

The Power of Visual Media in Improving Students' Speaking Ability in Descriptive Text

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Abstract

Mastering speaking skill remains a major challenge for Indonesian learners of English, who often struggle with limited vocabulary, low confidence, and lack of speaking practice. This study investigates the effectiveness of visual media in enhancing students' speaking ability in descriptive text. The research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design developed by Kemmis and McTaggart, involving 28 tenth-grade students of SMAK Kalam Kudus III Green Garden Jakarta during the 2022/2023 academic year. The study was conducted in three cycles, each consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages. Data were collected through speaking tests, observations, interviews, field notes, and documentation. The results revealed a significant improvement in students' speaking performance, with the average score rising from 66 in the pre-action to 86 in the post-action, surpassing the school's mastery criterion of 75. Students demonstrated notable progress in fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and confidence. The findings confirm that visual media—such as pictures, flashcards, realia, and videos—create a more engaging and interactive environment that stimulates imagination and contextual understanding. This research highlights the pedagogical power of visual media in fostering communicative competence and reducing students' speaking anxiety.

Key words: descriptive text, speaking ability, visual media.

1 INTRODUCTION

English has become a global language that connects people in education, business, science, and technology. In Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject from junior high school to university level. However, despite years of study, many Indonesian students still face difficulties in using English for real communication. Among the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—speaking is often considered the most challenging to master. According to Nunan (2003), speaking is a productive oral skill that enables learners to express ideas, feelings, and opinions meaningfully. In practice, speaking requires not only linguistic competence but also confidence and creativity to convey meaning effectively. For Indonesian learners, the ability to speak fluently and accurately remains a major obstacle due to limited exposure, lack of vocabulary, and minimal opportunities for interaction.

In the context of Indonesian schools, speaking activities are frequently dominated by teacher-centered instruction, where students listen, take notes, and rarely engage in oral communication. This condition can be observed in SMAK Kalam Kudus III Green Garden Jakarta, where a preliminary study showed that more than half of the tenth-grade students had low speaking performance. Many students spoke in short, fragmented sentences and relied heavily on Indonesian when describing something in English. Their lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and limited vocabulary hindered their participation.

In addition, teaching methods that rely mostly on textbooks and verbal explanations fail to provide meaningful contexts or motivation for speaking practice. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a more engaging and supportive approach that encourages students to express their ideas confidently.

One potential solution to these challenges is the integration of visual media in teaching speaking. Visual media—such as pictures, flashcards, realia, and videos—can stimulate students' imagination, provide contextual support, and make abstract language more concrete (Heinich et al., 2002). As Wright (1989) points out, pictures and other visual resources play an essential role in language learning because they help learners understand meaning and communicate more effectively. Visual media can also increase students' motivation and reduce anxiety, creating a more enjoyable learning environment (Harmer, 2007). By using visual cues, students are encouraged to speak naturally, describe objects or scenes, and relate language to real-life experiences. This approach aligns with Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory, which states that information is more easily retained when it is processed both visually and verbally.

Several previous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of visual media in developing speaking skills. Putri (2017) found that the use of flashcards significantly improved students' vocabulary mastery and confidence. Similarly, Sari (2017) reported that pictures and videos helped students pronounce words more accurately and use appropriate expressions. Hidayat (2017) also observed that combining various visual media increased students' engagement and participation during speaking activities. Canning-Wilson (1999) further emphasizes that visual materials enhance motivation and comprehension, while Arsyad (2014) argues that media bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world contexts. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focused on general speaking skills or narrative texts and often employed a single type of visual aid.

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the effectiveness of combining different forms of visual media—pictures, flashcards, realia, and videos—in improving students' speaking ability specifically in descriptive text. Descriptive text is an essential genre in the senior high school curriculum, aiming to describe a person, place, or object vividly (Gerot & Wignell, 1994). Yet, many students struggle with this genre because it demands the ability to observe details, use descriptive adjectives, and present ideas coherently. By incorporating visual media, teachers can help students generate ideas more easily, organize their thoughts, and express them fluently. Moreover, this study applies the Classroom Action Research (CAR) design by Kemmis and McTaggart, allowing systematic observation, reflection, and improvement across three learning cycles.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to improve students' speaking ability in descriptive text by utilizing visual media in classroom instruction. This study is expected to provide empirical evidence that visual media can enhance speaking performance and contribute to the development of communicative, confident, and creative English learners. It also aims to offer practical insights for English teachers to design more engaging and student-centered speaking activities. Ultimately, this research highlights the power of visual media as an effective pedagogical tool for fostering meaningful oral communication in the language classroom.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in learning a foreign language because it allows learners to express ideas, thoughts, and feelings directly. According to Chaney (1998), speaking is the process of constructing and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal symbols in various contexts. It requires fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and confidence (Harmer, 2007). However, many Indonesian students find speaking difficult because they lack sufficient vocabulary, grammatical control, and opportunities to practice. This problem is particularly visible when they are asked to perform descriptive speaking tasks that demand both linguistic mastery and creativity.

Descriptive text, as stated by Gerot and Wignell (1994), is a genre that aims to describe a particular person, place, or thing in detail to give the listener or reader a clear image. It typically consists of two parts: identification and description. In speaking, students are expected to describe objects or people fluently using appropriate adjectives, the simple present tense, and correct pronunciation. Yet, in traditional classroom settings, students often face difficulties generating ideas or recalling the right words when producing descriptive speech. They tend to depend heavily on memorization, which limits natural communication. Therefore, an alternative approach that stimulates imagination and provides concrete context is needed.

Visual media serve as an effective tool to address these issues. Heinich et al. (2002) define media as channels of communication that can take visual, audio, or audiovisual forms to convey messages and support learning. Visual media—such as pictures, flashcards, realia, and videos—help learners connect abstract language to real-life experiences. Wright (1989) emphasizes that visuals assist students in understanding meaning and using language more effectively, while Harmer (2007) notes that visual materials can reduce anxiety and increase motivation in speaking activities. Through images and objects, students are encouraged to describe what they see, which helps them practice vocabulary and structure naturally.

The effectiveness of visual media in language learning can also be explained through Paivio's (1986) *Dual Coding Theory*, which suggests that information is better retained when it is processed through both verbal and visual systems. When students see an image and describe it verbally, they form stronger mental associations that enhance memory and comprehension. This interaction between words and visuals allows students to internalize new vocabulary and expressions more effectively. As a result, they become more confident and fluent in speaking.

Based on these theoretical considerations, the framework of this study proposes that visual media can significantly improve students' speaking ability in descriptive text. The process begins with identifying the difficulties students face in speaking, such as limited vocabulary and low confidence. Visual media are then introduced to provide contextual and imaginative support, helping students generate ideas and express them more naturally. Through consistent practice and reflection across classroom action research cycles, students are expected to show progress in fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and overall communicative competence.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, which aimed to improve the quality of teaching and learning through a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The model used was developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), who define CAR as a form of collaborative inquiry in which teachers and researchers work together to diagnose problems, implement strategies, and evaluate outcomes for the purpose of improving educational practice. The cyclical nature of CAR allows continuous refinement of teaching techniques until the desired learning improvement is achieved. In this study, three cycles were conducted, with each cycle consisting of two meetings, to systematically observe progress in students' speaking ability after the use of visual media.

The research was carried out at SMAK Kalam Kudus III Green Garden Jakarta, a private Christian senior high school located in West Jakarta. The participants were 28 students of the tenth grade Science class during the 2022/2023 academic year. The students were chosen because they represented a typical group of English learners with moderate proficiency who had trouble in expressing ideas verbally, particularly in descriptive text. The classroom teacher collaborated with the researcher throughout the implementation to ensure the practicality, validity, and relevance of the actions taken in each cycle.

The study used both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the improvement process. Quantitative data were derived from the students' speaking test scores, while qualitative data were obtained from observations, interviews, field notes, and documentation. The combination of these two data types allowed the researcher to measure not only the level of progress in speaking ability but also changes in students' attitudes, participation, and classroom dynamics.

Data collection was conducted through several techniques. Observation was used to record students' engagement, participation, and behaviour during the learning process. Both the researcher and a collaborating teacher used observation sheets to monitor how students interacted with visual media and participated in speaking activities. Speaking tests were administered before the implementation (pre-test) and at the end of each cycle (post-tests) to evaluate students' speaking performance. The assessment rubric covered five components: fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence. Each component was rated on a scale of 1 to 5, and the total score was converted into a percentage to determine the students' proficiency level.

In addition, interviews were conducted with selected students and the English teacher to gather insights into their perceptions and experiences of using visual media. The interviews provided deeper qualitative data on how students felt about the learning process, what aspects helped them the most, and what challenges remained. Field notes were also taken to record non-verbal behaviours, classroom atmosphere, and spontaneous reactions that might not be captured in formal observation sheets. Meanwhile, documentation, such as photographs and lesson plans, served as supporting evidence of the implementation process and students' progress during each cycle.

The collected data were analysed using a comparative descriptive analysis technique. The process involved four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and data verification. During data collection, all relevant information—test scores, observation notes, interview transcripts, and photographs—was gathered systematically. In the reduction stage, the data were organized and focused only on information directly related to the research objectives, particularly those indicating improvement in speaking performance. The data were then displayed in the form of tables, charts, and descriptive summaries to visualize patterns and progress across cycles. Finally, the data were verified and interpreted to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of visual media in improving students' speaking ability.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed. This method involves using multiple data sources and techniques—observation, testing, interviews, and documentation—to cross-check and confirm the consistency of results (Denzin, 1978; Creswell, 2012). Triangulation strengthened the credibility of the study by minimizing bias and ensuring that the observed improvements were genuinely due to the implementation of visual media rather than other external factors.

The success of the research was determined by two criteria. First, it was expected that at least 75% of the students would achieve a minimum score of 75 in the speaking test, which corresponds to the school's mastery criterion (KKM). Second, qualitative observations had to show a noticeable increase in students' motivation, participation, and confidence during speaking activities. When both criteria were met, the action was considered successful, and the cycle could be concluded.

Overall, this methodological design allowed for both measurable and observable assessment of improvement in speaking skills. The use of multiple data sources and reflective cycles provided a rich understanding of how visual media contributed to students' speaking development. By combining structured assessment with qualitative reflection, the research offered a balanced view of both cognitive and affective growth among learners, thereby validating the pedagogical power of visual media in enhancing speaking competence.

4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

The results of this classroom action research showed a consistent improvement in students' speaking ability after the implementation of visual media. Quantitatively, students' average speaking scores increased significantly from 66 in the pre-action stage to 71 in Cycle I, 76 in Cycle II, and 86 in Cycle III. The percentage of students who achieved the minimum mastery criterion (75) also rose from 29% before the intervention to 89% by the end of Cycle III. These results indicate that the use of visual media effectively enhanced students' speaking performance in descriptive text. The steady progress across cycles suggests that continuous exposure to visual materials and communicative activities provided meaningful support for students' language development.

In the first cycle, students were introduced to speaking activities supported by simple pictures and realia. Although they appeared interested, many still relied on limited vocabulary and produced short, hesitant sentences. Some students showed shyness and were reluctant to speak in front of the class. However, the use of visual aids began to attract their attention and encouraged them to participate more actively. The teacher's reflection after Cycle I showed that students needed more structured guidance and vocabulary preparation before performing descriptive tasks.

During the second cycle, the researcher added videos and flashcards to strengthen students' comprehension and pronunciation. These materials provided clearer models of descriptive expression and helped students visualize objects and scenes more vividly. Students started to construct longer and more coherent sentences, showing better use of adjectives and grammar. Their pronunciation also improved because they could imitate native speakers from the videos. Observations indicated that classroom participation increased, and students seemed more confident when presenting their descriptions. This cycle demonstrated a noticeable improvement in both performance and enthusiasm.

By the third cycle, students showed substantial progress in fluency, confidence, and creativity. They were able to describe people, places, and objects more naturally and spontaneously, using appropriate vocabulary and intonation. Group activities such as role-play and picture-based storytelling helped them communicate ideas collaboratively. Most students appeared more relaxed when speaking and used English with minimal hesitation. Classroom interaction became more dynamic, and the learning atmosphere was lively and supportive. Both the teacher and the students agreed that visual media made the lessons more enjoyable and easier to understand.

Overall, the findings confirm that visual media play a powerful role in improving speaking ability. They provided concrete contexts for learning, stimulated imagination, and reduced students' anxiety. These results are in line with Harmer's (2007) assertion that visual aids create an interactive environment conducive to communication, and with Paivio's (1986) dual coding theory, which explains that combining verbal and visual input enhances retention and recall. The improvement in this study also supports previous findings by Sari (2017) and Hidayat (2017), who reported that visual media increase student participation and speaking performance.

The gradual improvement across three cycles demonstrates that integrating various forms of visual media—pictures, flashcards, realia, and videos—can effectively enhance students' speaking ability in descriptive text. It not only helped students master linguistic elements such as vocabulary and pronunciation but also built confidence and motivation. Therefore, the use of visual media can be regarded as a practical and engaging strategy for promoting communicative competence in the English classroom.

4.2 Discussion

The improvement observed across three cycles reflects the positive influence of visual media on students' speaking development. Visual materials such as pictures, flashcards, realia, and videos provided concrete and contextual support that helped students generate ideas, recall vocabulary, and construct descriptive sentences more fluently. These findings

support the theories of Harmer (2007) and Wright (1989), who argue that visual aids promote motivation and interaction by bridging abstract language concepts with real-world contexts. In this study, videos and flashcards were particularly effective in improving pronunciation and vocabulary, while realia and pictures helped students describe objects more accurately.

The findings also align with Paivio's (1986) *Dual Coding Theory*, which suggests that learners process information more effectively when verbal and visual input are combined. Through repeated exposure to visuals, students developed stronger mental associations between images and words, improving recall and fluency. This supports earlier studies by Sari (2017) and Hidayat (2017), who reported similar gains in students' participation and confidence through visual-based instruction. Furthermore, the classroom action research design allowed for continuous reflection and adjustment, ensuring that each cycle built upon the previous one. As a result, learning became more student-centred, interactive, and enjoyable.

In summary, the discussion shows that visual media not only improve linguistic elements of speaking—such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar—but also strengthen affective factors like motivation and self-confidence. Therefore, integrating visual media in English classrooms can be considered an effective pedagogical approach to enhance communicative competence, particularly in teaching descriptive text.

5 CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the use of visual media significantly improved students' speaking ability in descriptive text. Through three cycles of classroom action research, students demonstrated steady progress in fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence. Their average score increased from 66 in the pre-action to 86 in the final cycle, showing that visual media helped them achieve and even surpass the school's minimum mastery standard. The improvement was not only evident in test results but also in students' behavior, participation, and motivation during speaking activities.

The findings confirm that visual media provide meaningful contexts that make language learning more concrete and engaging. Pictures, flashcards, videos, and realia helped students generate ideas, organize descriptions, and use appropriate expressions when speaking. The use of visuals also reduced anxiety and encouraged students to participate actively. These results support previous studies (Harmer, 2007; Wright, 1989; Paivio, 1986) that highlight how visual and verbal integration enhances understanding and communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, this study implies that English teachers should integrate various visual materials into speaking lessons to create more interactive and student-centered learning environments. Visual media not only develop linguistic competence but also foster creativity and confidence in learners.

For future research, it is recommended to apply similar strategies to other text genres—such as narrative or recount texts—or to explore the use of digital visual tools like infographics, animations, or online platforms. Such studies could further enrich the understanding of how visual media support communicative competence in modern English classrooms.

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