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## **Developing Critical Thinking Skills Through Images**

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Images are among the most common tools of many language teaching professionals. We use visual support to scaffold our instruction, teach vocabulary, illustrate grammar concepts, or support our content teaching. We assign a variety of tasks with these images to allow learners to develop their language skills. Images have become so essential to our language classrooms that it is difficult to imagine teaching without visual aids. Nevertheless, many times we overlook opportunities to use these images for purposes other than supporting language objectives. Actually, we can use visual materials in English language classes to develop learners' critical thinking skills along with language and visual literacy.

Critical thinking is one of the 21st-century core skills referred to as the "Four Cs," along with communication, collaboration, and creativity. It involves skills of "conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication" (National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, 1987). Very often critical thinking skills are developed around spoken or written texts. Considering the fact that 21st-century communication increasingly depends on and occurs in the context of visual media, it seems necessary to involve images in these processes as well. In fact, Cordell (2016) writes that similarly to texts, "images need to be vetted for accuracy, reliability, relevance and timeliness. To be information literate, it is necessary to possess the critical thinking skill set. Both text and photographs must be regarded through a critical lens" (p.7).

In other words, as we present learners with texts and encourage them to critically explore ideas through analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information presented in the texts, we can similarly present learners with images and encourage them to complete similar tasks around them. By studying images with our language learners, we help them to develop critical thinking skills hand in hand with skills of visual literacy. Learners build their ability to better understand images through careful and critical examination of their components and thus build skills of visual literacy.

There are a number of tasks and questions we can carry out around images to encourage our learners' critical thinking as well as visual literacy skills. One of the many resources I have identified online and find easy to use is provided by The Learning Network of The New York Times and is titled "What's Going on in This Picture?" Every Monday, a thought-provoking photograph is posted. Students are asked to look closely at the photograph and seek answers to three questions:

1. What's going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you think that?
3. What more can you find?

Students are guided to notice details, look for evidence/support to base their opinions on, and deepen their understanding of the photograph. They basically learn to build meaning from an unlabeled photograph. They can share ideas and opinions with their class peers or post comments online. They can also read other students' thoughts about the image online. At the end of the week, the title of the photograph and its backstory are revealed, which allows for further discussion of the photograph. Although the activity is not originally developed for language learners, due to its open-ended nature, it can be easily used with language learners or adapted for them if needed.

Activities like this one focus on the integrated development of English language and life skills. It is just one example of the value of images beyond their common use in language classes. For additional sample tasks and questions around images to encourage critical thinking and visual literacy, download [my handout](#) (PDF) from 2016 TESOL International Convention in Baltimore.

Let's go beyond using images as backdrops to English language tasks and allow learners to explore their depth by implementing various thinking skills. Let's think about images as texts and design tasks around them that would allow learners to develop English language skills along with critical thinking and visual literacy.

#### References

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