

Improving the Speaking Ability of Grade Seven Students through Picture-Based Activities

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Abstract

The author conducted an experimental research to investigate the effectiveness of picture-based activities used in the learning of English as a school subject (E21101). This study also explores students' attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities in the classroom. The research subjects who were selected by convenience sampling, consisted of thirty-one grade seven students from Demonstration School, University of Phayao. This study categorised as classroom action research, was monitored over a period of 8 weeks, exclusive of both the pre-test and the post-test. Grade seven students' attitudes towards the picture-based activities were evaluated through a questionnaire which was administered after the teaching experiment. The collection of data was performed through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data which consisted of observations and interviews in relation with thirty-one grade seven students, were gathered in the form of field notes and interview transcripts, whereas quantitative data were obtained from the questionnaire, the pre-test and the post-test. The results revealed the appearance of a statistical difference in the scores obtained by grade seven students following the assessment of their English- speaking abilities before and after learning through picture-based activities. The findings also showed that the learners demonstrated positive attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities which were perceived as welcome. Moreover, this learning approach was believed to be effective to improve the speaking proficiency of grade seven students whose satisfaction towards picture-based activities reached high levels. Their speaking abilities were measured quantitatively by comparing the mean score of the pre- test with that of the post-test. The results indicated that the mean score of the students' speaking performance increased from 14.70 in the pre-test to 20.90 in the post-test.

Keywords: picture-based activities, speaking

Introduction

It is widely accepted that English has now been considered and used as a global language that encourages communication between people from all around the world. Learners therefore must be able to comprehend the conceptual dimension and understand the linguistic mechanisms of this language so as to actively develop their four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in order to deliver articulate speeches, produce well-written texts and interact sensibly with others. Bertram (2002) claims that oral language is a very important connection in the development of students' learning and thinking process. Oral

language provides the basis for the development of all the other language skills. According to Soares (2011), 400 million people speak English as their first language as well as more than 900 million people speak English as their second language. It is likely that the number of people who speak English will continue growing as English is used as a global mean of communication for several purposes and in a variety of circumstances at the heart of all leading world organisations, like the United Nations. According to Harmer (2001), language students should be comprehended of "language components" and the ability to process them in communication. If the speaker continues to dominate these language features, students will be helped to achieve a fruitful communication goal. Speaking constitutes the capacity to produce a message in consideration of aspects which are included in two major categories: accuracy and fluency. Accuracy refers to the correct use of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in activities whereas fluency takes into account "the capacity to keep going when speaking instantaneously" (Gower, Philips, & Walter 1995).

With the interdependent complexities of the contemporary world, English needs in Thailand are similar to those in more affluent countries. Every year, a massive number of foreigners visit Thailand for several purposes which include business, tourism, and education. Hence, a dramatic surge in expectations for Thai nationals to be communicatively proficient in English occurred in recent years. For many centuries, the Thai government has been backing Thai students to learn English as soon as they enter their kindergarten years and until they complete their tertiary-level education. Additionally, the government has also provided his committed support for the study of English to vocational learners destined to form the future labor market's manpower. Although English is essential, English education generally seems to fail as far as effectiveness is concerned when pondering upon the fact that Thai students have consistently been underperforming in evaluations and in this regard, ONET's low results speak for themselves. Indeed, the national mean score for English is disheartening every year, so the reality that Thai people generally have a significantly limited speaking ability reawakens concerns recurrently. The teaching and learning of English in schools and universities is definitely one of the major causes of Thai nationals' low competence.

In an attempt to acquire mastery over speaking skills for the language of Shakespeare while enjoying the benefits of a great atmosphere inclined towards learning, students were supposed to be seen studying hard in order to fulfil the nation's needs. However, this differs from the actual situation in the classroom as most students experience tremendous difficulties when required to put a message across in English. Some underlying causes to this problem may stem from the fact that most teachers taught language instead of teaching how to use the language as a way of communication and in turn the development of the ability to speak was disregarded as the teacher did not provide students with enough opportunities to practice orally. Even though, students could have taken part more actively in lessons by demonstrating interest for what the teacher had to cover, by convenience, most learners preferred to adopt a passive and bashful attitude conditioned by the dreadfulness of language mistakes which potentially pose the threat of being ridiculed by peers, thereby undermining confidence in expressing ideas in an unfamiliar language. Besides, the task consisting in organising ideas still represents an area of difficulty for most learners, partly due to the exclusive focus on language forms, the correctness of rules for each grammar pattern and this to the detriment of language functions — a phenomenon which emerged with the decision of teaching and learning with the aid of media. Within the frame of preparation, what the teacher taught was

solely intended at empowering students on how to pass the National Examination by correctly answering all its questions.

After observing grade seven students over an extended period of time, the researcher identified problems related to their learning of English. Firstly, they lack the essential ability to communicate orally. Secondly, their years of struggle with the language have apparently instilled a sense of apprehension as for communicating in English. Thirdly, most of them remain unable to shed light upon the meaning of a particular sentence in consideration of its context. Similarly, proper use of new vocabulary becomes problematic for the construction of their own sentences. This research aims at elaborating on previous studies conducted in this area so as to address main issues which frequently occur during English language classes. A teaching strategy centred around picture-based activities was evaluated in terms of its effectiveness to allow grade seven students to develop their ability to speak proficiently.

1. Review of the related literature

English activities offer ample opportunities to practice students' speaking ability, furthermore Harmer (1984) claims that they stimulate the motivation of students which is conducive to increasing the self-confidence of being part of the classroom when it comes to responding to questions, sharing ideas, and presenting. Bygate (1987) defined two elements: skill in production and skill in interaction. Speaking ability finds expression in production skills not inconvenienced by environmental time-limit constraints whereas interaction skills involve bargaining between learners. Both skills help learners to improve their performance in speaking more easily.

Developing speaking skills through picture-based activities

The use of pictures as a teaching aid in the classroom was selected to motivate students to speak, to get them to start organising ideas and to express their opinions freely without any dread. Pictures were believed to be able to stimulate and drive the students to speak. Pictures help illustrate, develop the imagination of students, accommodate their interest, motivate them to express ideas but they also render the process of learning more interesting. Arum & Dwiyani (2016); and Wright (1989) state that 67 pictures are not just an element of method, but they are an essential component of the overall experience that the teacher seeks to create through their representation. The teacher acting as a resource should assist them in performing assigned tasks by eliciting answers. It was believed that pictures can be used to tackle difficulties and help students enhance their speaking skills (Arum & Dwiyani op.cit.). It appears always easier for students to deliver their ideas in relation with the pictures by adopting a descriptive approach. As Nguyen Thi Huyen Tran believes, a profusion of such picture-based activities will create an enjoyable learning environment where students will be motivated to engage in a diverse pool of other English speaking activities.

Objectives of the study

This study aims at:

1. Investigating the effectiveness of picture-based activities upon the development of an ability for grade seven students to proficiently speak in English.
2. Exploring students' attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities.

Research questions

1. Do grade seven students from Demonstration School, University of Phayao (Satit Phayao) tend to better develop their English speaking ability when learning through picture-based activities?
2. What are grade seven students' attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities for the English subject (E21101)?

Population and sample

Population

The population in this study consisted of grade seven students who were studying the English 1 subject (E21101) at Demonstration School, University of Phayao (Satit Phayao), Thailand.

Sample

The participants who were selected by convenience sampling, consisted of thirty-one grade seven students studying the compulsory course of English 1 (E21101) during the first semester of the academic year 2019.

Duration /time of the study process

This study was conducted in a classroom setting on a basis of three hours per week over a two-month period (eight weeks), exclusive of the pre-test, the post-test and the questionnaire inquiring about students' attitudes.

Research methodology

Research design

Within the frame of experimental action research, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected on the basis of the pre-test, the post-test and the questionnaire, inquiring about the attitudes of grade seven students toward picture-based activities in the classroom, which was administered at the end of the teaching experiment. Qualitative data which were in the form of field notes and interview transcripts, derived from observations and interviews with thirty-one grade seven students whereas quantitative data were directly processed on the basis of the content of the pre-test, the post-test and the questionnaire.

Data

The quantitative data collected in this study consisted of the results to both the pre-test and the post-test as well as self-rated scores of the questionnaire evaluating attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities. To complement quantitative data, the collection of qualitative data incorporated semi-structured interviews together with random observations in the form of field notes.

Research instruments

In this study, the research instruments used for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data comprised English speaking tests (pre-test and post-test), rubrics evaluating speaking ability, a questionnaire inquiring about students' attitudes, a paper list of questions structuring the interview, a description detailing steps and procedures concerning the production of each of the instruments, and finally, picture-based activities together with lesson plans laying down the following structure: 1. Listen and Draw, 2. Describing Pictures, 3. Dialogue Bubbles, 4. If I Were There ... I Would ..., and 5. Picture Dictation.

Procedure for the monitoring of the experiment and the collection of data

1. In accordance with the English course curriculum, a test to assess speaking was designed according to the guidelines approached by Laoma (2004) and Kittiya (2012).
2. After examination of the test, a pilot study was performed with other grade seven students who initially were not involved in the study so as to check the practicality of the test.
3. Speaking ability rubrics were adapted from the previously cited work of Kittiya.
4. A questionnaire was designed to obtain information on the attitudes of grade seven students towards using picture-based activities in the classroom for the English subject.
5. The teaching of English for grade seven students was directed towards speaking through picture-based activities during the first semester of the academic year 2018/2019. Each lesson integrating picture-based activities was allocated three periods every week.
6. The questionnaire assessing students' attitudes was administered to grade seven students.
7. The post-test was administered during the last week of teaching after completion of the learning experiment

Data analysis

1. The results revealed an overall improvement in the ability for grade seven students to speak English according to statistical calculations on the basis of both pre-test and post-test scores, and how this was influenced through the use of picture-based learning activities.

2. Following the calculation of mean values and standard deviation values from students' self-rated scores for the questionnaire relative to learning attitudes, results were interpreted along five dimensions.

3. Feedback and self-ratings in relation with students' interviews allowed the interpretation of qualitative data.

Results of the study

To answer the research question number one — Do grade seven students from Demonstration School, University of Phayao (Satit Phayao) tend to better develop their English speaking ability when learning through picture-based activities? — findings established that after grade seven students learnt English through picture-based activities, their ability to speak improved as indicated by the difference existing between the mean value of pre-test scores and that of post-test ones (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: A comparison of students' results between a pre-test and a post-test which assessed English speaking ability after the use of all five picture-based activities

English speaking ability	Pass Score	M	SD σ	68% 1σ	95% 2σ
Pre-test 31 students	15 out of 30	14.70	4.55	10.15 19.25	5.60 23.80
Post-test 31 students	15 out of 30	23.33 +58.7%	3.40	19.93 26.73	16.53 30.00

Table 1 presents values in relation to scores of grade seven students which differ between this pre-test and this post-test. This clearly indicates a difference in assessed abilities to speak in English at two distinct points in time. Accordingly, the mean value ($M=23.33$) for the test taken after this experimental course was higher than the mean value ($M=14.70$) for the one taken before it. Moreover, the standard deviation ($SD=3.40$) for the test taken after this experimental course was lower than the standard deviation ($SD=4.55$) for the one taken before it. This underlines that post-test scores were closer to the expected value than they were for the pre-test, and that pre-test scores were spread over a wider range than they were for the post-test. Therefore, the discrepancy witnessed between standard deviations for both tests, shows evidence that this experimental course manifested uniform improvement among a large number of students, thereby boosting speaking abilities to a more homogeneous level throughout the class, with a larger number of students managing to reach average speaking abilities in respect of the standard set by the mean value of class test scores. Accordingly, about 68% of students had scores situated within the range 10.15-19.25 on the pre-test graded out of 30 marks, however after attending the experimental course, 68% of students successfully passed the post-test with scores within the range 19.93 to 26.73, hence higher than the pass benchmark of 15. Findings confirm that this course thoroughly projected the ability to speak of almost the totality of the students to a general level above average as 95%

of students obtained scores between 16.53 and 30.00 on the post-test which marks an average progress of 58.7% in comparison to the pre-test.

Picture-based activities fostering speaking ability

Hereafter follows the five picture-based activities that were used to improve the students' ability to speak in this study: Listen and Draw, Describing Pictures, Dialogue Bubbles, If I Were There ... I Would ..., and Picture Dictation.

Table 2: A comparison of students' assessment results between a pre-test and a post-test which assessed English speaking ability after the use of the picture-based activity Listen and Draw

English speaking ability	Pass Score	M	SD σ	68% 1σ	95% 2σ
Pre-test 31 students	15 out of 30	6.37	2.44	3.93 8.81	1.49 11.25
Post-test 31 students	15 out of 30	12.13 +90.4%	1.61	10.52 13.74	8.91 15.35

*** Listen and Draw picture-based activity**

Table 2 presents values in relation to scores of grade seven students which differ between this pre-test and this post-test. This clearly indicates a difference in assessed abilities to speak in English at two distinct points in time. Accordingly, the mean value (M=12.13) for the test taken after this experimental activity 1 was higher than the mean value (M=6.37) for the one taken before it. Moreover, the standard deviation (SD=1.61) for the test taken after this experimental activity 1 was lower than the standard deviation (SD=2.44) for the one taken before it. This underlines that post-test scores were closer to the expected value than they were for the pre-test, and that pre-test scores were spread over a wider range than they were for the post-test. Therefore, the discrepancy witnessed between standard deviations for both tests, shows evidence that this experimental activity 1 manifested uniform improvement among a large number of students, thereby boosting speaking abilities to a more homogeneous level throughout the class, with a larger number of students managing to reach average speaking abilities in respect of the standard set by the mean value of class test scores. Accordingly, about 68% of students had scores situated within the range 3.93 to 8.81 on the pre-test graded out of 30 marks, however after attending the experimental course, 68% of students managed to perform better on the post-test with scores within the range 10.52 to 13.74, which unfortunately were still lower than the pass benchmark of 15. Findings confirm that this course thoroughly projected the ability to speak of almost the totality of the students to a general level above the initial one as 95% of students obtained scores between 1.49 to 11.25 on the pre-test, which subsequently rose to reach the range 8.91-15.35 on the post-test which marks an average progress of 90.4% in comparison to the pre-test.

Table 3: A comparison of students' assessment results between a pre-test and a post-test which assessed English speaking ability after the use of the picture-based activity *Describing Pictures*

English speaking ability	Pass Score	M	SD σ	68% 1 σ	95% 2 σ
Pre-test 31 students	15 out of 30	10.73	4.14	6.59 14.87	2.45 19.01
Post-test 31 students	15 out of 30	17.53 +63.4%	3.66	13.87 21.19	10.21 24.85

** Describing Pictures activity*

Table 3 presents values in relation to scores of grade seven students which differ between this pre-test and this post-test. This clearly indicates a difference in assessed abilities to speak in English at two distinct points in time. Accordingly, the mean value (M=17.53) for the test taken after this experimental activity 2 was higher than the mean value (M=10.73) for the one taken before it. Moreover, the standard deviation (SD=3.66) for the test taken after this experimental activity 2 was lower than the standard deviation (SD= 4.14) for the one taken before it. This underlines that post-test scores were closer to the expected value than they were for the pre-test, and that pre-test scores were spread over a wider range than they were for the post-test. Therefore, the discrepancy witnessed between standard deviations for both tests, shows evidence that this experimental activity 2 manifested uniform improvement among a large number of students, thereby boosting speaking abilities to a more homogeneous level throughout the class, with a larger number of students managing to reach average speaking abilities in respect of the standard set by the mean value of class test scores. Accordingly, about 68% of students had scores situated within the range 6.59 to 14.87 on the pre-test graded out of 30 marks, however after attending the experimental course, 68% of students managed to perform better on the post-test with scores within the range 13.87 to 21.19, which unfortunately did not allow the totality of those students to pass the benchmark of 15. Findings confirm that this course thoroughly projected the ability to speak of almost the totality of the students to a general level above the initial one as 95% of students obtained scores between 2.45 to 19.01 on the pre-test, which subsequently rose to reach the range 10.21-24.85 on the post-test which marks an average progress of 63.4% in comparison to the pre-test.

Table 4: A comparison of students' assessment results between a pre-test and a post-test which assessed English speaking ability after the use of the picture-based activity *Dialogue Bubbles*

English speaking ability	Pass Score	M	SD σ	68% 1 σ	95% 2 σ
Pre-test 31 students	15 out of 30	10.27	3.46	6.81 13.73	3.35 17.19
Post-test 31 students	15 out of 30	17.20 +67.5%	4.44	12.76 21.64	8.32 26.08

*** *Dialogue Bubbles* picture-based activity**

Table 4 presents values in relation to scores of grade seven students which differ between this pre-test and this post-test. This clearly indicates a difference in assessed abilities to speak in English at two distinct points in time. Accordingly, the mean value (M=17.20) for the test taken after this experimental activity 3 was higher than the mean value (M=10.27) for the one taken before it. Moreover, the standard deviation (SD=4.44) for the test taken after this experimental activity 3 was higher than the standard deviation (SD= 3.46) for the one taken before it. This underlines that post-test scores were less close to the expected value than they were for the pre-test, and that pre-test scores were spread over a narrower range than they were for the post-test. Therefore, the discrepancy witnessed between standard deviations for both tests, shows evidence that this experimental activity 3 manifested variable improvement among a large number of students, thereby boosting speaking abilities to more heterogeneous levels throughout the class, each student progressing on their own pace, with a large number of them being unable to keep up with the much faster progress of their peers in respect of the standard set by the mean value of class test scores.

Accordingly, about 68% of students had scores situated within the range 6.81 to 13.73 on the pre-test graded out of 30 marks, however after attending the experimental course, 68% of students managed to perform better on the post-test with scores within the range 12.76 to 21.64, which unfortunately did not allow the totality of those students to pass the benchmark of 15. Findings confirm that this course thoroughly projected the ability to speak of almost the totality of the students to a general level above the initial one as 95% of students obtained scores between 3.35 to 17.19 on the pre-test, which subsequently rose to reach the range 8.32-26.08 on the post-test which marks an average progress of 67.5% in comparison to the pre-test.

Table 5: A comparison of students' assessment results between a pre-test and a post-test which assessed English speaking ability after the use of the picture-based activity *If I Were There ... I would....*

English speaking ability	Pass Score	M	SD σ	68% 1σ	95% 2σ
Pre-test 31 students	15 out of 30	10.87	3.45	7.42 14.32	3.97 17.77
Post-test 31 students	15 out of 30	14.93 +37.3%	3.69	11.24 18.62	7.55 22.31

*** *If I Were There, I Would...* picture-based activity**

Table 5 presents values in relation to scores of grade seven students which differ between this pre-test and this post-test. This clearly indicates a difference in assessed abilities to speak in English at two distinct points in time. Accordingly, the mean value (M=14.93) for the test taken after this experimental activity 4 was higher than the mean value (M=10.87) for the one taken before it. Moreover, the standard deviation (SD=3.69) for the test taken after this experimental activity 4 was slightly higher than the standard deviation (SD= 3.45) for the one taken before it. This underlines that post-test scores were slightly less close to the expected value than they were for the pre-test, and that pre-test scores were spread over a slightly narrower range than they were for the post-test. Therefore, the slight discrepancy witnessed between standard deviations for both tests, shows evidence that this experimental activity 4 manifested variable improvement among a large number of students, thereby boosting speaking abilities to more heterogeneous levels throughout the class, each student progressing on their own pace, with a large number of them being unable to keep up with the much faster progress of their peers in respect of the standard set by the mean value of class test scores. Accordingly, about 68% of students had scores situated within the range 7.42 to 14.32 on the pre-test graded out of 30 marks, however after attending the experimental course, 68% of students managed to perform better on the post-test with scores within the range 11.24 to 18.62, which unfortunately did not allow the totality of those students to pass the benchmark of 15. Findings confirm that this course thoroughly projected the ability to speak of almost the totality of the students to a general level above the initial one as 95% of students obtained scores between 3.97 to 17.77 on the pre-test, which subsequently rose to reach the range 7.55-22.31 on the post-test which marks an average progress of 37.3% in comparison to the pre-test.

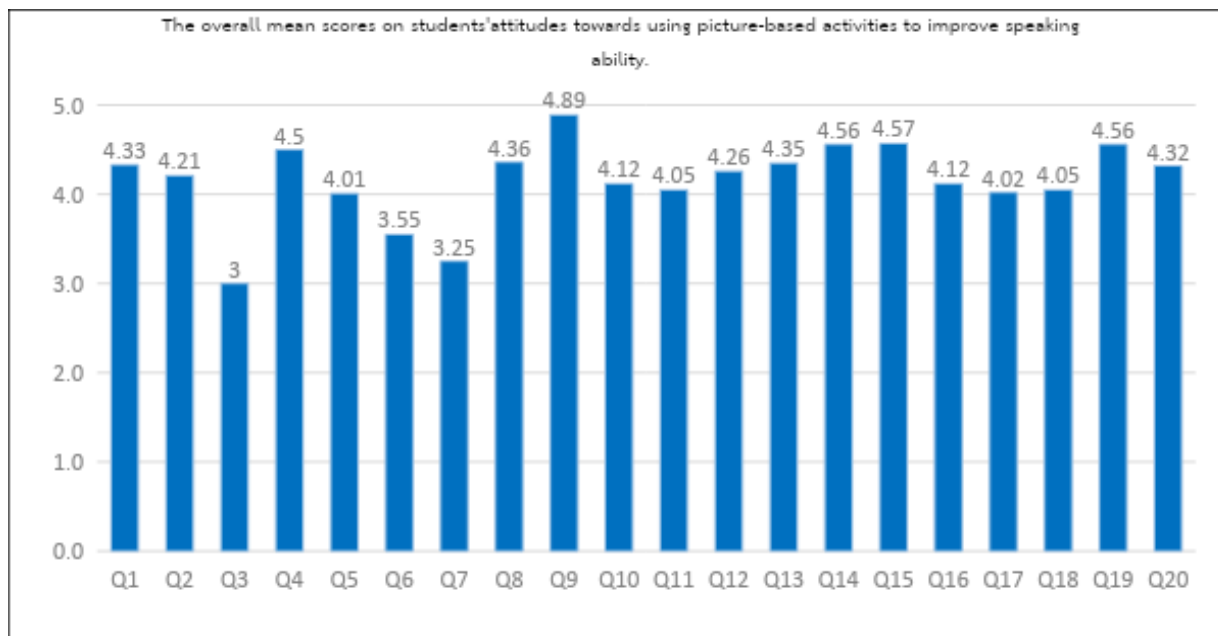
Table 6: A comparison of students' assessment results between a pre-test and a post-test which assessed English speaking ability after the use of the picture-based activity *Picture Dictation*

English speaking ability	Pass Score	M	SD σ	68% 1 σ	95% 2 σ
Pre-test 31 students	15 out of 30	5.83	2.59	3.24 8.42	0.65 11.01
Post-test 31 students	15 out of 30	8.47 +45.3%	2.81	5.66 11.28	2.85 14.09

*** *Picture Dictation* picture-based activity**

Table 6 presents values in relation to scores of grade seven students which differ between this pre-test and this post-test. This clearly indicates a difference in assessed abilities to speak in English at two distinct points in time. Accordingly, the mean value (M=8.47) for the test taken after this experimental activity 5 was higher than the mean value (M=5.83) for the one taken before it. Moreover, the standard deviation (SD=2.81) for the test taken after this experimental activity 5 was slightly higher than the standard deviation (SD= 2.59) for the one taken before it. This underlines that post-test scores were slightly less close to the expected value than they were for the pre-test, and that pre-test scores were spread over a slightly narrower range than they were for the post-test. Therefore, the slight discrepancy witnessed between standard deviations for both tests, shows evidence that this experimental activity 5 manifested variable improvement among a large number of students, thereby boosting speaking abilities to more heterogeneous levels throughout the class, each student progressing on their own pace, with a large number of them being unable to keep up with the much faster progress of their peers in respect of the standard set by the mean value of class test scores. Accordingly, about 68% of students had scores situated within the range 3.24 to 8.42 on the pre-test graded out of 30 marks, however after attending the experimental course, 68% of students managed to perform better on the post-test with scores within the range 2.85 to 14.09, which unfortunately did not allow the totality of those students to pass the benchmark of 15. Findings confirm that this course thoroughly projected the ability to speak of almost the totality of the students to a general level above the initial one as 95% of students obtained scores between 0.65 to 11.01 on the pre-test, which subsequently rose to reach the range 2.85-14.09 on the post-test which marks an average progress of 45.3% in comparison to the pre-test.

1: Figure Bar chart illustrating, for each question of the questionnaire, the ratings of grade seven students as for their attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities



To answer the research question number two — What are grade seven students' attitudes towards the use of picture-based activities for the English subject (E21101)? — findings established that grade seven students who made an average progress of 60.4% on the basis of all the assessments performed throughout the course, provided extremely positive feedback when sharing their attitudes towards their experience with the experimental course, as all questions, at the exception of Question 3 (M=3.00), Question 6 (M=3.55) and Question 7 (M=3.25), were rated above 4 out of 5 with Question 9 (M=4.89) Question 15 (M=4.57) and Question 14 (M=4.56) reaching the highest levels among all the twenty questions of the questionnaire (refer to Figure 1).

2. Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that picture-based activities had a positive effect on the ability for grade seven students to speak in English, moreover a questionnaire evaluating their overall attitude towards the experimental course confirmed that activity-based learning was warmly welcome on the basis of the high ratings it attracted for its appeal to those 31 participants. Individual interviews with them also established that these classroom activities had been contributing towards the creation of an enjoyable experience throughout the course perceived as entirely satisfying in all aspects, considering that 90% of them mentioned that it had given them greater opportunities to freely express myriads of thoughts that came to mind when functioning with pictures for which interpretation is characterised by diversity and subjectivity. The endeavour for each learner to play an integral part in the group rendered the atmosphere extensively more dynamic and interactive, whereby learning subject to the trade-off between fluency and accuracy, allows the development of confidence provided that the right balance is implemented, which impacts considerably upon the ability to communicate often contrasted with communicative proficiency. According to Gardner (1985), positive attitude and greater motivation assist the improvement of a student's language competence.

The analytical research performed in this study conclusively ascertained the effectiveness of the picture-based teaching approach in improving the ability to speak in the foreign language of English as all the five activities resulted in fast-paced progress for most learners, which was evaluated at an average of 60.4% according to results from all the assessments monitored throughout the course. Concerning limitations, it is arguable that the novelty of the course may have represented a key factor in inducing active engagement in students throughout the course and may not necessarily reflect any progress in terms of language proficiency or accuracy since the experimental course stressed upon fluency as opposed to accuracy considering that over-correction undermines the ability for a particular student to function properly with the language. Similarly, as time passes enthusiasm for activities inevitably tends to fade away as a result of the repetitive pattern structuring the delivery of teaching when adopting a single approach which presumably remains more conducive to progress when implemented in the form of intermittent components throughout the continuum of a long-term course.

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