

Improving Students' Speaking Skills Through Describing Picture Strategy at SMP Negeri 7 Palu

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ABSTRACT

Descriptive speaking skills remain among the most challenging competencies for junior high school students, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. Many students struggle with pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehensibility, resulting in limited confidence and difficulty expressing descriptive information. This study aims to determine the effectiveness of the Describing Picture Strategy in developing the descriptive speaking skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Palu. Using a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest control group, the study involved 57 students selected through simple random sampling. The experimental group received treatment using the Describing Picture Strategy, while the control group received conventional instruction. Data were collected using a speaking performance test and analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics using SPSS 25. The results show a significant improvement in the experimental group's mean score from 59.69 to 71.81, compared to the control group's increase from 58.24 to 61.08. An Independent Samples T-Test yielded a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a statistically significant difference between the groups. These findings demonstrate that the Describing Picture Strategy effectively enhances students' pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility by providing visual stimuli that trigger ideas and reduce speaking anxiety. The study concludes that visual-based, student-centered techniques are beneficial for improving descriptive speaking performance in EFL contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking ability is a fundamental component of communicative competence and plays a crucial role in enabling learners to convey ideas, describe objects, and interact meaningfully in social contexts [1], [2]. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, speaking proficiency requires not only correct pronunciation but also fluency and comprehensibility to ensure that messages are delivered clearly and coherently [3], [4].

However, many junior high school students continue to experience difficulties in speaking, particularly due to limited vocabulary, anxiety when speaking in front of peers, and insufficient instructional support during classroom interaction [5], [6].

At the junior high school level, descriptive speaking materials, such as descriptions of people or objects, are essential because they help students organize ideas, enrich vocabulary, and practice meaningful oral communication [7], [8]. Nevertheless, English instruction in many Indonesian schools still relies heavily on traditional, teacher-centered approaches with minimal use of engaging learning media, resulting in low student motivation and limited speaking practice [9], [10], [11]. The lack of visual support further constrains students' ability to generate ideas and express descriptions fluently [12].

From a theoretical perspective, visual media play a significant role in language learning because the learning process is closely related to perception, particularly visual perception, which facilitates information processing and comprehension [13], [14]. Visual stimuli help reduce cognitive load during speaking activities, allowing learners to focus more on language production rather than idea generation [15]. In line with this view, picture-based strategies have been widely recognized as effective tools for improving speaking performance by providing concrete references that support vocabulary use, sentence organization, and fluency [16], [17].

Previous studies have demonstrated that picture description techniques can improve students' speaking skills and classroom engagement [16], [18], [19]. Previous studies have also shown that picture-assisted speaking activities help students organize ideas more systematically and express descriptive content with greater confidence in EFL classrooms [20]. Other studies emphasize that visual-based instruction enhances learners' motivation and reduces speaking anxiety by creating a more interactive and student-centered learning environment [21], [12]. Although these studies confirm the general effectiveness of visual media in speaking instruction, most of them focus on overall speaking improvement without clearly operationalizing specific speaking sub-skills or examining their application in a particular local school context.

In the context of SMP Negeri 7 Palu, classroom observations indicate that students experience persistent difficulties in descriptive speaking. Teachers frequently resort to code-mixing due to students' limited vocabulary, and students struggle with pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility when expressing descriptive information [5], [6]. These challenges are exacerbated by limited exposure to visual learning media, even though students demonstrate better comprehension and engagement when pictures are used during instruction [13].

Therefore, a clear research gap exists between previous studies that broadly confirm the effectiveness of picture-based instruction and the need for empirical evidence that operationalizes speaking sub-skills within a specific junior high school context. This study addresses this gap by investigating the effectiveness of the Describing Picture Strategy in improving students' pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility, as measured by an analytic speaking rubric. The study aims to examine whether this strategy can enhance overall descriptive speaking performance among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Palu and to provide pedagogical insights for English teachers in similar EFL contexts. By doing

so, this research is expected to contribute both theoretically to EFL speaking pedagogy and practically to the improvement of classroom-based speaking instruction using visual media.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest control group. A quasi-experimental design was selected because random assignment of individual students was not feasible in the natural classroom setting, where classes had been administratively formed prior to the research [22], [23].

The study population consisted of all eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Palu. Two intact classes, class VIII B and class VIII C, were selected via random class selection, in which all available eighth-grade classes were listed, and two were randomly chosen. The selected classes were then assigned to the experimental and control groups. No individual random sampling of students was conducted, and intact classes were treated as whole groups, consistent with the characteristics of quasi-experimental research in school settings [24].

A total of 57 students participated in the study. Class VIII B (32 students) served as the experimental group and received instruction using the Describing Picture Strategy, while Class VIII C (25 students) served as the control group and received conventional speaking instruction.

The research instrument was a descriptive speaking test administered as both a pretest and a post-test. Students' speaking performance was assessed using an analytic rubric adapted from Heaton (1991) as cited in Syahidah and Umasugi [25], which measured pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility. Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS 25, including normality and homogeneity tests and an independent-samples t-test to examine differences between groups [23].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic Analysis

Class	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PreControl	25	44	81	58.24	10.277
PostControl	25	45	82	61.08	10.847
PreExperimental	32	48	85	59.69	9.393
PostExperimental	32	50	86	71.81	9.878
Valid N (listwise)	25				

Based on the descriptive statistical analysis, the Pre-Control (58.24) and Pre-Experimental (59.69) groups showed similar initial abilities. After the treatment, the Post-Experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in the mean score (71.81) compared to the Post-Control group (61.08). These results indicate that the experimental group experienced greater and more consistent improvement, suggesting that the treatment had a positive effect on students' performance.

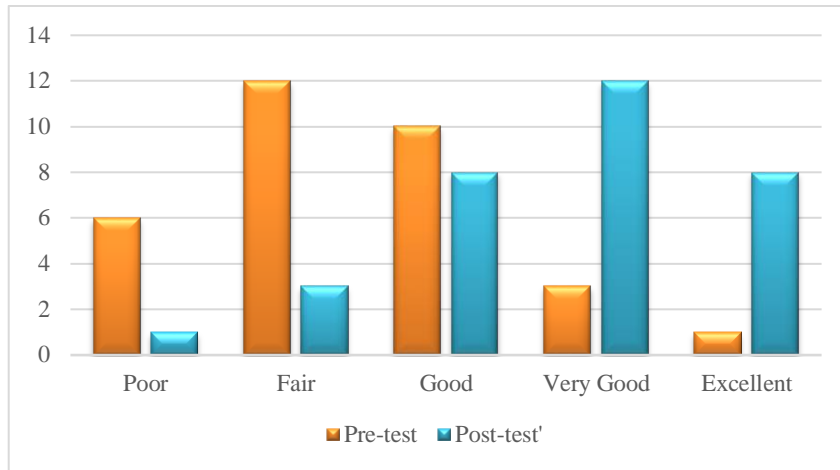


Figure 1. Distribution of Pretest and Post-test in the experimental class

Based on the pretest results, most students in the experimental class were in the Fair category (37%), followed by Good (31%) and Poor (18%), indicating moderate initial speaking ability. After the treatment, the post-test results showed a clear improvement, with increases in the Excellent (25%) and Very Good (37%) categories, while the Fair and Poor categories declined sharply. This shift demonstrates substantial enhancement in students’ descriptive speaking skills following the implementation of the treatment.

Table 2. Normality Test Results

	Test of Normality					
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
PreExperimental	.137	32	.131	.934	32	.052
PostEksperimental	.121	32	.200	.947	32	.119
PreControl	.162	25	.091	.931	25	.092
PostControl	.194	25	.016	.922	25	.057

The normality test results show that all significance values in the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests are above 0.05. Therefore, the data in both groups are normally distributed. This indicates that the data meet the assumptions required for parametric statistical analysis.

Table 3. Homogeneity of Variances Test

		Test of Homogeneity of Variance			
		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Posttest	Based on Mean	.030	1	55	.863
	Based on Median	.054	1	55	.817
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.054	1	53.948	.817
	Based on trimmed mean	.040	1	55	.842

Based on the Test of Homogeneity of Variance table, the significance values (Sig.) for the posttest across all methods (Based on Mean: 0.863; Based on Median: 0.817; Based on Median and with adjusted df: 0.817; Based on trimmed mean: 0.842) were all greater than 0.05. Since all significance values exceeded 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), it can be concluded that the variance of the posttest data is homogeneous. According to the interpretation guidelines for homogeneity testing, these results indicate that there is no significant difference in the variability of posttest scores between the groups, indicating that this essential assumption is met for continuing with parametric statistical analyses.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing

Group Statistics					
	Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Control Class Post-test	25	61.08	10.847	2.169
	Experimental Class Post-test	32	71.81	9.878	1.746

Table 5. Independent Sample T-Test

Independent Samples Test										
Levene's Test of Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Score	Equal variances assumed	.030	.863	-3.899	55	.000	-10.733	2.753	-16.249	-5.216
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.854	49.188	.000	-10.733	2.785	-16.328	-5.137

Based on Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the significance value of 0.863 (Sig. > 0.05) indicates that the assumption of equal variances is met; therefore, the t-test results under the 'Equal variances assumed' row are used for interpretation. The t-test results show a t-value of 3.899 with 55 degrees of freedom (df) and a two-tailed significance value (Sig. 2-tailed) of 0.000. Since the significance value of 0.000 is less than 0.05 (Sig. < 0.05), it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the two groups, with the control class scoring lower by 10.733 points than the experimental class.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the Describing Picture Strategy significantly improved students' overall descriptive speaking performance, as reflected in the higher post-test mean score of the experimental group compared to the control group. This result is

consistent with previous studies highlighting the effectiveness of picture-based instruction in enhancing students' speaking ability [16], [17].

The strategy's effectiveness can be explained by the role of visual stimuli in supporting idea generation and scaffolding during speaking activities. Pictures provide concrete references that help students organize their thoughts, reduce cognitive load, and focus more on language production [13], [15]. As students experienced less difficulty generating ideas, they were able to produce spoken responses more fluently and confidently, which aligns with cognitive processing principles in language learning.

In addition, the use of pictures appeared to reduce students' speaking anxiety, a common barrier in EFL classrooms [6]. The visual support helped students feel more secure when expressing ideas, leading to increased participation and greater output during speaking activities. This finding supports previous research emphasizing the importance of interactive, student-centered learning environments for developing speaking skills [18], [21].

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of intact classes may pose a selection threat, as individual random assignment was not possible. Second, the relatively small sample size and short duration of the intervention limit the generalizability of the findings. Third, potential rater bias may have influenced scoring, despite the use of an analytic rubric. Finally, the study was conducted in a single school context, which may not fully represent other EFL settings.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that integrating visual-based strategies into speaking instruction can effectively support students' descriptive speaking performance in EFL classrooms. The Describing Picture Strategy provides pedagogical value by facilitating idea generation, reducing cognitive load, and encouraging more active student participation during speaking activities.

The findings suggest important implications for English teachers, particularly at the junior high school level, to adopt more interactive and visually supported instructional approaches. However, this study is limited by its quasi-experimental design, sample size, and the scope of its context. Future research is recommended to examine specific variables such as picture complexity, learner autonomy, task format (individual vs. group), and long-term retention of speaking skills over extended periods. This research contributes to the broader EFL teaching community by providing empirical support for the use of simple, accessible visual media to enhance speaking instruction.

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