

Pictures and their applications in teaching English speaking skills

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Abstract: On December 26th, 2018, the General Education English Curriculum was promulgated, in which it is stated that Vietnamese students are supposed to be able to achieve level B1 in CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) as well as use English as a means of communication. In other words, students are required to communicate using four skills of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. However, due to the context that in Vietnam, English is considered a foreign language, it is challenging for teachers and students to teach, study, and practice English speaking skills outside of the class. Therefore, this article focuses on introducing visual resources as available material which provides more opportunities for students to practice and enhance their speaking skills. Moreover, the writer also suggests several different ways for teachers to employ visual resources in teaching English speaking skills.

Keywords: Visual resources, images, pictures, speaking skills, visible thinking routines

1. Introduction

In the context of Vietnamese education, although English is a foreign language, it is taught as a second language in many educational institutions, ranging from elementary schools to tertiary education. As a consequence, the standard of teaching and learning English has been dramatically raised recently. Students have to master not only three English language components including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, but also four language skills which are listening, reading, writing, and speaking so that they may deal with the National High School Graduation Exam as well as other English proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOIEC, and TOEFL. Therefore, this situation puts a huge pressure on the English teaching and learning process in schools as well as English centers. Especially, teaching productive skills, especially speaking skills, seems to encounter numerous difficulties due to the lack of practice environment and the limitation of learning hours. The reason for this problem is that English, in Vietnam, is still considered as a foreign language so it might be difficult for students to practice speaking English outside the classroom. This, combined with the emphasis on other skills and components in the National High School Graduation Exam, has created “poverty” in teaching and learning speaking skills, which leads to poor quality teaching and learning speaking skills at multiple levels of education. Having a chance to teach and encounter a wide range of

In the field of second/foreign language education, the idea of using visual resources, especially pictures,

has long been supported and facilitated by educators, researchers, and teachers. Visual resources are believed to be beneficial to the process of language learning as well as language acquisition. According to Wright (1989), pictures can support language learner’s experience by providing illustrations or adding to understanding. Moreover, Unsworth & Ngo (2014) pointed out that in addition to those functions, pictures have the ability to actively facilitate language activities and language development using their meanings. Therefore, teachers should be able to recognize the potential of using pictures and thus, take advantage to provoke students’ language development. Furthermore, the idea that visual resources may enrich the overall meaning of the texts is supported by Stokes (2002). He believed that in order to effectively employ visual resources in teaching second/foreign language, teachers should be able to use imagery language as well as techniques of teaching visually.

Having a chance to examine recent studies about visual resources and their roles in teaching language, the researcher was deeply interested in the roles of visual resources in teaching and learning speaking skills in EFL classes. Therefore, the researcher desires to conduct research on employing visual resources in teaching speaking skills in order to suggest a solution for English teachers and students to improve students’ speaking skills as well as their ability to communicate in English orally.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Speaking skills

According to Nunan (2003) and Bailey & Savage

(1994), speaking has been considered a productive oral skill, in which meaning is conveyed through a process of producing systematic verbal utterances. She also states that speaking is the most difficult skill for learners to master as speaking happens in real-life situations, and speakers cannot edit as well as revise what they wish to say. Having a similar idea, Chaney & Burk (1998) see speaking as a process in which meaning is built and shared through the channel of verbal and non-verbal symbols, and in a huge number of contexts.

2.2. Visual resources in teaching speaking

The roles of visual resources in teaching speaking have been questioned by both teachers and researchers for a long time. According to Wright (1989), pictures are claimed to play multiple roles in the context of speaking class. First, they may be able to motivate the students, draw their attention, and make them want to participate in the lessons. Secondly, as the pictures bring the outside world inside the classroom, they may contribute to the use of language in different contexts. Moreover, thanks to the appearance of an object via pictures, students may find different ways to describe it, such as objective, interpreted, or subjective. Fourth, pictures are supposed to help learners give solutions to questions in controlled practices. Last but not least, information needed in conversation, storytelling, as well as discussion could be simulated and found via pictures.

2.3. Pictures in teaching speaking

So far, a large number of studies have been carried out to examine the roles of pictures in teaching speaking. An experimental study conducted by Khafidhoh & Carolina (2019) took place in a junior high school. In this study, the authors tried to investigate the impact of pictures on students' ability to acquire vocabulary as well as their attitudes toward the lesson. At the end of the research, it was found that using pictures had positive impacts on both students' performance in vocabulary and their attitudes that they wanted to pay attention and participate in the class more actively. Focusing on the impact of pictures on students' ability to construct a storytelling speech, a study by Fantika & Ratmanida (2016) provided a brief theoretical background as well as a framework to employ pictures in teaching storytelling.

2.4. Pictures in teaching speaking in Vietnam

In Vietnamese schools, despite the advantages of using pictures in teaching speaking, research showed that the effectiveness of this method was limited. There was an investigation conducted in Da Nang by Luu & Ngo (2014) to gather information about (1)

how pictures were used in English speaking lessons in primary schools of Da Nang, (2) what were teachers and students' attitudes toward using pictures in English speaking lessons in primary schools of Da Nang, (3) what difficulties did teacher encounter in using pictures in English speaking lessons, and (4) what was the recommendation for teachers to use pictures effectively in teaching speaking. Another similar investigation was conducted by Luu & Nguyen, (2008) but in the context of Quang Binh Province. In both studies, the status of using pictures in teaching speaking was pointed out, and practical suggestions were given so that the effectiveness of teaching speaking through pictures could be improved.

3. The suggestion of using pictures in teaching speaking skills.

There have been multiple procedures to apply visual resources in teaching speaking.

3.1. Using pictures in teaching English conversations

Nurdini (2018) states about a three-step technique, which contains pre-conversation, process-conversation, and post-conversation. In the first step, pictures are brought into classes, and students are divided into groups or pairs. Then, students will be asked to analyze the pictures in about 5 minutes and discuss them in groups or pairs before answering Wh-questions about the pictures given by teachers and sometimes other groups, and then making simple sentences about those pictures. In the last step, to make sure all students understand firmly about the pictures, some pairs or groups will be asked to give a speech in which they will conclude and summarize the content of the picture, and comments as well as a conclusion will be given by teachers.

3.2. Using pictures in teaching telling stories

In addition, Fantika & Ratmanida (2016) provide a three-step procedure in which pre-teaching activity, whilst-teaching activity, and post-teaching activity are included. In particular, there are sub-steps included in the stage of the whilst-teaching activity, which are observing, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating. This implementation will occur during these sub-steps.

Observing: In this step, the teacher uses multiple pictures to show the context of the story. It aims to build and activate students' background knowledge about the story. Then, several questions are given by the teacher to make the story easier for students to understand.

Questioning: In this phase, it is students' chance to raise questions about the information that they find difficult to understand, such as new vocabulary of

objects which appear in pictures.

Experimenting: After explaining new vocabulary, it is the teacher's job to sum up the new words and let students practice pronouncing those words. Then, the story and pictures should be separated so that the story map should be clear to the students.

Associating: This is the core part of the procedure. In this phase, students should be given examples of what should be done and how to do it justice by the teacher. The use of pictures will be demonstrated in this part. After that, students are supposed to be divided into groups, in which they will make a map of the characters, setting, and plot.

Communicating

After finishing making and discussing the story map, students would be checked about their understanding of the story. Then, it is time for students to try telling the story using the pictures, the story map, as well as their understanding.

Using pictures in teaching describing objects

This framework is modified and then adapted from the framework of Agustien et al. (2004). There are four steps in this framework, which are Building Knowledge of the Field, Modeling of the Speech, Joint Construction of the Speech, and Independent Construction of the Speech. In the first step, students will be given different types of visual resources to brainstorm their ideas for their speeches, and the teacher may ask several questions to help them analyze the visual resources. In the next step, the teacher will provide an example of the speech and analyze it in order to develop learners' understanding of the speech. In this step, scaffolding questions may be used to raise students' awareness about the structure of the speech. Then, students will be divided into groups and give their speech within their group while the teacher gives feedback as well as error correction. In the last step, students will be given the opportunity to produce the speech individually.

Using pictures together with visible thinking routines

Thinking routines first appeared in Project Zero by Perkins (2008). So far, there have been 10 types and multiple sub-categories of thinking routines have been introduced and applied. In this part, the writer will focus on the use of visible thinking Think, See, and Wonder together with pictures in teaching how to describe objects. According to Richhart et al. (2011), the teacher should apply this routine by asking students to answer the following questions:

What do you see in the picture?

What do you think about what you see?

What do you wonder?

To apply this procedure in teaching describing objects, the teacher will prepare several pictures of targeted objects. Then, in order to answer the first question, students are expected to give information about objects in the pictures. After that, the teacher may help them in interpreting that information to obtain further details. Finally, students may raise questions about some aspects that are not found or mentioned in the pictures. By doing this, the teacher may have the opportunity to give students an insight of targeted objects and make it easier for students to describe.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, there have been multiple studies pointed out the effective use of pictures in facilitating foreign and second language learning as well as teaching and learning speaking skills in particular. In this study, a number of applications of pictures have been listed, which are slated to play important roles in speaking classes. However, it should be noted that the effectiveness of using pictures in speaking classes depends on the flexibility as well as the ability of teachers. Before applying pictures in the lesson plans, they should consider the aims and objectives of the lesson, as well as the effectiveness of activities. In addition, although using pictures in teaching speaking may improve students' attitudes towards class, it should be noticed that if teachers stick to only one procedure during a long time, it may cause boredom among students. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to apply multiple procedures of using pictures so that the chosen procedure is suitable to different lessons' content and aims. Last but not least, enhancing students' other competencies such as leadership, teamwork, or critical thinking is also considered important as those competencies may improve the effectiveness of using pictures in speaking class.

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