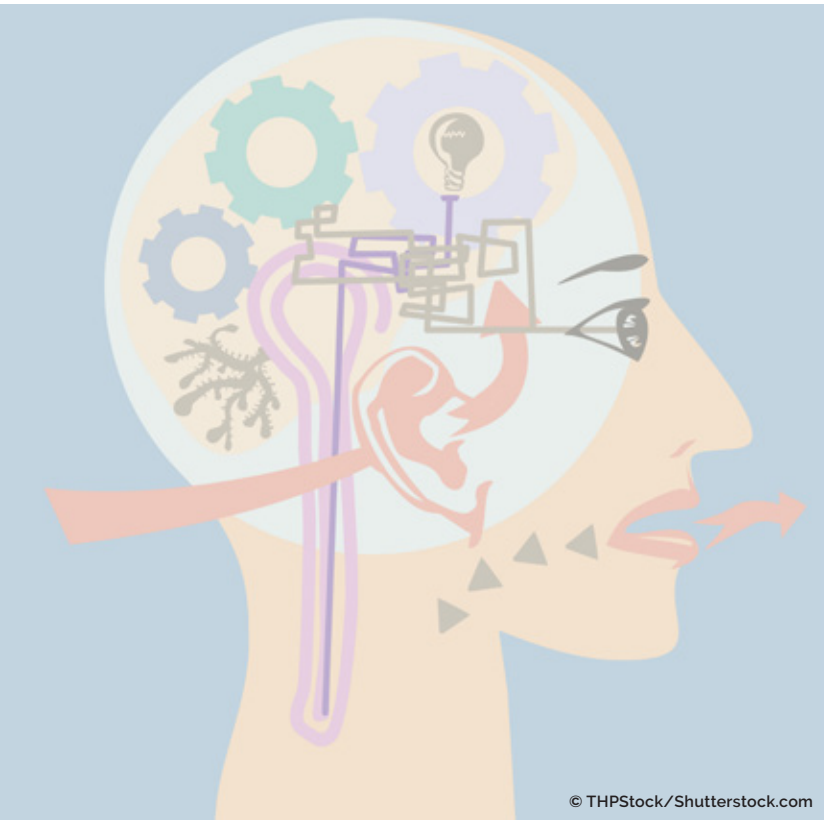
Teaching Descriptive Writing through Visualization and the Five Senses

by KATHERINE CARTER

The descriptive paragraph and subsequent essay are usually among the first assignments students must complete in composition classes. Typically, students are told to describe their childhood home, a person of importance, a special object, or a summer vacation. Most students, especially learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), have difficulty beginning the assignment. In 2014, I was teaching an intermediate-level English class to first-year university students in Namibia, and after observing my students' struggles with writing a descriptive essay, I searched for techniques to implement in class. I found that visualization based on the five senses—what we touch, see, smell, hear, and taste—can be used as a technique to get ideas down on paper. This technique could be useful for teachers in a variety of EFL teaching contexts, from primary school to university, and can be used with a wide range of texts that are particularly vivid and that stimulate the senses.

IN MY CLASSROOM

Wilhelm (2008) states that once students see something in their minds, they find it much easier to write about. In addition, visualization based on the five senses can engage students and improve writing skills. In my class of 25 learners in Namibia, we first read a short text together. Reading before we wrote captured my students' attention. I like to select short poems and short stories that are especially colorful and tap into our senses, and in the class, I chose *All the Places to Love* by Patricia MacLachlan. *All the Places to Love* describes special places in the countryside through the eyes of a young boy. Once I chose the text, we were ready to apply the techniques outlined later in this article.



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As we read the story together, I encouraged students to visualize, allowing the words to become pictures that they saw. I also had students underline phrases in the text that connected to one of their five senses. When we finished reading, I asked students to share with a partner what they underlined and what they saw in their minds—what spoke to them. I allowed a few minutes for those exchanges, then opened up the discussion to the whole class. "What did you see, hear, taste, smell, or feel when reading this piece?" I asked. Typically, after a short silence, students opened up and shared parts of the story that appealed to their senses.

Then I redirected the discussion by asking, "Does any part of the story remind you of something from your own life?" This question opened the floodgates. Students described anecdotes and memories from their childhood, their villages, and their families. Some recalled their favorite pastime as a child—for one of my students, it was driving donkey carts and delivering wood.

Having activated their background experiences, I encouraged my students to describe childhood pastimes, special times with family, or memorable events. We added details, facts, emotions, and new vocabulary to our discussion.

Next I asked students to think of a place they loved or that was special to them. At that point, most already had a place in mind, but I modeled an example from my own experience for those who needed more support. I closed my eyes and pictured the small town of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, during the Christmas season. Using my senses to play a "movie" in my mind, I described the scene like this: "I see people dressed in white, walking to church and tending their stews on the open fire. I can smell the eucalyptus trees and the incense and the fires burning. I hear the priests' call for church and the beating of the drum. I feel the cool air coming off the nearby lake. I taste the spicy meat sauce and homemade bread and the strong, sweet coffee."

Then it was the students' turn. I had them copy the chart in Figure 1 and take brief notes on what they see, smell, hear, taste, and feel in a place they love. After completing the chart, students talked about their notes with a partner. Based on their conversations, students added details, thoughts, and emotions to their notes. Then I asked students to find a new partner and again talk about their special place, based on their notes. After their second conversations, they added more details to their charts.

Visualizing the pictures in their minds as they read, describing their personal experiences,

and completing the chart gave students support to write. With their extended notes and details, they had the tools to write a descriptive paragraph or essay.

REFLECTIONS ON THIS TECHNIQUE

Reading a colorful short story or short poem before writing turns on thinking skills (Wilhelm 2008) and allows students to become interested in the topic. In this activity, students find descriptive expressions from a piece that speaks to their senses. Guiding students to visualize as they read gives them confidence; it also helps them learn to think as they write. Most of us already visualize as we read, but our students may need encouragement to do so (Dinkins 2007). Talking about their visualizations and personal memories allows students to discover and share what was meaningful to them from the text. Meanwhile, the text has become significant to them, as their background experiences have been activated. Instead of confronting an arbitrary list of topics for a descriptive essay, students have made a connection with a story. That connection offers them something interesting to write about, whether it is driving donkey carts and delivering wood or something else.

Students will build on visual references they already have. They will bring to the piece their life experience, which for every learner will be different (Rosenblatt 2005). My students built on their personal experiences and visual references when they discussed childhood memories. EFL learners have numerous and rich life experiences. Teachers can keep looking for ways to help students tap into those experiences and bring them to paper.

IN YOUR CLASSROOM

The following is a step-by-step description of the technique.

Time needed: 45 minutes for the technique; additional time for writing and revising

Preparation: Choose any text that is particularly vivid and taps into the senses. In addition to *All the Places to Love*, examples could be *Acquainted with the Night* by Robert Frost, *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* by Jack Prelutsky, or *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. Write the chart for visualizing the senses (Figure 1) on the board and have students copy it.

Think of a special place or a place you love
1. List things that you see:
2. List things that you hear:
3. List things that you feel:
4. List things that you smell:
5. List things that you taste:

Figure 1. Chart for visualizing the senses

Procedure:

Step 1: With your class, read the text you have chosen. Have students underline phrases that catch their attention based on their five senses. (If students do not have a copy of the text, ask them to write down phrases or details that activate their senses. In this case, students might have to listen to the text a second time.) Afterwards, ask

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students to share with a partner what they underlined. Next, ask students to share their visualizations with the whole class, saying: "What did you see in your mind as you were reading the story? Describe that picture."

Step 2: Direct students to the chart on the board. Give the class an example of a place you love. Describe the place with reference to your five senses. Then ask students to visualize a place they love and to take brief notes in the charts in their notebooks. Tell students to focus on an image of their special place that they want to communicate to the reader.

Step 3: Have students discuss the notes in their charts with a partner. Then ask students to return to their charts and, based on their conversations, add details, thoughts, and emotions.

Step 4: Ask students to find a new partner and again, based on their notes, describe their special place. Following their second conversation, have them add more details to their charts.

Step 5: Give students time to write a paragraph based on the notes they took. (Instead of a paragraph, intermediate-level classes can write an essay.)

Step 6: Arrange students in pairs so they can read their paragraph aloud to a partner. Before students begin reading, tell them that listening partners will be expected to ask the readers questions and make comments on the piece. Encourage the readers to take notes on what their partners say. After students discuss the first partner's piece, have them switch roles.

Step 7: When pairs have finished their discussions, have students revise what they wrote, basing revisions on their classmates' questions and comments.

Step 8: Pair students with new partners and have them read their revisions and discuss them as before.

Step 9: Have students revise their pieces again. The final draft of the paragraph can be turned in during the following class.

Final point: Remember, once students see something in their minds, they have a much easier time writing about it.

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