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Impact of Pictures on Young Learners' Speaking Ability at a Primary School in Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam

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Abstract:

Research into the use of pictures has been widely known as influencing how learners speak English as a foreign or second language. In the context of primary schools, especially in the community as Tra Vinh, such study has not been investigated so far. This paper therefore examines the impact of pictures on young learners' speaking ability at a primary school. A mixed-methods design was undertaken with 139 fourth graders from six classes. The data discussed in this paper include tests, classroom observations and semi-structure interviews. The findings reveal that pictures influenced young learners' speaking ability and that these learners had positive attitudes towards the use of pictures in speaking lessons. Implications are also presented.

Keywords: Attitudes, pair work, speaking, college

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the use of pictures that influence young learners' English-speaking ability at a primary school in Tra Vinh, Vietnam. In particular, it explores the impact of pictures on fourth graders' speaking and their attitudes towards this type of instruction. To meet the global integration, it is necessary for individual learners to use English communicatively. In foreign or second language learning and teaching, speaking is widely known as a key component of four language skills and communicative success (e.g., Nunan, 2015; Ur, 1996). In Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject at school at all levels of education, namely from primary to tertiary. This importance is advocated by the National Foreign Language 2020 Project with regard to promoting learners' capacity of communicating and interacting with others using English (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). However, young learners at the school under investigation encounter some speaking problems. First, they could express their ideas even in a simple form of conversation or speak fluently. Second, young learners found difficult in recalling imagination about something they wanted to say. Third, these learners were reluctant to talk with others due to their nervousness when asked to speak in front of class. Therefore, in order to deal with these issues and improve learners' speaking ability, the use of pictures reported in this study is considered an effective tool.

Research into the use of pictures has been widely recognized as influencing how learners speak English as a foreign or second language (Episiasi, Ardayati, & Novianti, 2015; Purwatiningsih, 2015). As indicated earlier, speaking plays a vital role in teaching and learning process, there are many different ways that learners play with words to develop their speaking skill. As a very common saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' goes, pictures are a way to help people express ideas, tell stories, and communicate with each other in a natural and entertaining way (Chesla, 2000; Finch, Song, Tanaka-Ishii, & Sumita, 2013; Nugroho, 2014). Using pictures as a visual aid to teach speaking English skill for young learners is therefore gaining increased attention of teachers and learners within the context of teaching and learning speaking in Vietnam where the use of pictures is still limited. This paper therefore examines the impact of using pictures on young learners' speaking ability and their attitudes towards this type of instruction. The research questions that guided the study reported in this paper were, 'What are the effects of using pictures in teaching speaking English to young learners?' and, 'What are young learners' attitudes towards learning speaking English using pictures?'

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speaking

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning of words to generate, receive, and process information (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and purposes for speaking. Speaking requires that learners should not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary but also understand when and why to use that language. While teaching speaking, teachers must pay attention to providing learners with the opportunity to interact with other peers in order to maximize comprehension and

involvement (Brown, 2007). Speaking has been examined from different perspectives of communication with regard to fluency, comprehensibility, and accentedness (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2013; Galante & Thomson, 2017; Nguyen & Do, 2017; Nzanana, 2016). Others view speaking as the production skill that involves accuracy and fluency (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Skehan, 2009). While accuracy focuses on the use of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation of the target language, fluency takes into account the learners' ability to keep conversations or communication going spontaneously. Therefore, in this paper we draw on the connection between pictures and communicative purposes in young learners' speaking class.

2.2. Young Learners

There are different perspectives of the term 'young learners' in the literature. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) view young learners as children between the ages of five and ten or eleven while Phillips (1993) define young learners as children from five or six to eleven or twelve years old. Others define young learners as ones between the ages of five and twelve to learn a foreign or second language (Cameron, 2001; McKay, 2006; Nikolov, 2016; Shin & Crandall, 2014). In this current study, young learners are defined as children at the age of ten to eleven.

Young learners are energetic and physically active as they cannot sit in one place for a long period of time. They move around and are attracted by games or funny activities. Therefore, it is important for teachers to take advantage of dynamic energy of young learners to create or design any activities for effective learning (McKay, 2006; Shin & Crandall, 2014). It is assumed that learning activities should be varied from students working alone to working in pairs to groups and the whole class (Brumfit, Moon, & Tongue, 1995; McKay, 2006; Shin & Crandall, 2014). Young learners are very social in communicating others; therefore, it requires teachers to pay much attention to learners' needs, interests, learning styles, and aspects of foreign language teaching.

According to Shin and Crandall (2014), there are five principles for teaching speaking to young learners. For the first principle, teachers need to build the classroom routines in English and give young learners plenty of opportunities to participate. Second, all activities should be designed based on real life communication and developmentally appropriate. Third, teachers need to use a variety of activities to improve both accuracy and fluency. Fourth, teachers need to keep the speaking environment active and do not correct errors explicitly. Fifth, young learners should be equipped with negotiation strategies.

2.3. Picture

A picture is defined as a visual representation of a person or an object through painting, drawing or photographing (e.g., Nugroho, 2014; Purwatiningsih, 2015; Wright, 2010). It is likely that pictures as visual aids that teachers can use to communicate ideas or information embedded in a lesson to learners. Pictures also allow learners to speak, use the language taught and interact with others in their learning process. Through the use of pictures, learners find it easier to obtain what is presented to them (Purwatiningsih, 2015). As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, pictures can motivate learners to unravel what is not clearly stated in the text (Nugroho, 2014). Therefore, understanding how pictures influence learners' speaking is the focus of this study,

3. Research Methods

A mixed-methods design was used in this study to explore the effects of pictures on young learners' speaking within a Vietnamese primary school context. This quasi-experimental design was considered most appropriate for obtaining better understanding of the topic under investigation (Creswell, 2014). The design of the study includes two groups: control and experimental group. Both groups took a pretest and posttest but only the experimental group received the treatment.

The study was conducted at a primary school in Tra Vinh province, Mekong delta, Vietnam during the 2017-2018 academic years. English as a compulsory subject was taught at Grade Three at this school in which its program has been applied since 2012. However, learners' English outcomes were not high as they did not have an opportunity to practice speaking and, were not interested in this productive skill. The reasons for this neglect were lack of confidence, being afraid of making mistakes, shortage of vocabularies, and pronunciation problems. Notably, the number of Khmer learners was quite high (accounting for 35.7%). For these Khmer learners, English as the third language causes some difficulties; as a result, such challenges hindered them from using English in class. These challenges result from the traditional lecturing of the teacher.

Participants in this study were one hundred thirty-nine young learners at a primary school in Tra Vinh province. They were fourth graders (age from ten to eleven) from six classes. There were sixty-nine learners in the control group (Classes 4C, 4D, and 4E) and seventy in the experimental group (Classes 4A, 4B and 4D).

The data collected in this study included tests, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Pre-test was administered before the implementation of pictures as the treatment. At the end of the study, the posttest was used to assess learners' speaking ability. Classroom observations were considered to be the best tool to allow for gaining insights into the teacher's practices of pictures in a naturalistic setting (Hendricks, 2013). The observation sheet adapted from Nguyen's (2014) set by five-stage lesson plan comprise pre-, in-, and post-tasks (Appendix 1). The picture items focus on real-life contexts, role of the learner, interactions, and teacher reflection. Two period observations were conducted in each class during five semester weeks. Each observation took approximately twenty-five minutes. After five weeks, the post-test was used. The data of the tests were collected and analyzed using the computer software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Twelve learners were selected for face-to-face interview. The participant selection was based on their test scores from the highest to the lowest, namely high-achieving, average-achieving and low-achieving. Each

interview took approximately half an hour. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure students felt more comfortable and could express their ideas in a natural way during the interview process. All learners' responses were taken notes, translated from Vietnamese into English for data analysis.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study to answer the two research questions. The findings reveal that pictures influenced young learners' speaking, followed by their positive attitudes towards the use of this instructional practice.

4.1. Findings from Tests

The reliability of the pre-test was .831 and that of the post-test was .823, indicating that the internal reliability coefficient of the two tests was satisfactory. A *Descriptive Statistics Test* was conducted to observe the tests scores of the pre- and post-tests within the two groups. Then, an *Independent-Samples t-test* was administered to check whether there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the young learners' speaking ability between two groups before and after the intervention. Finally, a *General Linear Model (GLM) Repeated Measure tests* was used to investigate whether young learners in each group made progress in speaking after the course

Descriptive Statistics						
Conditions	Tests	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Control	Pre-	69	2.5	10.00	7.60	2.61
	Post-		3.75	10.00	8.02	2.17
Experimental	Pre-	70	2.5	10.00	7.67	2.56
	Post-		5.00	10.00	9.03	1.29

Table 1: Descriptive Statistic of Young Learners' Speaking Ability

As can be seen in Table 1, the pre-test mean scores of the young learners' speaking ability of the control group ($M_{pre} = 7.60$) and that of the experimental group ($M_{pre} = 7.67$) were observed to be at a high level on the ten-degree scale. The mean score of the post-test of the two groups ($M_{postCon} = 8.02$, $M_{postEx} = 9.03$) was higher compared with that of the pre-test. This indicates that young learners' speaking ability in the two groups is different after the intervention.

Table 2 presents an *Independent-Samples t-test* to measure whether there was a difference in speaking ability of the young learners between the two groups before the intervention. The *t-test* result indicates that there was no difference between the mean score of the learners' speaking ability in the control group ($M_{pre} = 7.60$, $SD = 2.61$), and that of the experimental group ($M_{pre} = 7.67$, $SD = 2.56$), ($t = -0.16$, $df = 136.8$, $p = 0.9$). It can be concluded that before the study, young learners' speaking ability of the two groups were the same.

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
TotalPre	Control	6	7.60	2.61	.31474
	Experimental	9	7.67	2.56	.30659
Independent Samples t-Test					
			t-test for Equality of Means		
			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
TotalPre	Equal variances not assumed		-.159	136.846	.874

Table 2: Independent-Samples T-Test Results before the Intervention

Table 3 illustrates that the mean score of the young learners' speaking ability of the experimental group after the intervention ($M_{post} = 9.03$) is higher than that of the control group ($M_{post} = 8.02$). The result of *Independent-Samples t-test* on the posttest of the two groups indicates that after the intervention, there is a significant difference between the mean score of the young learners' speaking ability of the control group and that of the experimental group ($t = -3.30$, $df = 110.49$, $p = 0.00$). It indicates that after the intervention the young learners' speaking ability in the experimental group is higher than that of the control group. Therefore, it can be concluded that this intervention has positive impacts on improving the young learners' speaking ability.

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
TotalPost	CG	69	8.02	2.17	.26243
	EG	70	9.03	1.29	.15505
Independent Samples Test					
t-test for Equality of Means					
			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
TotalPost	Equal variances not assumed		-3.303	110.491	.00

Table 3: Independent-Samples T-Test Results after the Intervention of Two Groups

A General Linear Model (GLM) Repeated Measure test, as shown in Table 4, was conducted to observe whether there was a significant difference between the learners' speaking ability before and after the implementation of pictures. The result shows that young learners' speaking ability after the intervention ($M_{\text{post}} = 9.03$, $SD = 1.29$) is higher than that before the intervention ($M_{\text{pre}} = 7.67$, $SD = 2.56$) ($f = 34.09$, $df = 1$, $p = .00$). This result indicates that using pictures influenced young learners' speaking ability.

Descriptive Statistics						
Conditions	Tests	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Experimental	Pre-	70	2.50	10.00	7.67	2.56
	Post-	70	5.00	10.00	9.03	1.29
General Linear Model						
Within-Subjects Factors						
Multivariate Tests ^a						
	Effect	value	f	hypothesis df	Error df	sig.
factor 1	Pillai's Trace	.331	34.09 1 ^b	1.000	69.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.669	34.09 1 ^b	1.000	69.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.494	34.09 1 ^b	1.000	69.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.494	34.09 1 ^b	1.000	69.000	.000

Table 4: Speaking Ability in Experimental Group before and After the Intervention

4.2 Findings from Classroom Observations

In this section, observation data illustrate the active participation of young learners in the learning process through pictures used by the teacher in a speaking lesson. Guessing game as a warm-up activity was the major part of the teacher's speaking lesson, as shown in the following scenario.

At the beginning of lesson, the teacher had learners play a guessing game. Learners were asked to observe two pictures of jobs and places of work such as farmer and worker; a field, and factory. The class was divided into two groups (Tiger group and Bird group). Four members in each group were assigned to join the game. After the teacher said the word 'farmer', two members in both groups chose a picture, wrote down a word on the picture, then said one complete sentence using that word. For example, 'My father is a farmer. He works in the field.' Tiger group did quickly and correct, so Tiger group scored one mark. The game continued until the last words presented to the learners (OB. S2.7.40-7.46am).

The extract above shows that the teacher involved young learners in his speaking lesson through the use of pictures as a game. This learning strategy offered learners an opportunity to play their roles in the learning time and interact with other peers.

In the presentation part, the teacher introduced the new lesson by presenting new words and reviewing grammatical structures. Observation notes below showed how the teacher employed pictures to lead young learners to the new lesson.

The teacher showed a couple of pictures of interviewing jobs of family members and asked learners to elicit some questions related to that topic. Questions such as 'How many pictures are there?', 'Who are they?', 'What are they talking about?', 'What does the father in the picture do?' are provided as prompts. Learners were arranged into pairs. The teacher modeled the structures used by learners while practicing speaking. An example of the model was 'What does the father do? The father is an engineer.' 'Where are they?' 'They are at the office.' The teacher spent five minutes presenting new words about jobs and structures, moved around the class to check if any learners made any mistakes with regard to pronunciation or the use of tense and then helped them correct these. After five minutes, two pairs of learners were called to present what pictures tell in front of the class (OB. S2.7.46-8.06am).

This teacher thought that what young learners working in pairs used sentences to describe pictures helped them think about how to tell a story from a given picture, choose the appropriate structure, practice pronunciation, and increase their feeling of freedom to speak in English.

The following example provides evidence of how the teacher continued the use of pictures from the textbook *Tieng Anh 4* to allow his learners to practice English, thereby familiarizing them with natural learning environment.

The teacher showed a picture of food and drink from the textbook and asked learners to guess the topic that they were about to learn. From that picture, the teacher elicited vocabulary like chicken, beef, fish, pork, and had them recite these words chorally and individually. Then the teacher used a different picture in Section 'Point and Say' in the textbook to introduce learners the structure 'What is your favorite food/ drink? – It's fish/ milk.' Also, with that picture, the teacher had learners practice speaking in pairs and swap roles (OB. S2.8.05-8.15 am).

The above scenario reveals the interactions through student-student talk and teacher-student talk. These activities are targeted at young learners' active participation in speaking classroom practices.

4.3. Findings from Interviews

Analysis from the interview data indicates that all twelve interviewed learners reported that the use of pictures in their speaking class was useful. In particular, learners expressed their interest and preference of having pictures as a potential tool for speaking over time, as noted by the following extracts.

I can guess the topic that I am going to learn immediately and I can receive good comments from the teacher. I just like this way of learning with pictures. (Dat, interview extract)

Pictures with color actually make me feel interested as they encourage me to speak more English in speaking periods (An, interview extract)

Moreover, most of the interviewees acknowledged the potential use of pictures in learning speaking in the subsequent classes. For instance,

I hope my teacher will use more pictures in all speaking lessons (Tram, interview extract)

I always expect to speak English with colored pictures. These colors stir me up for more ideas or maintain conversations with other classmates (Ngan, interview extract)

I can remember vocabularies easily when looking at pictures (Duong, interview extract)

I love the colorful pictures because they make me excited about using English during speaking with others (Thy, interview extract)

These views above suggest that learners had positive views of pictures on their speaking ability. They believed that this activity could motivate them to learn more words and increase their feeling of confidence.

When asked if it was difficult when using pictures to speak English/ express ideas in English, learners indicated some challenges such as retention of words, pronunciation or word meaning. Three students stated:

Although looking at pictures may help me remember vocabularies easily, I have some problems to complete one sentence verbally. I cannot remember long sentences so the teacher had to give me more time in practicing the conversation with my partner. (Vinh, interview extract)

I can remember words but I had pronunciation problems. Some of my friends laughed at me when I mispronounced some words. At that time, the teacher asks me to repeat many times until I can pronounce them correctly (Nuong, interview extract)

Sometimes, I misunderstand the meaning of words given in the picture. Therefore, my friends laughed at me, so my teacher has to explain the words to me (Duong, interview extract)

5. Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that pictures had positive impact on young learners' speaking ability. It was evidenced by the significant difference between the mean score of the young learners' speaking ability in the control group and that of the experimental group ($t = -1.61$, $df = 1$, $p = .00$). This difference supports the conclusion that the use of pictures could help improve young learners' speaking ability. This finding is consistent with those of several studies (Harmer, 2007; Lavallo & Briesmaster, 2017; Novianda, 2017; Nugroho, 2014) highlighting that pictures could influence and enhance learners' speaking ability. Such improvement in learners' speaking appears to advocate the view that pictures are an effective tool that allows learners to speak and use English more in their learning process compared with traditional way presented to them.

The findings from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews reveal that the participating learners had positive attitudes toward the implementation of pictures in learning speaking. In particular, their interests in and preferences of the use of pictures in speaking were shown by the progress they made in speaking, more vocabularies and structures gained, thus resulting in increased confidence and motivation in their learning process. These findings build on other studies (e.g., Lavallo & Briesmaster, 2017; Novianda, 2017; Zainatuddar, 2015) affirming that using pictures could increase learner motivation, promote their confidence and lead to better speaking ability. Specific strategies of picture instruction identified as a guessing game and role play were reported in this study. These activities reflect the interaction between the teacher and learners as well as that among learners. However, word retention, pronunciation, or word meaning were the issues participating learners encountered while using pictures in speaking classes. Understanding such challenges as well as the importance of learners' speaking gains through pictures sheds new light on how teachers continue their positive aspects of this type of instruction in their speaking classes.

6. Conclusions

The findings from this study shed new light on the impact of using pictures on improving young learners' speaking ability and enhancing their attitudes towards this type of instruction. Awareness of learners' needs and preferences towards picture use may provide teachers with opportunities to improve their teaching practices and student learning speaking in similar contexts. Young learners need to be involved in a variety of speaking activities through locating information from the internet or telling a story based on picture words in relation to their daily life so that they feel motivated to learn in a more active and entertaining environment. It is also recommended that teachers are encouraged to participate in professional development workshops or training courses in speaking research into pictures so that they will maximize their student learning by tailoring instructional strategies to meet students' interests and needs.

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Appendix

Five-Stage Lesson Plan						
Categories	Activities	Pre-task		In-task		Post-task
		Warm up	Presentation (new lesson)	Guided practice	Free practice (Production)	Follow-up (Reflection)
Teaching strategies (how)	Whole class					
	Role play					
	Pair work					
	Group work					
	Individual					
	Other					
Teaching aids/ resources	Textbook					
	Pictures					
	Black board					
	Video					
	Projector					
The role of the teacher	Controller					
	Team member					
	Facilitator					
	Helper					
	Supporter					
	Other					
Students' interaction	Student-student talk					
	Teacher-student talk					
	Time on task					
Reflection on the practices						

Table 5: Observation Sheet (Adapted from Nguyen, 2014)