Bringing Descriptions of People to Life Using AI-Generated Images

by WING WU

LEVEL: Intermediate and above

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 40 minutes to write descriptions of people, plus 40 minutes to create portraits using an artificial intelligence (AI) application

GOAL: To practice writing descriptions of people in a fun, learner-centered way

MATERIALS: A digital device (smartphone, tablet, laptop, etc.) for each student, with which they can design and showcase their AI-generated image(s)

BACKGROUND: We encounter people from all walks of life almost every day, but can we describe them well? When teaching students how to write descriptions of people, the common approach is to ask students to depict facial features, clothing items, and other physical features that help identify the target subject. Often, students complement these written descriptions with drawings. Sometimes, we ask students to peer-review the written descriptions and assess whether they are accurate.

However, there are several issues with this approach. First, not all students like to draw. Even if they do, the quality of their drawings can vary. Students may struggle to capture the person's physical features, while those who are interested in drawing might prioritize the visual element over the written description. Second, when the drawings are not accurate, it is difficult to determine whether the written descriptions can serve their purpose well. In that case, the peer review often becomes just another grammar identification task.

Thanks to AI and image generators, though, we now have an alternative that minimizes the reliance on visual-arts skills while placing greater emphasis on language use, as students can create an image simply with their written descriptions. There are no crayons involved; instead, students attend to the nuances in their descriptions. The idea is that the more accurate the written descriptions are, the closer the resemblance of the image will be to the subject being depicted. This approach is also easier for peer review because we no longer need to imagine the possible gaps between the written descriptions and the visual representations.

Without a doubt, there are many platforms you can use to generate AI images, including Canva (https://www.canva.com) and ImagineArt (https://www.imagine.art/). I have used Adobe Express, which can be accessed on a computer by visiting its webpage (https://new.express.adobe.com) or on a smartphone by downloading the app

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under the same name. The platform has an icon called "Generate with AI" in the middle of the webpage and in the second row on the app. Adobe Express is free of charge for individuals who are satisfied with basic editing tools, which should suffice in a language classroom. Teachers should compare platforms to see which one best fits their classroom and their needs.

In the following section, I present a writing lesson on descriptions of people. The term "descriptions of people" refers to the depiction of one's physical appearance, including facial features, clothing, and body build. The lesson was originally part of a unit on sports. Students in Secondary 1 (which in Hong Kong is equivalent to seventh grade in the United States) had to create a poster for a "Sports for All" event. This event introduced up-and-coming sports such as jazzminton, beach tennis, and archery tag. It would also feature three guest athletes who would play games with the attendees and deliver speeches. In the final poster, only the pictures of the athletes would be included; therefore, students wrote vivid descriptions that could generate AI images resembling the athletes.

Figure 1. Image of an athlete for students to describe

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Review topic-related vocabulary items.

To activate their schematic knowledge of person descriptions, students are asked to describe the given image (see Figure 1).

In pairs and within two minutes, they identify as many features as they can related to the face, clothes, and body build of the athlete. Examples include the following, although other descriptions are possible:

- *Facial features*: bright green eyes; light brown, tousled hair; freckles on both cheeks; a smile with no visible teeth; a tan skin tone
- *Clothing*: a short-sleeved, mint-green athletic T-shirt; orange and black elements on the shoulders of the shirt; a dark green logo on the front of the shirt
- *Body build*: not too bulky but muscular; broad shoulders

Alternatively, to cater to learner diversity, you might label the image with numbers and

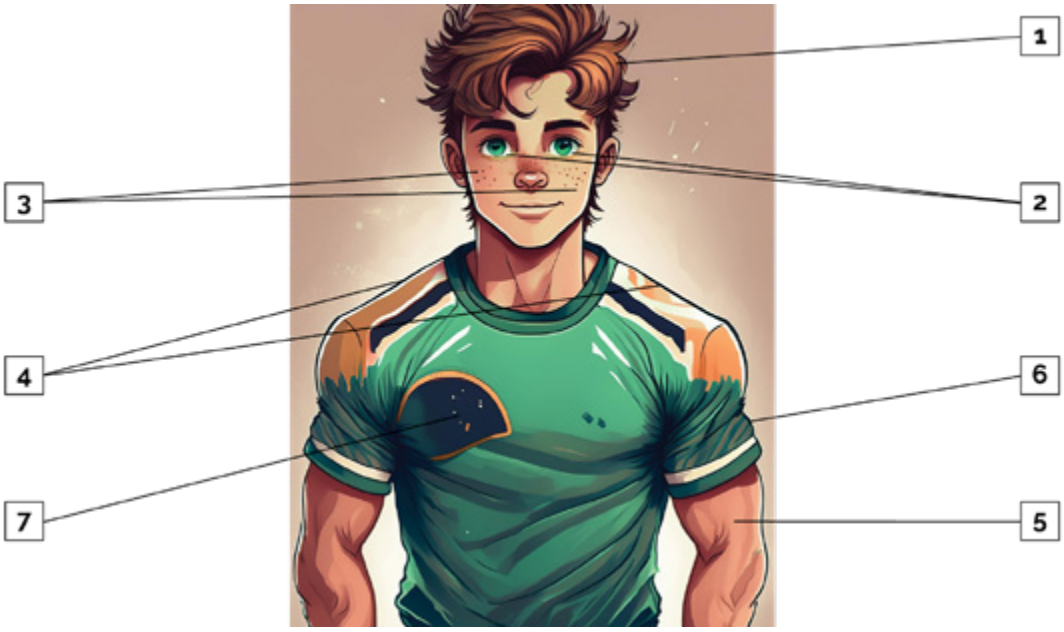

Figure 2. Image with numbers to guide students

prompt students to contribute adjectives and nouns taught in previous lessons.

For example, the labels in Figure 2 refer to the (1) hair, (2) eyes, (3) freckles, (4) shoulders, and (5) arm muscles of the athlete, as well as the (4) special patterns, (6) sleeves, and (7) logo on the T-shirt. You may elicit as many descriptions as possible from the students and write them on the board. Categorize the descriptions together with the students—for example, facial features (1, 2, 3), clothing (4, 6, 7), and body build (4, 5).

Before the end of this stage, students can guess which sport the athlete specializes in. It could be football, basketball, or any other sport, as the image does not provide much evidence. Students may then brainstorm items that differentiate this athlete from others. For example, an archery-tag player would wear a protective vest and a mask, while a female beach-tennis player might wear sunglasses and have her hair tied up in a ponytail.

Step 2: Write descriptions.

Announce that the task of the lesson is to create an athlete who will attend the "Sports for All" event. Tell students they must write a description of an athlete and generate an AI image, based on the description.

For students who need an example, you might consider co-writing a description in class. In my class, we randomly selected one of the ten up-and-coming sports that students had researched earlier—bubble football. Students contributed vocabulary, and as a class, we ended up writing this description:

Jack is a middle-aged man. He is about 1.8 meters tall. He has an athletic build. His short, sandy-blond hair is coming out from his clear inflatable suit. The suit makes him look like a bouncing bubble. His bright blue eyes shine with excitement. Jack has a wide smile with straight, white teeth. He wears colorful sneakers with fun patterns. His cheerful vibe invites everyone to join in on the fun.

We used this description as a prompt, which returned four image choices, shown in Figure 3.

While we decided that Photo A might match the written description better than the others, we noticed that some details were not fully captured in the photo. For example, it should be the sneakers, not the bubble suit, that are

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colorful. Comparing the photos with the description in this way can be turned into a useful classroom exercise.

After the guided writing, students are ready to create their own athlete.

Step 3: Generate AI images.

When the students' written descriptions are ready, guide them to create an AI image step-by-step. Instructions will vary, depending on the platform. Teachers should practice with the platform beforehand so that they can guide their students effectively. As an example, the steps for using the Adobe Express website are as follows:

1. Select "Generate image."
2. Type the written description in the box under the line "Describe what you'd like to see."
3. Decide on the image size (square, portrait, landscape, or widescreen), content type (auto, photo, graphic, or art), and style (e.g., digital art, neon, layered paper, synthwave).
4. Click "Generate."
5. Wait for a few seconds.

Ta-da! Four images are ready for your perusal. Have students compare and contrast them, then decide which comes closest to matching the description. As explained in Step 2, the images may or may not capture all the features stated in the written description. Where appropriate, students can modify the description by adding or changing adjectives to specify the style or nouns to include more topic-relevant items. Remember not to choose a picture solely based on beauty.

Don't forget to ask students to save a copy of the selected image and the final version of the written description. These will be used in the next step.

Step 4: Share the images.

There are many ways to share the images. Here are two of them.

One way is to organize an art gallery. By using portable devices such as tablets and smartphones, students can display their images and written descriptions in a Word document, then place their devices on a table so that others can walk around and view the files. In smaller classrooms or when it is better for students to remain seated, it might be preferable to use an online post-it

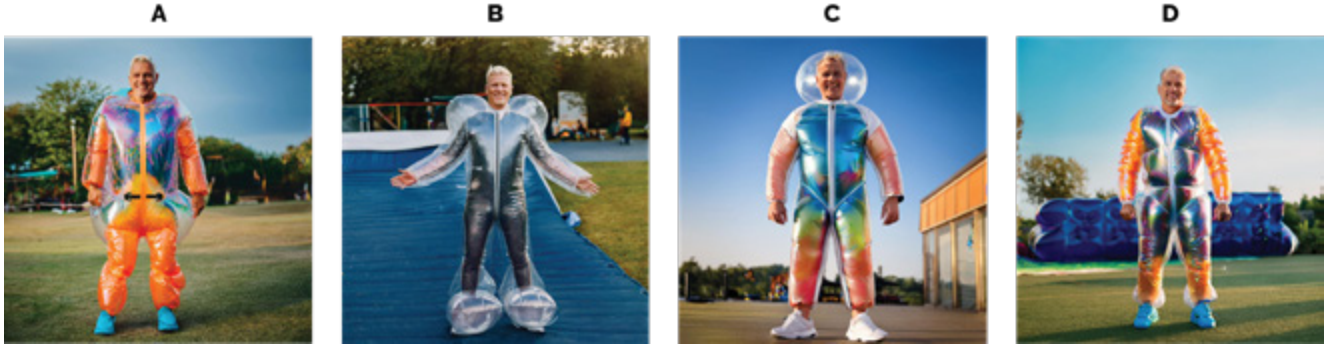

Figure 3. Four images produced by AI from a classroom prompt

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board, such as Padlet (https://padlet.com/). Students can post their photos alongside their written descriptions, and peers can comment on each other's work by adding feedback to each post.

Another way to share is to mix and match images and written descriptions. Give each student two different numbers—one for the image and one for the description. They will label the image and description accordingly. Then, students upload the two files to Google Drive, Microsoft SharePoint or OneDrive, or any other sharing platform. Each student will then be given time to match the photos with the descriptions. Students must record their guesses on a worksheet. When all students have finished the matching task, the answers can be revealed.

In the case of a large class and thus many photos and descriptions, it may be more realistic to divide students into groups of a maximum of five. You must create a folder for each group on the drive where they can upload their work. This way, students can focus on fewer pieces but will be able to dig deeper into the details of each image and description. Given the requirements for higher-order thinking skills such as comparison and evaluation, this method is suitable for more-advanced students.

Either way, to celebrate students' success, one option is to have them vote in categories such as The Best Portrait, The Best Written Description, and The Best Re-creation of the Written Description into Visual Form. In the art gallery, students may cast their votes by placing stickers next to the corresponding devices; on the online post-it platform, they can rank the products in the comment box. In the matching exercise, after successfully matching the images and descriptions, each group may select one pair as the best. From all the pairs presented by the groups, the entire class will vote for three to be included as featured pieces in the poster for the sports project.

EXTENSION: RE-CREATION

As an extension task, students can select one of the images created by their classmates and write a description to match that image. Then, they can generate images based on their new description and compare how similar or different theirs is to the original. Or you might ask students to pair off and then have each student write a description/prompt of their partner's image, generate an image based on their description, and then see how close the new generated image is to their partner's original.

VARIATION: PROMPT WRITING

My previous attempts at generating AI images have shown me that the simpler and more straightforward the instructions in the prompt are, the more likely you are to get an image that meets your expectations. In contrast, when there are complex sentences that include more than one clause and/or participial phrase, the AI's interpretation can stray from our expectations. Since intermediate and advanced students tend to use more-complex sentences, prompt writing can be introduced to them. This introduction can occur prior to the hands-on task of image generation, where you ask them to simplify their written descriptions by including one main idea in each sentence and maintaining consistent subjects throughout.

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Students can generate images using different versions of a prompt; they can then examine the images and review the prompts to figure out which details were expressed clearly, which words or phrases might have been unclear, which sentence structures were more (or less) effective than others, and so forth. In this way, students can analyze the language used and see immediately how it was interpreted by the AI platform.

CONCLUSION

One of my colleagues asked me about the difference between AI-generated images and students' own drawings. Clearly, there are differences: students' drawings are more personalized and require fewer resources, while creating AI portraits is less time-consuming (within seconds, you can have a portrait generated at your fingertips!) and saves hassle for less-talented artists.

Most importantly, as an English teacher, I find that the close connection between the written descriptions and the AI-generated images creates opportunities for meaningful negotiation. This process of authentic language use may not be easily replicable if students base their images solely on their own conceptions, which might be disconnected from the written descriptions. After all, in an English lesson, language use matters most.

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