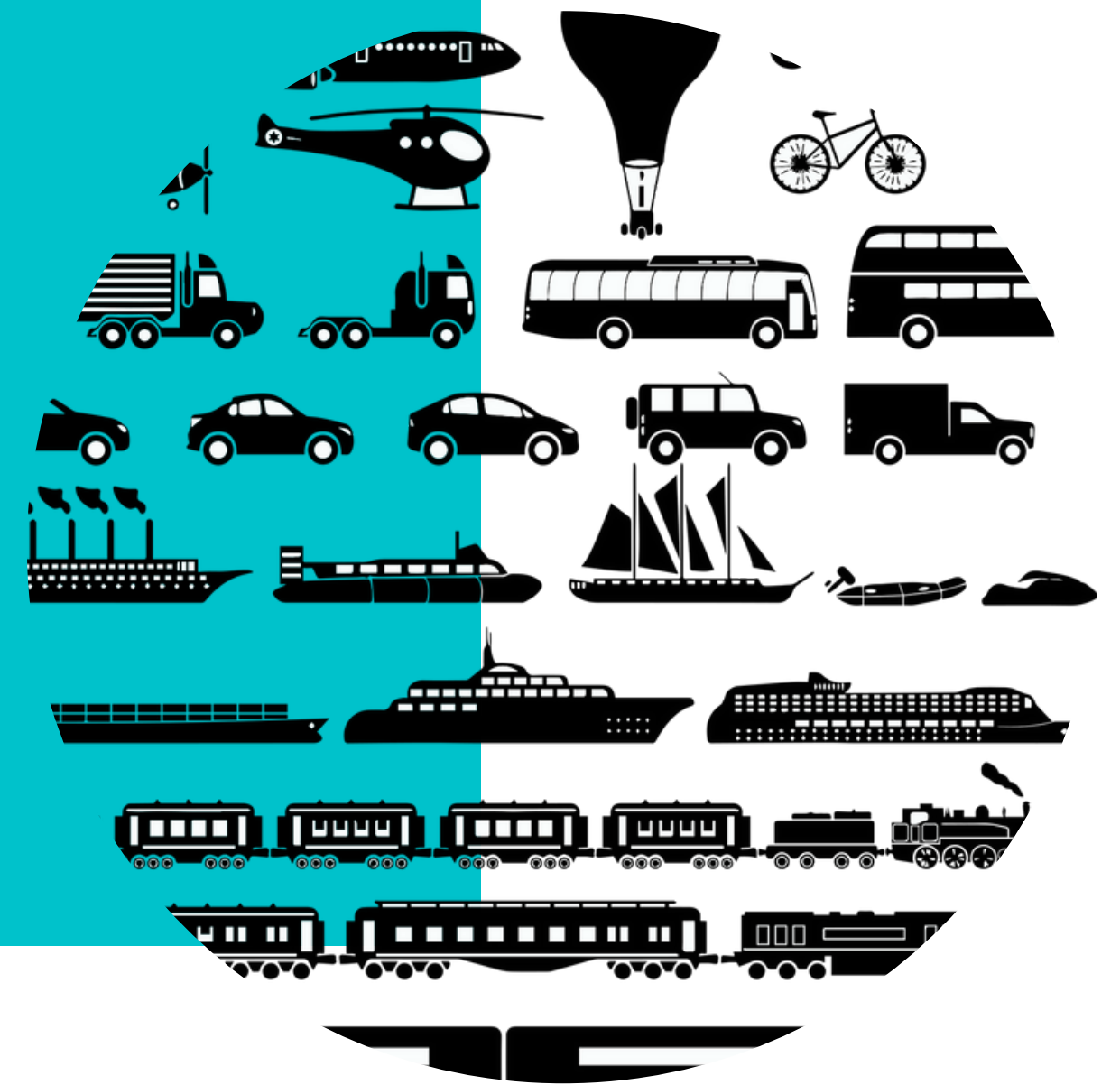
## DIY photo collage

After you've studied a group of new words, students create a photo collage together showing all the vocabulary on the list and maybe even extra pictures related to the lesson topic.



## Brainstorming

For this activity, you'll need a specific kind of picture like the one on the right. When you introduce a new topic (e.g., means of transport) and you want to brainstorm all the words the student already knows (and to present those they don't), use a visual support to retrieve your student's knowledge. The picture will make it easier to recall the vocabulary.



## Name as many things as you know



Choose a nice big picture with lots of details. Students name all the things in the picture they know in English. This is a great activity to boost lower-level students' motivation, showing them how much they already know. If you want to go more in-depth, they can organise the words into categories, or use the words to ask each other questions.

## I spy with my little eye



This classic game works like a charm both in the real world and with pictures. Again, you'll need a nice big picture with lots of details. Then just take turns with your student saying 'I spy with my little eye... something purple/something made of metal' and see how quickly they can point to the right spot or even name the object.



## What's NOT on the list?

Put students in pairs and show them the same picture. Then, assign categories to each student (people, emotions, colours, etc.). Have the students make a list of everything they see in the picture from their category. After a few minutes, have the students guess what's NOT on the other's list. (They should know each other's categories, it's not a secret.) They should be thinking of advanced words or looking for details that their partner may have missed. Award points only for words that did not appear on the other's original list. A great way to boost vocabulary as well as use some less common words.



## What will be in the picture?

Tell your students you're going to show them a picture of, e.g., a street. What do they think will be in the picture? Students name things until they can successfully guess 5 objects that the actual picture shows. You can show them the picture then. Can they name any more things now that they can see the image?



## Spot what no one else can see

Once again, find a nice big picture full of details (how about a 360° one from [360cities.net](https://360cities.net/)?) and show it to the class. Each student tries to spot at least 3 things or details that, in their opinion, no one else in the class can see. Great for practising 'there is' with beginners, or a more challenging version for advanced students would be to describe little stories going on in the picture.





gtra  
mon  
do



do

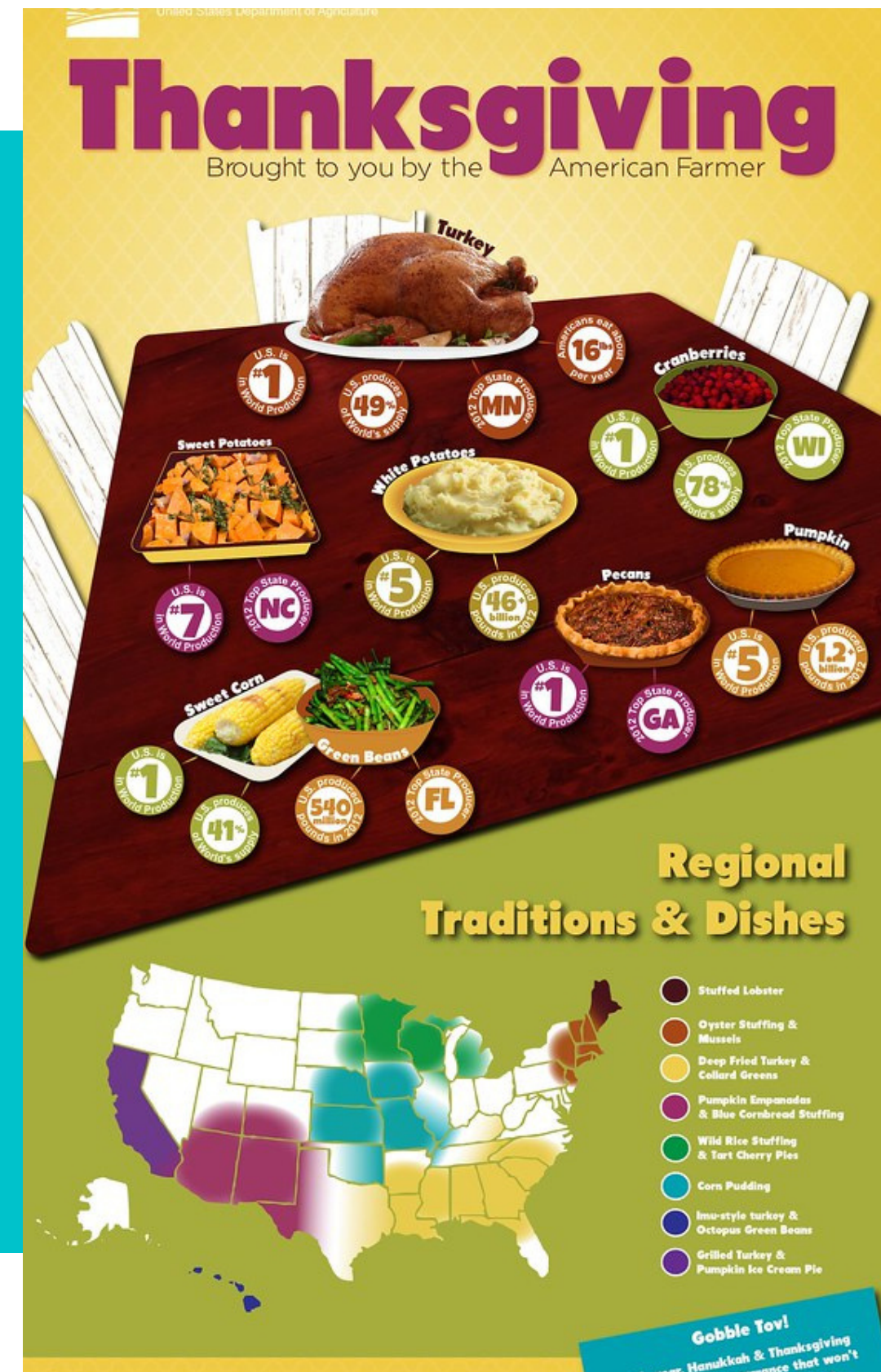
-5-

# FOR READING/ LISTENING



## Reading comprehension

Yes, pictures can be used as a reading comprehension exercise, especially at A0 and A1 levels where visual support is a key part of comprehension. You can use pictures of street signs, weather forecast maps, simple infographics, or any other visuals accompanied by text. For example, in a lesson on food, use this infographic to introduce the dishes and ingredients first, then to answer some comprehension questions (e.g., 'Do they eat meat at Thanksgiving?'), and finally, to spark discussion about holiday dishes in other countries.





## Prediction cue



Before you read a text, show your students a picture and explain that it is somehow related to the text. Can they guess what the article will be about? Encourage them to predict multiple variations and speculate about them. Works just as well with listening comprehension and as a warm-up to predict the lesson topic.

## What was the text about?



After students have listened to a recording, instead of the usual listening-for-gist questions, show them three pictures and let them choose one that best illustrates the story they've just heard. Remember to encourage them to defend their choice and explain what made them choose it!



gira  
mon  
do

-6-

# MISC





## Picture dictionary

If you come across a new word in a lesson, instead of giving a definition, explanation, or even translation, just google the word as a picture if possible. The visual element will make understanding much quicker, easier, and more accurate for the student, not to mention the fact that it will help students remember the word much more effectively.



## Speech bubble

Students write a caption or newspaper headline for a picture, or a speech bubble for one of the people in the picture. Funniest sentence wins!

## Aha! grammar

If you love the aha-effect to introduce grammar points, you probably use texts to do so, but using pictures can be equally if not more effective. Show your students a picture that represents the grammar you're about to study and ask a series of questions that will lead the students to discover the grammar rules for themselves. (E.g., if you're doing a lesson on quantifiers, you may ask: 'Are there many or few people in the picture? Is there much room for someone else? Which one means a lot of – many or few? Which one do we use with countable nouns – many or much?')





## Categories



Prepare a number of different pictures and let the student sort them into categories: things you do at home/at work, things you like/dislike, or anything else you need to practise. Then have a short conversation about each category. Remember to ask lots of follow-up questions.

## Picture dictation



Put students in pairs. Give student A a picture they have to describe so that student B can draw it according to student A's instructions. After the drawing is done, both students can compare the drawing and the original picture, talking about the differences and similarities. Try this out when you talk, e.g., about furniture or physical appearance.

## Draw with me

Prepare a template that your students can work with (e.g., to talk about food, you may want to use the Very Hungry Caterpillar or the Czech fairy-tale ogre Otesánek). Students take turns to say what Otesánek ate and draw a corresponding picture in the template. Continue until all students run out of ideas.



image courtesy of monkik, flaticon.com



## Can you find...?

This game is designed to practise prepositions of place. Find a picture with lots of items (what about a fridge or a children's bedroom?). The student's task is to find, point to (and name!) 'something that is between flour and sugar', 'something that is under the chair' etc. Remember to swap roles!



## Memory test

Show your students a picture for 30 seconds. They should try and remember as much as they can. Then hide the picture, put students in pairs and let them ask each other questions about the picture: 'What colour was the sofa? How many chairs were there in the picture?' Who can remember more?



## The highs and lows of last week

Are you sick and tired of asking 'How was your weekend?' over and over again? Try out this quick warm-up activity. Students (and you!) draw two simple pictures – one that shows the best part of their past week and one that shows the worst. Let the class look at each picture while the author briefly talks about each.





giramondo

-7-

# MAPS

name: Lisa  
from: Sweden  
age: 36  
job: nurse

name: Hans  
from: Germany  
age: 48  
job: IT programmer

name: Pedro  
from: Mexico  
age: 22  
job: designer

name: Naomi  
from: Nigeria  
age: 51  
job: businesswoman



## Where have you been?

Students put game counters on all the countries they've been to. Then have a conversation about their travel experience and perhaps compare it to yours.

Online: copy and paste a map and as many pictures of counters as you need on a virtual board.



**1, 1, 1**

If your students aren't super well travelled, have them put a counter on one country they've been to, one country they'd love to go to and one country they'd never ever go to on holiday. Then they guess each other's answers and discuss their experiences.



## Giving directions

Maps are a natural prompt to practise giving directions.

Either ask your student how to get from point A to point B, or let them give you directions to a secret place! Did you arrive where you were supposed to?



**My name is Pedro and I'm from Mexico**

For this beginner role-play activity, you need a map and some post-its where you'll write basic information about your student's 'alter-egos': name, country of origin, age, job, favourite food, anything your student can already talk about. Both your student and you take one post-it at a time, stick it to the appropriate country on the map, and have a little conversation introducing yourselves.







## Virtual travel



Let your students travel virtually. Take virtual tours using Google Maps or web apps of specific places such as the Taj Mahal, Galleria degli Uffizi, or Route 66 and discuss your experience.

## Post-it maps



Who says visuals need to be provided just by you? Let your students do the work for you! Let the class create their own map, either imaginary or of your area, using post-its. Then use it to practise prepositions, giving directions etc.



## Map board game

Give your students a blank map of the world and let them find the locations of 12 countries of your choice (they can use their smartphones). When they find the countries, highlight them and you can start the game. Students put their counters on the first country. Read out a 'question' that is somehow related to the country but that tests vocabulary/grammar rather than factual knowledge (e.g., 'Norway is known \_\_\_\_ its spectacular landscape scenery.'). Students write down their answers to complete the sentence. If their answer is correct, they can move their counter to the next country. The student who has 'travelled' to the most countries by the end of the game wins.





## Map it!

Give students a map and an envelope with pieces of paper containing information about a few mystery locations. The information can be fact-based ('It is the largest city in France.') or a general description ('This place is on the coast just a few kilometres away from Marseille.'). Students stick the papers on the correct places on the map. This might be a good lead-in activity in a lesson on geographical features, a specific country, or just a way to expose them to language to describe places using comparatives and superlatives.



## I've just returned from...



Who wouldn't love talking about their holiday right after they come back? But! If you want to make sure your students will generate stimulating and thought-through content, prepare some visual support and show them that your holiday conversation is not just a chit-chat but an actual structured activity you've tailored specifically for them. Have them show you on the map which places they visited, which they liked best, what they saw and experienced where, where you get the best ice-cream, which areas they'd recommend and which they wouldn't. The possibilities are endless!



## Sources

...John Medina: Brain Rules

...[busyteacher.org](http://busyteacher.org)

...[fluentu.com](http://fluentu.com)

...[englishteaching101.com](http://englishteaching101.com)

...Giramondo teachers and students, my endless source of inspiration