

# From Image to Expression: Effectiveness and Limitations of Picture Prompts in Malaysian ESL Speaking Tests

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of picture prompts in English as Second Language (ESL) speaking tests among Malaysian undergraduates. It examines specifically on the effectiveness of using pictures as prompts in speaking assessments as well as to explore the challenges faced by the ESL learners when they use picture prompts. The study employs a quantitative survey approach, using four-section questionnaires to assess the use of picture prompts among 182 participants from two branch campuses of a public university in Malaysia. The results designate pictures have been used widely in English speaking class and it is found effective in generating ideas in speaking assessment as pictures are easier to understand the details compared to other types of prompts such as video prompts. This study recommends to improve the quality of pictures used for a better learning experience for the learners. This study contributes to ESL language assessment and suggests an improvement in teaching strategies especially in speaking skills.

**Keywords** – picture prompts, ESL, speaking test, effectiveness, challenges

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the fundamental language skills used in daily life, serving as a crucial tool for effective communication in both personal and professional contexts (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Human communication is a dynamic, intricate process in which people exchange ideas, feelings, and information with one another. During this process, speakers not only convey their ideas but also decipher and react to the signals they get. Therefore, to communicate effectively, speakers must be both engaged participants and focused listeners. Speaking fluently in any language is crucial, but English is particularly important as it is commonly recognised as the universal language. The capacity to communicate well and comprehend people is essential to developing meaningful relationships.

Despite the increased emphasis on communicative competence in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, many students still struggle to become proficient speakers. Speaking is considered one of the most complex and challenging aspects of language learning, as it requires learners to integrate vocabulary, grammar, and real-time processing to produce fluent and accurate language (Bueno, Madrid, & McLaren, 2006). Many students still find it difficult to speak English even after years of education. ESL learners frequently experience hesitation, anxiety, and difficulty expressing themselves clearly in social situations (Hasbi, 2020). This is due to many factors such as a lack of confidence, a fear of making mistakes, and a limited exposure to real language usage (Hayati, 2017).

Traditional speaking assessments typically rely on text-based prompts or questions, which may not sufficiently engage learners or encourage the production of natural, spontaneous speech (Sari, 2016). As a result, many students may not fully demonstrate their communicative abilities during these assessments, leading to an inaccurate evaluation of their speaking proficiency. The mechanical nature of these prompts can lead to rehearsed or minimal responses, which fail to capture the complexity of authentic communication (Chan, 2018).

Besides, conventional speaking assessments generally depend on text-based questions or prompts, which could not adequately captivate students or promote unscripted or spontaneous speech (Sari, 2016). As a result, many students may not fully demonstrate their best communicative effort throughout these tests, which could result in an erroneous assessment of their speaking ability. These traditional prompts often lead to limited and minimal responses from the students, preventing them from fully expressing the complexity of authentic or real conversation (Chan, 2018).

In recent years, picture prompts have drawn interest as a possible aid for enhancing speaking assessment in ESL classrooms. Visual prompts can provide context, reduce anxiety, and encourage the students to express themselves more freely and descriptively. However, despite their increasing use, research on the effectiveness of picture prompts in improving students' performance in speaking assessments is limited (Garcia, 2020). In comparison with the traditional prompts, there are still unanswered questions about whether visual prompts may actually improve students' fluency, accuracy, and general communication competence.

Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the following research objectives:

- 1) To evaluate the effectiveness of pictures in speaking test performance.
- 2) To compare the effectiveness of pictures with other prompts, such as dialogue and verbal prompts, in speaking assessments.
- 3) To identify the practical challenges faced by students when using pictures as prompts and suggest potential improvement.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How effective are pictures in helping students during speaking tests?
- 2) How do pictures compare to other types of prompts (e.g., dialogue, verbal, or video prompts) in terms of effectiveness for speaking tests?
- 3) What challenges do students face when using pictures as prompts in speaking tests, and how can these challenges be addressed?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of picture prompts in speaking assessments were supported by a few key theories. First, the Dual Coding Theory by Paivio (1971) proposes that verbal and visual information may enhance learning when used together, even though they are processed separately. He suggests that there are two different but interconnected systems for processing information; verbal system and non-verbal (imagery) system. This theory supports the use of both words and images in teaching and learning, as it leads to deeper learning and better retention. Paivio and Clark (1991) later explains how imagery can assist speech and verbal production, particularly in educational and narrative contexts. This is called referential processing; when a code (verbal description) is evoked by activating another code (an image) and subsequently speaking is facilitated (Clark, et.al., 1991).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of scaffolding and social interaction in the learning process. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a space where learners can accomplish tasks with guidance that they cannot achieve independently. In this context, picture prompts serve as scaffolding tools that assist students to generate ideas and produce speech they may struggle to develop without visual support. These pictures serve as mediating tools that reduce cognitive load and promote language production.

Supporting this theoretical perspective, a study by Sarmiento-Campos et al. (2022) used picture-based prompts and question cards as mediational tools in a scaffolded instructional approach. The results showed significant improvement in students' speaking performance, reinforcing the idea that visual aids effectively support learners' speech development within their ZPD.

Furthermore, in paired speaking tasks, the collaborative nature of the speaking activity reinforces the sociocultural aspect of learning as students engage in social interaction which is central to Vygotsky's view of language development.

## 2.1 The effectiveness of pictures in speaking test performance

In a study by Afraz et. al. (2017), improvements in overall speaking skills, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and grammar were recorded. Using pictures in teaching speaking skills were also found to be reducing students' participation anxiety and improves motivation among non-native Arabic beginner second or foreign language learners (Mohammad, et.al., 2020). In addition, Jaya, et. al. (2016) found that using picture-based series instructions improved the speaking achievements of undergraduate students. Jaya (2016) in another study found that students' posttest results improved significantly after using picture describing technique in speaking assessment. Another research found that using rich pictures affects students' speaking ability on comprehension of a situation (Meylina, 2019). Besides, Wulandari (2012) found that it was easier for the students to perform speaking by using pictures and test results showed an improvement in their achievement for the test. According to Siti, et. al. (2021), there is a significant difference in the speaking skills of students between those with pictures and those who do not have pictures as stimuli in oral tests among French language teaching students, although their report did not detail specific performance metrics.

## 2.2 The challenges in using pictures as prompts in speaking tests

Using picture prompts may present some challenges. Boers (2018) states that picture prompts serve as a tool to elicit linguistic samples of the same content from the students which allows comparison between learners' performance to be made. However, de Jong et. al. (2016) states that identifying equivalent prompts for parallel assessments or selecting prompts that vary only in a particular feature remains a challenge because there is still limited understanding of which specific features of these prompts influence task performance, to what extent, and for what reasons. Picture prompts, which initially appeared to be comparable based on three established complexity dimensions, still led to variations in fluency and lexical performance (de Jong, et. al., 2016).

Besides, Qiu (2019) found that English as a foreign language (EFL) learners obtained higher accuracy and lexical complexity on short speech tasks (non-picture prompts) than on picture-based storytelling tasks. Furthermore, it was found that higher-proficiency students displayed better structural complexity when doing speaking tasks with non-picture prompts. These studies indicate that the prompt type influences oral production, with non-image prompts showing advantages in certain accuracy and complexity measures.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies a quantitative research method to collect data from the participants. A purposive sampling technique is selected to carry out this study involving 182 semester two diploma students from two branch campuses of a public university in Malaysia. To be specific, there were 95 participants from Tapah campus in Perak, and the rest of them (another 87 participants) were from Machang campus, Kelantan. The participants enrolled in a university subject (LCC112 - English for Communicative Competence II). This particular English subject requires students to sit for a speaking assessment utilizing picture prompts in paired activities. This speaking assessment has three tasks in which Task B utilizes picture prompts to the speaking task.

The selected participants were required to respond to a survey that was distributed by class instructors via Google Form. The instrument was self-designed and the validity of the questionnaire was checked by an expert panel.

Table 1 - Distribution of items in the survey

SECTION	ITEMS	NUMBER OF ITEMS
1	Demographic profile	4
2	General perception	4
3	Effectiveness	19
4	Challenges	3
		30

This set of questionnaires has 4 sections; Section 1 consists of items on demographic profile, Section 2 consists of items on general perceptions of using picture prompts, Section 3 consists the items on the effectiveness of using picture prompts in speaking tests and Section 4 is meant for challenges the students face when using picture prompts in their speaking tests. Items in Section 1, Section 2, and Section 3 are using 5-Likert scales, whereas items in Section 4 are in open-ended questions.

Table 2 - Reliability of Survey Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.936	23

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .936, thus, revealing a good internal reliability of the instrument. The collected data is analysed using SPSS version 24 to obtain the frequency distribution and mean scores.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1 Findings for Demographic Profile

Table 3 - Frequency for Age Group

Age group	Frequency
18-20	181
21-23	1
Total	182

Table 3 shows the age distribution of the group ranging from 18 years old to 23 years old. 181 respondents are between the age of 18 years old to 20 years old while only 1 respondent is between the age of 21 years old to 23 years old.

Table 4 - Frequency for Gender

Gender	Frequency
Male	47
Female	135
Total	182

Table 4 shows the distribution of gender in which female respondents dominate with the total number of 135 respondents. Male respondents make up only 47 out of 182 respondents.

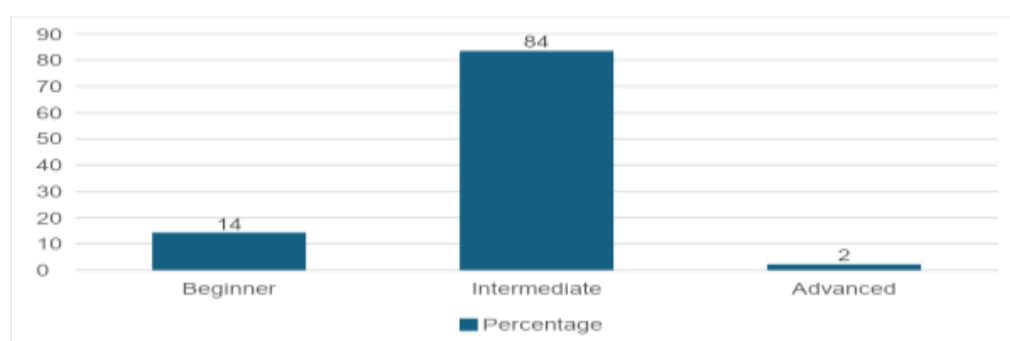


Figure 1 - Level of proficiency

Figure 1 indicates the level of proficiency among the respondents. It is recorded that 14% of the respondents are beginners while the majority of the respondents are intermediate with a total of 84% of respondents. There are only 2% of respondents who are in advanced level.

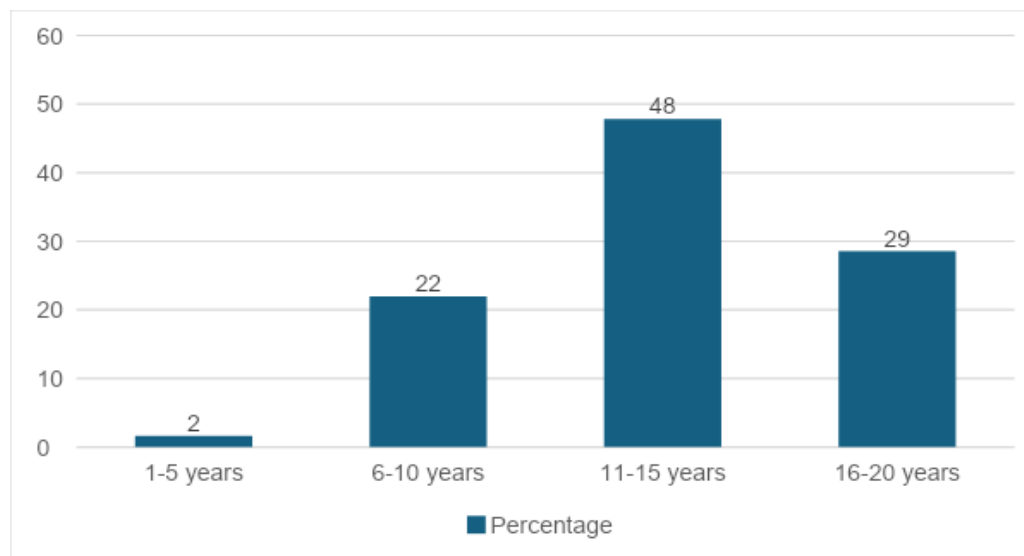


Figure 2 - Years of Studying English

Figure 2 shows the duration of studying English of the respondents. The majority of respondents studied English for a duration of 11 to 15 years while 29% of them spent 16 to 20 years studying English. 22% of respondents have studied English for 6 to 10 years while only 2% spent 1 to 5 years studying English.

## 4.2 Findings for Section 2 (General Perception)

Question 1: Have you ever used pictures as prompts before LCC112 speaking tests?

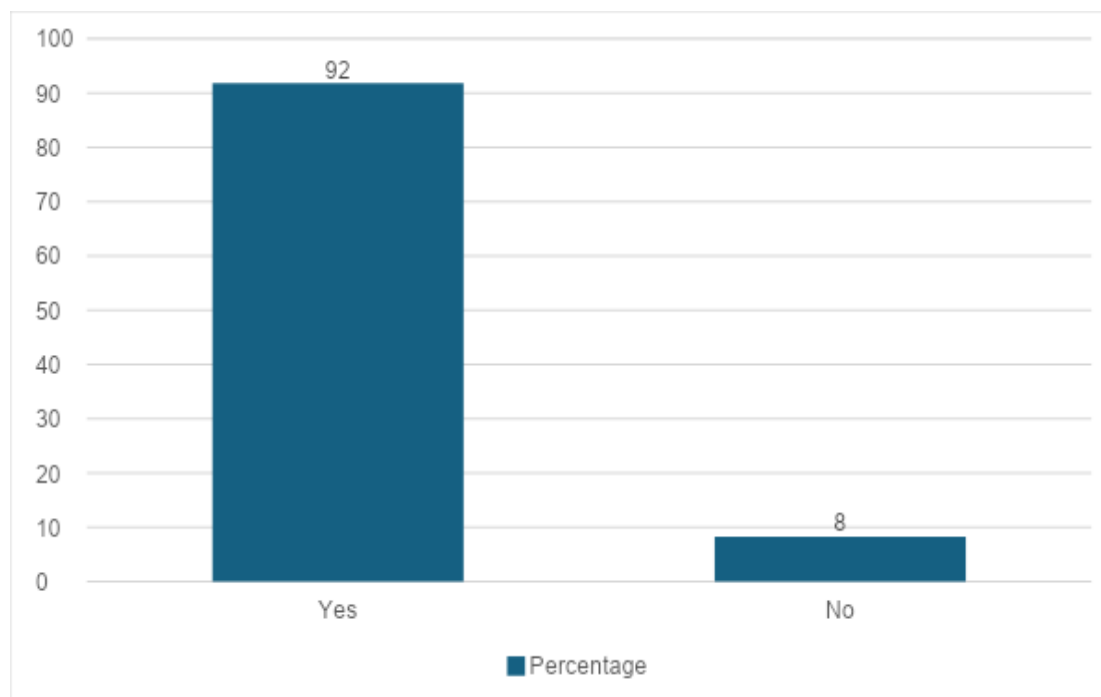


Figure 3 - Familiarity of using picture prompts

Figure 3 reveals the majority of the respondents (92%) used pictures as speaking prompts before they sat for the LCC112 Speaking Test. There are only 8% of them who admitted that they have not used pictures as prompts before the assessment takes place.

### Question 2: How often do you use pictures in your English classes?

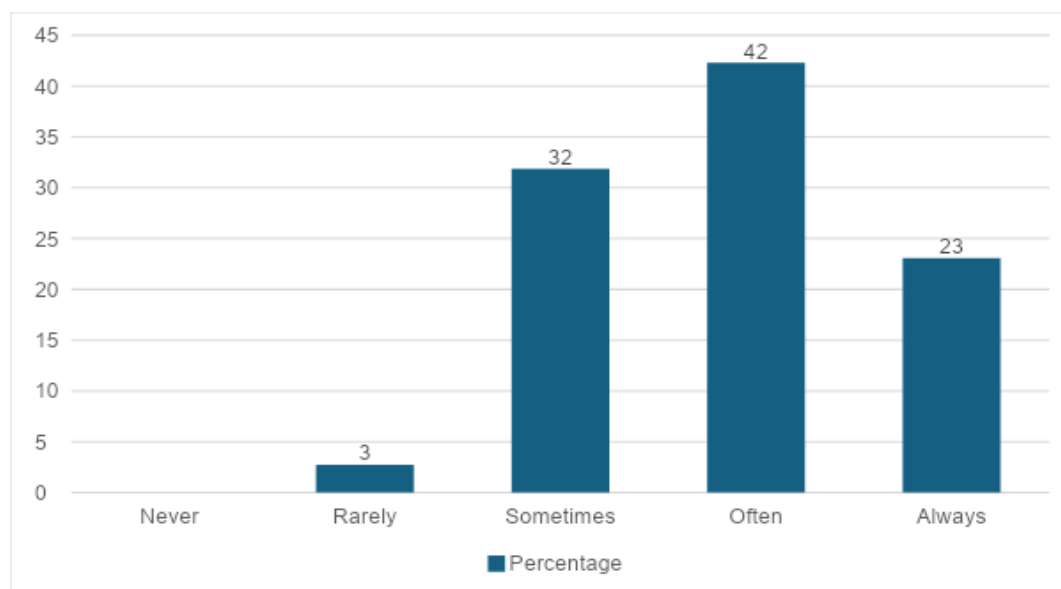


Figure 4 - Frequency of using pictures in English classes

Figure 4 illustrates the frequency of students using pictures in English classes. Almost half of the respondents (42%) revealed they often used pictures in English class while 32% of them used pictures sometimes in the class, 23% always used pictures in class, as compared to only 3% who used pictures as prompts in English class. Overall, it can be seen that the majority of the respondents (65%) often and always used pictures as prompts in English class.

### Question 3: How comfortable are you when using pictures as a speaking prompt?

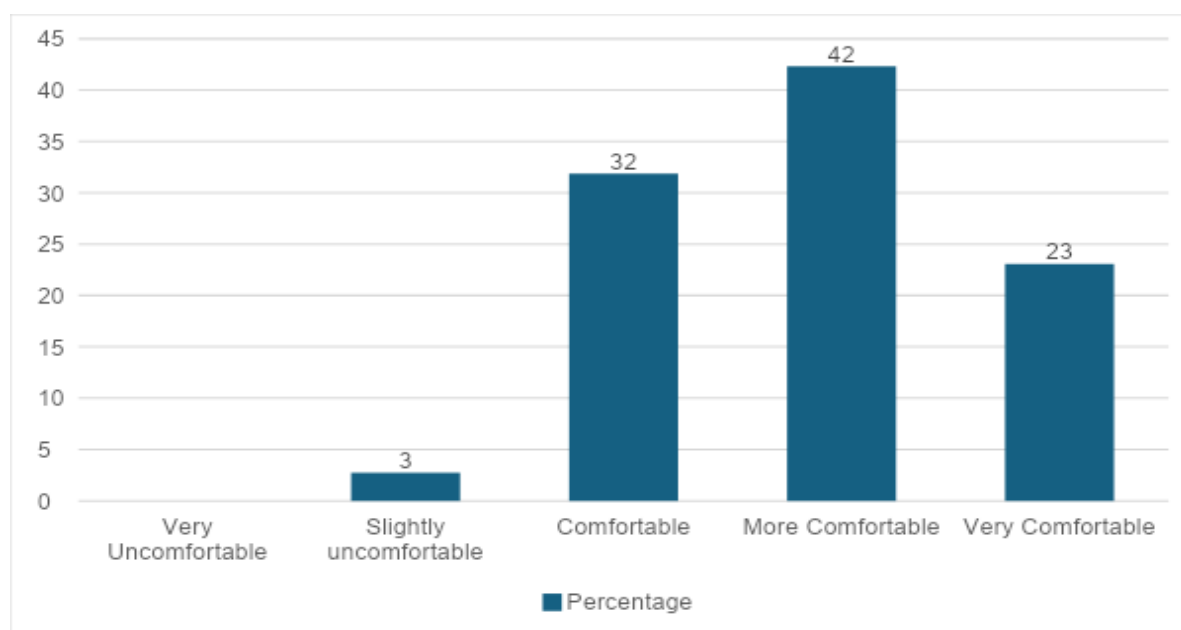


Figure 5 - Comfortability when using pictures as speaking prompts

Figure 5 highlights 42% of the respondents felt more comfortable and 23% of them were very comfortable when using pictures as prompts. Other than that, 32% of them who also gave positive feedback stated they were comfortable enough when using pictures as prompts in speaking tasks. Thus, these numbers (feeling comfortable, more comfortable and very comfortable) made the majority of them were positive (97%) about the comfortability in using pictures as a speaking prompt. However, there is also 3% who were slightly uncomfortable with this technique.



#### Question 4: What types of pictures do you find most helpful for speaking prompts?

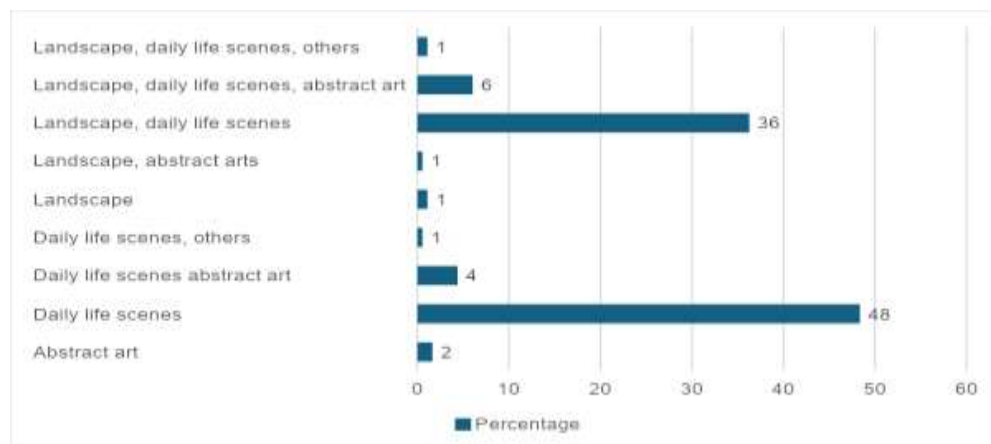


Figure 6 - Most helpful type of pictures

Figure 6 demonstrates types of pictures that are most helpful for the respondents. The biggest percentage (48% of them) agreed that daily life scenes were most helpful, followed by a combination of landscape and daily life scenes (36%). Other types of pictures like the combination of abstract art, landscape, daily life scenes (6%), the combination of daily life scenes, abstract arts (4%), abstract arts only (2%) only stated the minimal percentage. Additionally, other categories such as landscape, daily life scenes and others; landscape and abstract arts; landscape itself; daily life scenes and abstract arts, recorded the least percentage of 1%.

#### 4.3 Findings on Section 3 (The effectiveness of using pictures as prompts in speaking tests)

This section presents the main data to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How effective are pictures in helping students during speaking tests?
- 2) How do pictures compare to other types of prompts (e.g., dialogue, verbal, or video prompts) in terms of effectiveness for speaking tests?
- 3) What challenges do students face when using pictures as prompts in speaking tests, and how can these challenges be addressed?

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
S3Q1	182	1	5	4.1	0.063	0.848
S3Q2	182	1	5	3.9	0.067	0.905
S3Q3	182	1	5	3.95	0.063	0.849
S3Q4	182	1	5	3.91	0.067	0.9
S3Q5	182	1	5	3.93	0.066	0.896
S3Q6	182	1	5	3.75	0.067	0.898
S3Q7	182	1	5	3.91	0.066	0.89
S3Q8	182	1	5	4.1	0.064	0.864
S3Q9	182	1	5	3.57	0.077	1.037
S3Q10	182	1	5	3.55	0.074	1
S3Q11	182	1	5	3.81	0.064	0.868
S3Q12	182	1	5	3.93	0.06	0.814
S3Q13	182	1	5	3.58	0.067	0.899
S3Q14	182	1	5	3.81	0.063	0.848

S3Q15	182	1	5	3.81	0.07	0.941
S3Q16	182	1	5	3.79	0.069	0.935
S3Q17	182	1	5	3.9	0.066	0.893
S3Q18	182	1	5	3.98	0.06	0.807
S3Q19	182	1	5	3.95	0.061	0.819
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	<b>182</b>	-	-	-	-	-

Figure 7 - The effectiveness of using pictures as picture prompts in speaking tests

### 4.3.1 Findings on research question 1 (How effective are pictures in helping students during speaking tests?)

To answer research question 1, there are 14 questions to measure the effectiveness of using pictures as prompts in speaking tests (S3Q1 - S3Q14). Based on the data above, the highest mean score of 4.10 is indicated in S3Q1 and S3Q8; where the respondents agreed that they believe pictures help them generate ideas for speaking topics (S3Q1) and pictures also help them think of personal experiences related to the speaking topic (S3Q8). The average mean score is 3.81 for items S3Q11 and S3Q14; where the respondents said pictures positively impacted their engagement and interest in the speaking test (S3Q11) as well as pictures helped them to construct more grammatically accurate sentences (S3Q14). Meanwhile, the lowest mean score is 3.55; displayed by item S3Q10 where the respondents thought pictures helped to remember vocabulary and phrases related to the speaking topics.

### 4.3.2 Findings on research question 2 (How do pictures compare to other types of prompts (e.g., dialogue, verbal, or video prompts) in terms of effectiveness for speaking tests?)

There are 5 items to answer this research question specifically (S3Q15 - S3Q19). Figure 7 shows the highest mean score is 3.98 for item S3Q18, in which the respondents found that it is easy to understand the details of the picture and discuss them during the speaking test compared to other types of prompts. The average mean score is 3.90, recorded by item S3Q17, where the respondents agreed that pictures are more beneficial than using videos (Youtube videos etc.) as prompt in speaking tests. The lowest mean score in this section is 3.79, stated by item S3Q16 in which the respondents found pictures more helpful than verbal prompts given by instructors in speaking tests.

### 4.3.3 Findings on research question 3 (What challenges do students face when using pictures as prompts in speaking tests, and how can these challenges be addressed?)

To answer this question in detail, three open-ended items (S4Q1 - S4Q3) are constructed to obtain the data. Thus, the data for each item is organized in thematic-based.

AG

28. What challenges do you face when using pictures as prompts in speaking tests?

to find the right words

Come up an idea regarding the picture

no idea how to say sometime

to think the suitable vocabulary with the picture

I don't have any challenges before with the pictures being use as prompts

I know what's the pic about, but I can't generate my idea nicely, maybe because of nerve

none

have to think fast

Observe and think the idea

Picture not clear

Sometimes don't know the vocab

How to describe the situation

Elaborate the picture

I don't know how to explain the description after getting the idea from the picture

Not having so much idea.

because of line

to elaborated ideas

Lack of idea

to translate the word to the english

Figure 8 – Challenges faced by the students when using pictures as prompts



First of all, Figure 8 shows the analysis of the responses highlights several challenges students face when using pictures as prompts in speaking tests (S4Q1). One significant issue is difficulty with vocabulary and language, as many students struggle to find the right words, translate ideas from their native language, or recall appropriate terms to describe objects or actions. Additionally, generating and organizing ideas proves challenging for many, especially under time constraints. Some students also mentioned problems with sentence construction, such as forming cohesive sentences and organizing their thoughts logically. Anxiety and nervousness further exacerbate these issues as they need to think fast, often causing students to forget vocabulary or lose focus, which negatively impacts their ability to describe the picture effectively. Moreover, challenges also arise in paired tasks when one partner dominates the discussion or exhausts the points available.

29. What improvements would you suggest for using pictures as prompts in speaking tests?

pictures be more clear and colourful  
Includes color in it  
need to be more focus what have at that picture  
makes the photo more detail about the activities  
-  
No  
using a good quality picture  
put some keywords  
Make the picture more easily to see  
Using a clear picture  
Good quality picture  
Give a many situation in a picture, so we can have a better discussion in speaking.  
provide more pictures  
give a hint of ideas  
A daily activity image  
related prompts to the speaking test  
Already prepared two pictures for two candidates.  
make it more brightness  
makes the pictures clear

Figure 9 – Improvements suggested by the respondents

The next item (S4Q2) is shown in Figure 9, focuses on the improvements that the respondents would like to have including a better quality and relevance of the pictures used in the speaking tests. Blurry, overly complex, or overly simplistic images hinder students' ability to interpret and elaborate on the content. Familiarity with the subject matter is another factor, as students struggle more with unfamiliar scenarios depicted in the pictures, thus keywords or more hints could be more helpful.

30. Would you recommend the use of pictures as prompts to other students? Why or why not?

Yes because it stimulates ideas to students when speaking  
Yes, it can boost my confidence when I want to speak  
yes because can be more focus and more thinking bout wht picture means  
yes, because it's can help the study to improve their speaking  
Yes, it is because it does actually helps students to generate idea as most students nowadays are a visual learner. Therefore it is easier for them to create sentences based on the pictures.  
No  
yes because it will help the students to give more idea and let the students to give their opinions  
Yes. Because it easy to us to get idea  
Yes because it may help any student to speaking and It give many idea with that picture  
Yes  
Yes,cause help student more confident to talk  
Yes because it helps you a lot for you arrange your sentence.  
sea because it is very calming to see  
No, because for me it is hard to find the topic and generated the content  
Yes. It helps the explanation become more clear.  
view pictures because sometimes speaking test is about view  
Yes , I strongly recommended to use of pictures as prompts as it will give more ideas and makes me more creative to elabrate more points.  
yes because it really useful  
yes  
-

Figure 10 - Recommendation

The last item (S4Q3) is presented in Figure 10 which shows the majority of the respondents would like to recommend using pictures as a speaking prompt in the speaking tests to students of other English courses. This is due to several reasons such as pictures can stimulate ideas, have more focus especially for the visual learners and be more confident to perform in the speaking test.

Despite these challenges, some students reported no significant issues, emphasizing the potential effectiveness of picture prompts when the conditions are optimized. Addressing these concerns requires selecting clear and contextually relevant images, providing structured practice for idea development and sentence construction, and introducing strategies to manage anxiety during speaking assessments.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the effectiveness of using picture prompts in the speaking test compared to traditional text-based or verbal prompts. It aimed to determine whether they enhance the student's ability to produce meaningful speech. The main findings revealed that learners found using picture prompts helped them to generate the ideas, think and relate their life experience to the speaking topics and also increase their engagement and interest in speaking tests. This positive feedback supports Phuong (2018) study that found the use of pictures among Vietnamese high school EFL learners had positive effects on coherence in speaking in which the learners showed favorable attitudes toward using pictures in speaking activities. Next, this study discovered several challenges students face when using picture prompts. Many struggle with vocabulary recall, idea generation, and sentence construction, particularly under time constraints. Anxiety and nervousness further hinder their ability to express themselves fluently. Additionally, unclear or overly complex images and unfamiliar topics make interpretation difficult. In paired tasks, some students face challenges when one partner dominates the discussion. Despite these issues, some students found picture prompts compelling when conditions were optimized. To address these challenges, clear image selection, structured practice, and anxiety management strategies can enhance the effectiveness of picture-based speaking assessments.

The study on the effectiveness of using picture prompts in speaking assessments contributes to language assessment and teaching in several ways. It highlights the challenges students face, offering data for lecturers to refine speaking test methods and prepare more engaging and effective speaking assessments. Moreover, it improves teaching strategies where lecturers encourage the use of structured practice activities to help students develop strategies for describing images effectively. For test setters, this study provides a basis for integrating more visually driven assessment formats and offers guidelines on selecting images that are clear, relevant, and appropriate for different proficiency levels.

Future research could explore how different types of images influence speech production in speaking assessments. For instance, comparative studies could examine if students respond differently to realistic pictures versus illustrated images, or if students could generate a more spontaneous speech to single static pictures versus sequential images that depict a storyline or process. Understanding the differences can help teachers and test setters select the most effective visual stimuli for the speaking assessment. Additionally, further studies could investigate the long-term impact of picture prompts on students' language proficiency across different proficiency levels. Research could assess whether repeated exposure to picture-based assessments improves students' ability to produce more coherent speech or if other types of pictures have different effects on the students' performance in speaking.

Another critical area to study is whether consistent exposure to picture-based assessments contributes to fluency and confidence in speaking. Research could assess whether students gradually develop better speaking skills and reduce speaking anxiety after being tested with several picture prompt assessments. It is also intriguing to investigate lecturers' perspectives on the use of picture prompts in speaking assessment, particularly regarding the implementation, practicality, and challenges. Understanding the lecturers' viewpoints can help refine the use of picture prompts in language testing and ensure reliable and engaging speaking assessments.

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