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The Use of Picture Descriptions in Enhancing Communication Skills Amongst Eighth-Grade Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) encourage students to take a more active role in the oral activities in the classroom through different strategies. This study examines the use of picture descriptions as a strategy to develop and enhance communication skills among the eighth-grade students attending a private English school in Chile. To that end, action research (AR) was attempted with the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to determine whether the use of picture descriptions can improve the students' oral skills in English as a foreign language. The findings of the study suggest that the students' communication skills increased as result of integrating picture descriptions in classroom activities, which in turn enhanced the students' overall participation.

Keywords: learners of English as a foreign language (EFLs), picture description, communicative approach

Introduction

Communicating with others or expressing our ideas is part of human nature. Thus, language is seen as a tool for communication, and as such, speaking skills mean a lot for the learners of any language. Therefore, without speaking, communication is reduced to script. Kavaliauskiene (2006) defines speaking as a productive skill, whose objective is to facilitate communication. Similarly, Fulcher (2003), cited in Itkonen (2010), states that speaking is "the verbal use of the language to communicate with others" (p. 23)**.** We use oral language in our daily routines in a variety of situations where we are supposed to speak correctly in order to communicate well with one another, since any mistake may result in misunderstandings or problems.

A very common issue faced by foreign language teachers over the years is that students who are competent cannot communicate appropriately. Consequently, the processes involved in fluent

conversational interaction need to be considered. Therefore, this research investigates the influence of the use of pictures for speaking as a teaching strategy that may help students improve their communicative skills.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the use of picture descriptions can enhance students' communication skills in English as a foreign language. The participants of this study are the eighth-grade students in a private school in Temuco, southern Chile.

The following is the research question of this study: How can, if at all, the use of pictures enhance eighth-grade students' communication skills?

Literature Review

In a contemporary and highly competitive society, countries around the world need to ensure that their citizens receive a quality education. Therefore, a national language policy is often considered as fundamental to ensure that citizens of a given country have the necessary tools to become competent professionals, able to interact in the fields of medicine, industry, and education on an international level.

Some examples can be seen in the case of Europe, with its Common European Framework, or in South American countries such as Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and Paraguay, which have all implemented and improved a policy of languages. In Colombia, the Ministry of Education started a Programme of Bilingualism in 2004, while in 2003 the Chilean government inaugurated the English Opens Doors (EOD) programme to support the teaching of English for students in grades 8-12. In order to establish these proficiency levels, the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) employed the reading and listening skills tests of the ESOL examination, University of Cambridge, with 11,000 students from 299 different public, subsidized, and private schools throughout Chile (OECD, 2008).

Both groups of students were provided with the same test, whose results were devastating, revealing that only 11% of the students successfully met ALTE´s most basic levels. Therefore, the University of Cambridge created two new lower levels for Chile, titled "lower breakthrough" and "prebreakthrough," and the EOD programme by the Ministry of Education launched a volunteer programme. This example highlights the fact that much emphasis is being given to English as a foreign language in Chile, particularly to speaking proficiency which is considered fundamental for communication. For the purposes of this study, the picture description technique used was considered as one of the possible activities under the scope of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach.

The Communicative Approach
The Communicative Approach is understood by many as a methodology in which teachers encourage speaking the target language in the classroom. It deals with the goals of teaching, the way students acquire the language, the type of activities chosen in the classroom that facilitate learning, and the role teachers and students perform in the teaching environment. CLT is an approach to language teaching which is carried out by means of two main components, which are meaning and interaction (Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1989).

According to Richards and Rodgers (1999), the aim of CLT is to develop linguistic competence in a new language. It focuses on two important aspects, namely, "what to teach," meaning language functions in both formal and informal situations, each of which requires a specific grammar and vocabulary, and "how to teach." The CLT´s "how" holds that students' learning of language functions will take place when they are provided with opportunities to develop their communicative competence (Harmer, 1998). In other words, the goals of CLT, including grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, together with the appropriate strategies used in the EFL classroom, are met when students are encouraged to develop communicative competence.

Communicative Activities
Communicative activities can be understood to be those that encourage motivation and require learners to use their oral skills to communicate with, and listen to others. Their purposes include finding information, breaking down barriers, talking about self, and learning about the new culture. Nunan (1989) defines the communicative task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form" (p.10).

When teaching EFL, there are plenty of activities that one can choose from in order to engage students, such as games, use of pictures, storytelling, and role playing, among others. However, it is essential to clarify which ones to use in order to maximize their potential. Thus, it is important for teachers to be aware of the students' needs and interests so as to offer them a learning environment which they both enjoy and benefit from. The role the teacher plays in CLT is vital, given that they facilitate the communication process in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2000). Therefore, not only should teachers be aware of what students need, but they also should be conscious of how the activities they employ encourage learners to speak and practice oral skills in the classroom. This is because students are likely to be more engaged if they are provided with a dynamic learning environment.

The Role of the Teacher in Communicative Activities
Considering one of the definitions for communicative activities, Liao (2000) suggests that language should be learned by means of use and communication, respectively. At the same time, communicative activities have a goal, which is communicative competence. There are different definitions related to communicative activities. Tait (2001) claims that communicative activities are fluency-based activities, and that the key for their success is to base them in realistic situations so students are required to negotiate for meaning. Therefore, the role of the teacher has vital importance. According to Littlewood (1981), the role of the teacher is less dominant than in the traditional classroom, but no less important. This means that the teacher is meant to be a guide and a facilitator who helps the learners.

Benefits of Teaching with Pictures
According to Sinclair (1987), a picture is defined as a visual representation or image that is painted, drawn, or photographed, and rendered on a flat surface. The main advantage of a picture is its obvious visibility to learners. Using pictures can bring benefits to teaching, as they promote learners' interest in acquiring a foreign language. Byrne (1980) states that pictures can stimulate students' discussion and interpretation of the topic. Moreover, students' imaginations can also be inspired (Moore, 1982). For example, it is assumed that visual aids in general, especially pictures and colorful posters, could add attractiveness to the atmosphere of the classroom. Furthermore,

Wright (1989) argues that pictures can motivate students to take part in speaking activities. On the other hand, Gill (2005) asserts that focusing on the visual learning styles of EFL students is critical to their language acquisition, since these students need the visual stimuli of PowerPoints, whiteboards, and printed materials.

Picture-Cued Technique

According to Brown (2004), the picture-cued technique can be considered an important and powerful method to elicit students' oral language performance at extensive and intensive levels. Based on Brown's teaching principles, extensive and intensive forms of instruction may lead to monologues and rhymes respectively, where learners go over certain forms of the language. Furthermore, he states that describing pictures can be an ideal activity to begin the class because learners focus on content. In addition, they are likely to learn new topical or content vocabulary and grammar through teacher scaffolding during this activity.

> Additionally, Wright also proposes that they sponsor, stimulate, and provide information for writing and speaking activities without teacher guidance.

Pictures are considered a visual media that provide textual information. Moreover, they can be used to enhance students' participation and create a positive attitude towards English. Wright (1989) goes on to say that the use of pictures can stimulate and motivate students in language learning. When learning a second or foreign language, what learners concentrate on is grammar and phonology. Thus, Wright also states that the use of pictures provides motivation and the nonverbal stimulus that make students understand better.

Wright (1989) presents a compelling argument in saying that pictures help both teachers and students, since they provide motivation to students when it comes to speaking or writing. On the other hand, pictures also help to set a context and provide learners with information to use. They represent a guide for students in spoken and written descriptions. Additionally, Wright also proposes that they sponsor, stimulate, and provide information for writing and speaking activities without teacher guidance. Thus, from that point of view, pictures represent an advantage helping teachers in the learning process. They can provide a model to follow and motivation to students. Wright further asserts that using pictures encourages students to use their imaginations. In fact, in real conversation when one tries to understand someone speaking, special attention is paid to the nonverbal language, such as the tone of the voice or the context. When it comes to the technique used, pictures represent the nonverbal sources of information. Therefore, it becomes important for the teacher to prepare students for communication, making use of both verbal and nonverbal sources.

Method: Action Research

This research was carried out using an action research design to examine Lavalle's own teaching practice and to make changes, if necessary, to improve it. According to Watts (1985), action research is based on a problem identified by teachers, so teachers are best able to work on them. Besides, teachers become more effective when they are encouraged to examine and assess their

own work and make decisions to improve it, and are also able to collaborate with other colleagues since it helps improve their professional development.

This study was carried out with a control group in which the participants were monitored during six sessions, and the experimental group was assessed at the beginning and at the end of those sessions.

Participants
Twenty eighth-grade students, aged 13-14, were asked to voluntarily participate in this investigation. Due to their age, a consent letter was sent to their parents in order to obtain formal authorization. These students were divided into control and experimental groups, with 10 students in each. The students belonged to a private school located in southern Chile. The reason why these students were chosen responds to the need of improving oral abilities, as this was the year when teachers started training the students for the Preliminary English Test (PET). Thus, it was necessary to focus on their reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Most of the time, students tended to speak their first language in classes, so it was necessary to find a strategy which could help encourage them to speak in the target language. In addition, it was easier to work with the eighth-grade students since the researcher`s schedule was compatible with the other eighth-grade teacher's, who had also worked doing action research the previous year.

Sources of Data and Data Collection Strategies
First, a consent letter was sent to the headmaster of the school in order to allow the researcher to carry out the investigation. Once it was signed, another consent letter was sent to the students' parents. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to implement this study: PET, rubrics, and a qualitative focus group interview.

Pre- and posttests. Pre- and posttests were applied in order to assess the oral performance of the students at the beginning and at the end of the investigation. These tests were given at the beginning of the class. In one of these tests, students were asked to gather into groups of two. They were given a situation and a set of pictures. The situation was as follows: "A friend of yours is going to spend six months in England to improve her English. Discuss together about what things she may need to take with her." Then, they looked at the set of pictures given, which were items that can be useful for this friend in England. They talked together about the best options for her (see Appendix 1). In another test, students were shown a set of four pictures on the board. They were then asked to gather into pairs, and were told they had 10 minutes to talk together about the pictures and describe what they saw. They were asked to group themselves into pairs because in the PET level exam, the speaking part is carried out in pairs. After 10 minutes, students had to share their descriptions, and the teacher gave them the corresponding feedback. The pictures were related to the unit students were studying at that moment, for example, "Crime Scene" and "Natural Disasters." The students were expected to use the vocabulary previously seen in classes as well. At the end of these eight implementations, a posttest was applied to both groups in order to compare their performances. In order to carry out quantitative data analysis, the results obtained from the pre- and posttests were transferred to the SPSS software to obtain the corresponding information.

Rubrics. A PET rubric was used to assess students' performance on the pre- and posttests. They were taken from the PET sample tests book. The assessor awards marks for four

individual criteria which are: grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication. The band of assessment ranges from 0 to 5, where 0 is considered the lowest score and 5 is the highest (see Appendix 2).

Focus group interview. A qualitative focus group interview was conducted with a group of students at the end of the process, to develop a deeper understanding of the students' experiences of the technique used. It is important to highlight that qualitative interviews were chosen for this study because they rely on a small sample, and their analysis is based more on interpretation, summary, and integration. The findings will be supported by quotations or descriptions rather than statistical measurements (Stuart Weiss, 1995). A perception questionnaire (see Appendix 3) adapted from Saezhong (2005) was used as a guide to prepare the questions for a focus group interview (see Appendix 4). The focus group consisted of 10 students sitting at a round table in the classroom. After this, the interview was transcribed and coded in order to identify themes.

Discussion of the Findings

The results of the pre- and posttests revealed that the experimental group improved in three categories according to the rubric. It is important to highlight that this isolated part of the PET does not represent the EFL proficiency level of students, but rather it was used as a diagnostic assessment to identify what aspects related to speaking students needed to improve. In addition, the percentage of improvement of the experimental group between the pre- and posttest ranged from 68% to 75%, with no statistically significant findings (see Figure 1).
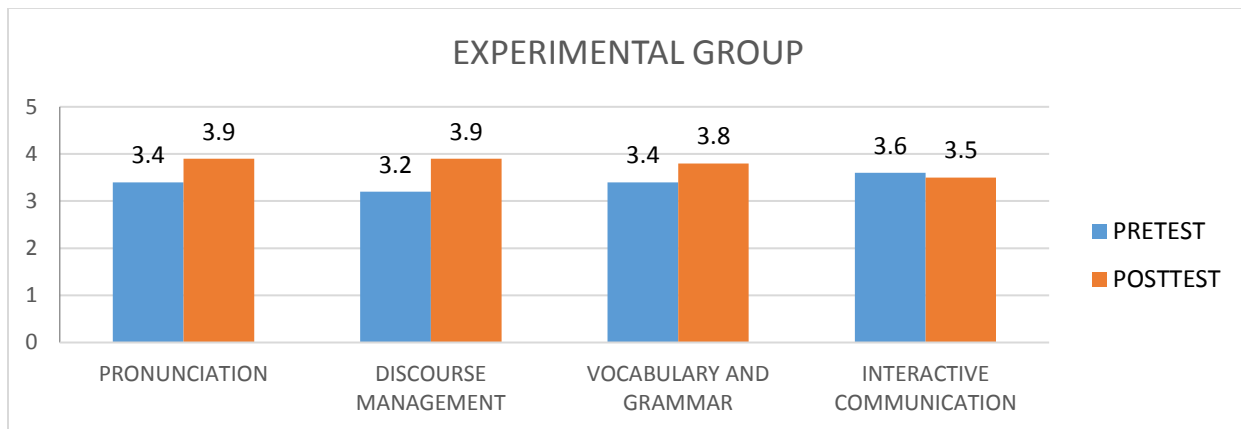

Figure 1. Experimental group pre- and posttest.

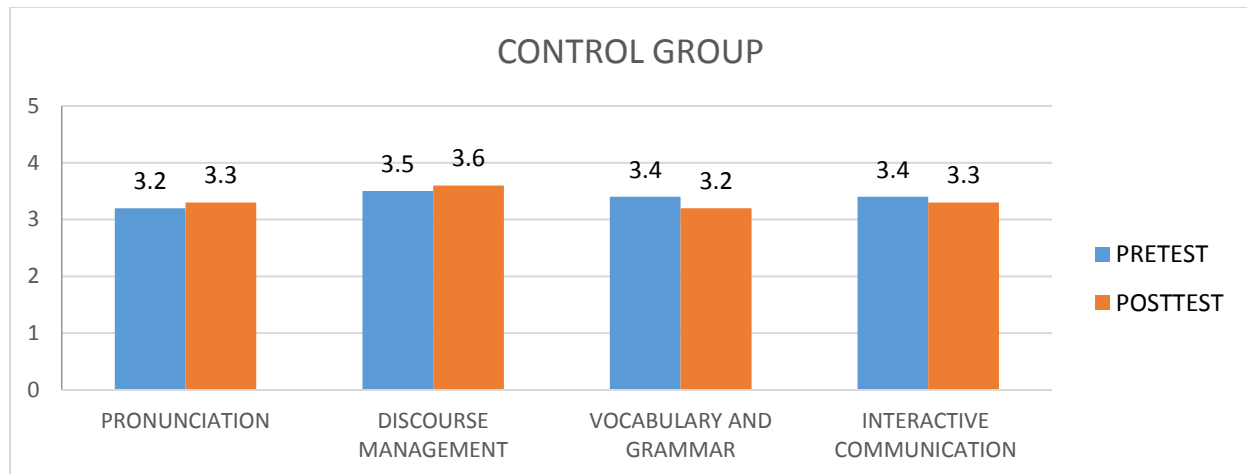On the other hand, the results of the control group are shown below.

Figure 2. Control group pre- and posttest.

Interestingly, the data for the control group in most of the categories were the same except for discourse management, but it was not statistically significant. Students obtained 67.5% of success in the pretest, and 67% in the posttest.

In general, students from the experimental group reported slightly better results after the intervention than the control group. The main problems at the beginning dealt with how to use grammar correctly, especially the use of auxiliary verbs and discourse markers.

During the focus group interview, students stated that they found the picture description treatment to be advantageous because it helped them set a foundation upon which to start speaking in English, rather than simply improvising in the void of visual aids. This supports the existing literature that suggests that pictures can reduce speaking and participation anxiety among learners when acquiring a second language, while increasing motivation (Byrne, 1980; Moore, 1982; Wright, 1989).

Most students agreed that improvising could cause one to lose valuable time thinking about what to say rather than immediately being able to think of ideas when viewing the pictures, as these helped establish a context. For instance, one student stated, "With pictures, you have a basis to start and your imagination flourishes." This statement echoes what Wright (1989) proposes when stating that pictures contribute to the students' imaginations.

This is what occurs in real conversation, as people pay attention to nonverbal language such as tone of voice, nonverbal cues, and context. Thus, pictures were a starting point for students, which eased their ability to communicate.

The same happens when the teacher is talking. According to students, it is easier for them to understand when they have visual support included, which makes sense since it affects the way things are interpreted. Therefore, it becomes a need for the teacher to prepare students for communication, making use of both verbal and nonverbal sources. At the time of asking them to describe random pictures either in pairs or in groups of four, they indicated that having visuals gives one an idea of what to say to the other person, as well as encourages them to activate their vocabulary. Another important fact mentioned was that they considered this technique useful to

> Generally, students stated that using pictures represented an advantage for them since they felt they improved their communicative competence, and they would recommend it if possible.

become familiar with the PET. One of the students said, "I think it is useful because the kind of exercises are related to picture description, and they evaluate your pronunciation and your vocabulary."

Moreover, among the criteria used to assess the PET speaking section, vocabulary and pronunciation are present, so this technique helps students train.

On the other hand, students perceived that they had improved their pronunciation, as the following quote from the focus group shows: "At the time of speaking and making sentences regarding the pictures, I noticed that I have improved my pronunciation." Another student said, "I have practiced a lot in classes, and there are a lot of words that I can say more naturally." Five out of 10 students mentioned that they have noticed they improved on their assigned oral projects, as evidenced in the following quote: "For example, in the oral projects I always put pictures, I have realized that I speak better; I am more confident."

For them, the more they used the technique, the better they became at pronouncing words. Repetition helped them to discover new words and to construct better sentences; it provided ideas to start talking and to become more fluent.

These findings suggest that regular use of the technique gave students the opportunity to improve their vocabulary. Generally, the students reported that their participation in classes had improved since the activities were entertaining, and that made them feel like participating more in classes. One of the students said, "The participation depends on the topic; if it is funny, I feel like doing more things. Comparing the beginning of the year and now, I think I pay more attention; I raise my hand more often to participate." Students appeared to be motivated, and according to Thornbury (2004), when students are motivated, it is more likely that they can learn vocabulary.

Finally, most of the students agreed that the pictures made them open their minds and think quickly, while others mentioned that it was possible for them to use prior knowledge in terms of vocabulary and use it to speak faster. It was also interesting because it helped them to understand the situation given, and it was easier to establish a context for speaking. Moreover, they mentioned that they felt they started conversing more in English in front of their classmates than before, and they felt more confident too. The following quotes demonstrate just that: "I just see a picture and I start imagining what the useful vocabulary could be used," and "It`s easier to speak because you look at the picture and it gives you a clear idea of what you have to talk about."

The students reported that using pictures promoted interactive communication, since they could share ideas about the same topic with their classmates: "You can talk about a certain topic and have similar or different opinions with your classmates; if we work in groups, for example, we can communicate more, so the more you practice, the better you do it next time."

Generally, students stated that using pictures represented an advantage for them since they felt they improved their communicative competence, and they would recommend it if possible. One of the students stated: "I would recommend it because it is useful to make sentences and for the vocabulary, mainly when it is related to the unit we are studying, so you can apply what we learn in classes."

Thornbury (2004) claims that visualizing pictures is one of the best ways to present new words or to link an abstract word with some mental image, and this is what happened with the students. They felt it was easy to remember words since they had the images. The more they practiced with them, the more they remembered words.

Implications for Foreign Language Teachers

This study has important implications for ESL teachers. Action research proves to be indispensable when it comes to experimenting with and applying the best tools to enhance student performance. Based on Lavalle's personal experience as a teacher and researcher, it is possible to say that carrying out action research in ESL classrooms signifies a positive tool for all teachers, EFL and other areas alike, to enrich their professional development. Furthermore, the results of this research could have an impact on those teachers who share a similar context.

Engaging in this research was an exceedingly meaningful experience for Lavalle, as she realized that she could identify a problem within her classroom and make some decisions in order to improve it. In this case, the main weakness of her classroom was the lack of English spoken. Moreover, her collaboration with colleagues convinced her that it could be possible to carry out action research together as an English department in order to improve their teaching practices. There are eight teachers of English at the school, and four work in eighth grade. It was important for the purpose of this investigation to collaborate with at least one of them, so as to have a focus group, and apply the pre- and posttests. The theory is available in books, but it does not ensure that it will fit the characteristics of the students you have in your classroom. Therefore, being your own researcher allows you to determine and solve your students' problems and satisfy their needs. Moreover, those teachers who carry out action research can make significant impacts in terms of the students` achievements and their own development (King & Newmann, 2000; Lassonde, Galman, & Kosnik, 2009).

Conclusions and Reflections

The results of this project appear to suggest that the students improved their communicative skills. The data analysis confirms that students perceived an improvement mainly in their pronunciation, motivation, and communicative competence. Students experienced a technique that made them reflect on the reality of a given context, and they enjoyed incorporating the pictures as they captured their attention, developed their imagination, and made the learning process more interesting and entertaining all at the same time.

More importantly, this study calls on teachers to become practitioner researchers in their own classrooms if they truly want to improve their practice. The importance of knowing your students well has the effect of shedding light on the context that surrounds the reality of the students, and

in that way helps the teacher better identify strategies that match those needs. Finally, it is important to highlight the importance of using the target language in the classroom in order to have meaningful learning. Thus, picture description activities can help improve students` speaking, both on a cognitive as well as affective level.

Limitations of the Study

It is possible to say that the aims of this research were achieved more from a qualitative perspective than a quantitative one, due to the action research design and focus on teaching practice. The students' perceptions were important to determine if the use of the technique had an impact. However, there were some unavoidable limitations. The first one was that the research was conducted with a small number of students; control and experiment groups were considered, having 10 and 14 students respectively. Moreover, the time limit of this investigation and the attendance of the students during the implementation of the technique were also limiting factors.

In relation to the target population of this research, the small sample size suggests that the results of the study cannot be generalized to other contexts. Nevertheless, this study raises awareness this technique so EFL teachers may incorporate it into their classes. Future research on similar areas of interest might consider larger samples as well as extending the time considered for the implementations.

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Appendix 1

Situation: A friend of yours is planning to spend six months in England to improve her English. Talk together about the things she will need in England, and decide which are the most important things to take with her.

Here is a picture with some ideas to help you.

Sample Material - Part 2

Appendix 2

PET Rubric

Cambridge English

Assessing Speaking Performance – Level B1

B1	Grammar and Vocabulary	Discourse Management	Pronunciation	Interactive Communication
5	• Shows a good degree of control of simple grammatical forms, and attempts some complex grammatical forms. • Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views on familiar topics.	• Produces extended stretches of language despite some hesitation. • Contributions are relevant despite some repetition. • Uses a range of cohesive devices.	• Is intelligible. • Intonation is generally appropriate. • Sentence and word stress is generally accurately placed. • Individual sounds are generally articulated clearly.	• Initiates and responds appropriately. • Maintains and develops the interaction and negotiates towards an outcome with very little support.
4	*Performance shares features of Bands 3 and 5.*			
3	• Shows a good degree of control of simple grammatical forms. • Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary when talking about familiar topics.	• Produces responses which are extended beyond short phrases, despite hesitation. • Contributions are mostly relevant, but there may be some repetition. • Uses basic cohesive devices.	• Is mostly intelligible, and has some control of phonological features at both utterance and word levels.	• Initiates and responds appropriately. • Keeps the interaction going with very little prompting and support.
2	*Performance shares features of Bands 1 and 3.*			
1	• Shows sufficient control of simple grammatical forms. • Uses a limited range of appropriate vocabulary to talk about familiar topics.	• Produces responses which are characterised by short phrases and frequent hesitation. • Repeats information or digresses from the topic.	• Is mostly intelligible, despite limited control of phonological features.	• Maintains simple exchanges, despite some difficulty. • Requires prompting and support.
0	*Performance below Band 1.*			

Appendix 3

Perception Questionnaire, Adapted by Saezhong (2015)

Item		Level of Opinion				
		5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
1. Using pictures is very interesting for me.	El uso de fotografías es muy interesante para mi.					
2. Using pictures helps me to speak English.	El uso de fotografías me ayuda hablar en inglés.					
3. Using pictures helps me develop my English pronunciation.	El uso de fotografías me ayuda a desarrollar mi pronunciación.					
4. Using pictures helps me improve my English fluency.	El uso de fotografías me ayuda a mejorar mi fluidez en inglés.					
5. Using pictures helps me have fun in the class.	El uso de fotografías me ayuda a entretenerme en clases.					
6. I have more confidence to speak English after I practice with pictures in class.	Tengo más confianza para hablar en inglés después de que practico con las fotografías en clases.					
7. I have more chances to participate in class.	Tengo mayor oportunidad de participar en clases.					
8. Using pictures in classes helps me speak English more fluently and correctly.	El uso de fotografías en clases me ayuda hablar inglés más fluido y correctamente.					
9. It is worth it to use pictures in classes in the future.	Es enriquecedor usar fotografías en clases en el futuro.					

Appendix 4

Interview Questions

1. Si se te pide hablar sobre un tema, por ejemplo, la familia. ¿Qué preferirías comenzar hablar improvisadamente o con ayuda de un material de apoyo visual? ¿Por qué?

2. ¿Consideras el uso de fotografías interesante para ti? ¿De qué forma?

3. ¿Consideras que el uso de fotografías te ayuda a hablar en inglés? ¿Por qué? ¿En qué lo notas?

4. ¿Crees que el uso de fotografías en clases te ayuda a mejorar la forma en la que te comunicas dentro de la sala? ¿De qué forma?

5. ¿Sientes que el uso de fotografías para comunicarte en inglés ha mejorado tu pronunciación? Fundamenta tu respuesta.

6. ¿Crees que el uso de fotografías en clases te ayuda a mejorar tu fluidez en inglés? Fundamenta tu respuesta.

7. Desde tu perspectiva. ¿Crees tú que ha habido algún cambio con el uso de esta estrategia con la forma en la que tú hablas inglés ahora?

8. ¿De qué forma te ha ayudado esta técnica a mejorar tu habilidad para comunicarte con otros en inglés? ¿Te sentiste más confiado por qué?

9. ¿Sientes que tu participación en clases ha cambiado? ¿En qué lo has notado?

10. ¿Te gustaría seguir utilizando esta técnica en las futuras clases? ¿Por qué?

11. Si tuvieras que recomendar el uso de fotografías para mejorar tu habilidad comunicativa. ¿Lo harías? Fundamenta tu respuesta.

12. ¿Crees que esta técnica podría ayudar a los estudiantes a fortalecer su habilidad oral en la rendición de exámenes internacionales como KET, PET, u otro?

13. Si tuvieras que mencionar una ventaja o desventaja de esta técnica. ¿Cuál sería?