

# THE IMPACT OF VISUAL THINKING STRATEGY ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE MAJORS' ORAL COMMUNICATION PROFICIENCY

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**Abstract:** *Visual Thinking Strategy can be characterized as a “meta-visual-lingual” endeavor involving the verbal articulation of thoughts provoked by a visual stimulus. The attempt is to enhance an individual’s capacity to interpret, describe, and analyze imagery by engaging in active observation and collaborative discussion. This study aims to clarify how visual thinking strategy is employed in speaking lessons to solve students’ English speaking problems in university education. The sample included 70 English-majored students at Dong Nai Technology University, comprising 35 first-year students and 35 sophomores. The examination of the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews indicated that activities inspired by Visual Thinking effectively promote students’ ease in speaking situations, thereby resulting in improved practice and proficiency in English speaking ability. This suggests that Visual Thinking may serve as an effective approach to providing university students with an active learning environment. Nonetheless, the notion of visual thinking and the benefits of activities inspired by visual thinking are relatively unfamiliar concepts within the realm of English education. Consequently, additional studies are necessary to create lesson plans that incorporate visual thinking strategies for learners of the English language.*

**Keywords:** *English speaking ability; English speaking problems; Visual thinking strategy.*

## I. Introduction

Oral communication plays a vital role in acquiring a language; however, the current school curriculum frequently overlooks the importance of developing the skill (Kabellow et al., 2020). The existing gap has led to numerous students facing issues such as shyness, diminished

confidence, and anxiety over judgment, which may contribute to stage fright and impede their capacity to learn a second language effectively (Daymiel et al., 2022). In the absence of sufficient opportunities for speaking practice, students are deprived of the chance to cultivate fluency and the natural communication skills that are crucial for effective real-world interactions.

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In Vietnam, the attainment of English speaking proficiency has increasingly garnered attention from many undergraduates due to its essential role in international communication shaped by global integration. Proficiency in English speaking skills has become a primary objective in the tertiary curriculum at many Vietnamese universities. Nonetheless, conventional teaching approaches fall short of equipping individuals with the essential tools and solutions needed to tackle existing deficiencies. The traditional methodology emphasizes the role of teachers, textbooks, and their explanations, with students anticipated to remain passive, listening attentively and memorizing content. This method presents multiple drawbacks, such as limited independence, inadequate practical life skills, and emotional turmoil. Therefore, it is essential to incorporate innovative methodologies into existing teaching practices to address these shortcomings.

Visual thinking strategy (VTS) represents a prominent approach within the realm of active learning styles. VTS enables learners to engage with artworks, fostering the development of essential skills like visual literacy, critical thinking, and communication abilities, including listening and self-expression (Yenawine, 2013). Furthermore, numerous investigations have been conducted regarding the efficacy of VTS, such as the enhancement of critical thinking abilities in young children (O'Leary, 2010); the impact of VTS on learners in fourth and fifth grades (Moeller et al., 2013); and the application of VTS in teaching writing to secondary students (Yeom, 2018).

Nonetheless, the investigation into the impacts of VTS on English speaking

remains constrained, particularly within the context of Vietnam. This study seeks to explore the innovative Visual Thinking (VT) methodology and its potential effects on the English oral proficiency and learning attitudes of freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU). This will assist English teachers in enhancing their teaching techniques and serve as a framework for additional research focused on advancing learners' English speaking skills.

## II. Literature Review

### *2.1. Students' English speaking problems*

The study conducted by Gan (2012) examined the challenges students face in developing their English speaking skills. It identified several issues, including insufficient vocabulary, an overwhelming emphasis on various grammatical structures, and a lack of opportunities for speaking English both in classroom settings and outside environments. Nevertheless, even during speaking lessons, Sarmiento Alayon et al. (2023) noted that many students frequently avoid participating actively due to a widespread fear of being judged by their peers and instructors. The presence of anxiety contributes to a classroom atmosphere that poses greater challenges and diminishes the overall enjoyment for learners. Furthermore, many learners occasionally lack ideas regarding unfamiliar speaking topics assigned to them. When faced with uncertainty, learners often opt for silence or minimal participation. Consequently, learners forfeit essential chances to engage and enhance their language abilities in a dynamic environment. Educators must address their students' emotional needs, preparing them for

meaningful engagement in the real world (Sarmiento Alayon et al., 2023). Educators can nurture communication skills and empathy in the classroom, creating a supportive environment that encourages open dialogue, collaboration, and individual growth.

## ***2.2. Visual thinking strategies***

Fernández-Fontecha et al. (2018) characterize VT as a methodology emphasizing the relationship between visual perception and cognitive processes. This approach employs a range of visual components, including images, colors, and lines, each carrying significant meanings that necessitate cognitive engagement for proper comprehension. Similarly, Liu (2022) emphasizes that incorporating visuals facilitates the connection between abstract concepts and concrete representations, fostering a more intuitive and engaging learning atmosphere. This approach fosters an environment where students can investigate various viewpoints and articulate their ideas visually, thus enhancing self-expression and teamwork within the classroom.

VTS serves as a student-centered teaching method, necessitating active and cooperative participation from learners in the classroom (Cappello & Walker, 2016). Students must engage actively by exchanging their thoughts to assist each other in acquiring greater knowledge within the classroom (Hess, Young, & Arbogast, 2019).

VTS consists of four distinct components. Yenawine (2013) identifies these components as viewing artworks, answering questions, engaging in discussion, and concluding the lesson

with the teacher. These components can be applied in numerous ways, tailored to the subjects or skills educators aim to enhance. For instance, VTS can enhance listening skills, visual literacy, reasoning, and communication.

Moeller et al. (2013) indicate that the method facilitates learners in generating new ideas with greater freedom and independence. Additionally, Campos (2018) asserted that using pictures and photographs allows learners to creatively and critically think about bar, line, circle, and graphic graphs.

## ***2.3. Previous studies***

Numerous investigations have been carried out in the context of writing classrooms related to language instruction. Yeom (2018) utilized images from picture books to enhance the L2 writing skills of Korean secondary EFL learners. The study subjects comprised Korean EFL secondary learners, and the methodologies employed included interviews, group discussions, and a writing assessment. The findings indicated that the participants felt capable of reasoning through visual cues. Furthermore, the participants successfully assembled the collection of images and articulated their ideas in English. In Thailand, Saengmontri (2015) examined the enhancement of English speaking and creative writing skills among 11th-grade students using VTS. A group of thirty participants, consisting of 11th-grade students, underwent instruction for 22 hours. The findings demonstrated that instruction on VTS was effective and suitable for learners with varying knowledge and abilities. Consequently, the learners' speaking skills and creative writing capabilities met the established standards.

### III. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

The approach integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The quantitative data comprised responses gathered from the questionnaires. The qualitative data was derived from the semi-structured interview. This study involved a cohort of 70 students majoring in English at Dong Nai Technology University. The duration of this study was five weeks. The participants in both groups received instruction in English speaking through lesson plans that utilized VTS as a foundational approach. During the last week, participants were requested to complete a questionnaire to assess their attitudes regarding using VTS to improve speaking skills. Ultimately, five participants from each group were requested to participate in interviews.

The researcher created English-speaking lessons to teach speaking ability by using VTS. Yenawine's (2013) components of VTS were employed as frameworks to design the lesson plan. To specify, the teaching process was divided into four steps of VTS. The details are as follows.

Step 1- The students view visual aids.

At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher displays a chosen image for the students, giving them a moment to observe it before encouraging their responses.

Step 2- The students answer questions related to the visual aid, and teachers guide the answers.

The teacher has two essential responsibilities: a) to pose the three specific questions of VTS and b) to engage with the students' comments. The following are the three specific questions:

i) What is going on in the picture?

This inquiry assists the students in understanding the dynamics within the

visual aids. The responses can encompass a range of elements: hues, emotions, and data. This inquiry prompts the students to embrace the role of narrators.

ii) What do you see that makes you say that?

This inquiry prompts the students to seek out evidence that substantiates their observations. This inquiry encourages them to engage in a fact-based and logical manner.

iii) What more can we find?

This inquiry encourages the students to delve deeper into the intricacies of the artwork.

Step 3- The students participate in group activities.

These three questions invigorate classroom discussions, facilitating skill enhancement for the students. The teacher embraces all the students' feedback without bias and emphasizes their thought processes rather than their errors. The students can cultivate various concepts from the visual aids as they engage in a progressive examination and dialogue about them.

Step 4- The teacher concludes the lesson.

The teacher ought to share a specific experience they have encountered, inspire the students to view visual aids as an ongoing and limitless pursuit and refrain from offering summaries. Additionally, it is essential to connect the learners' contributions throughout to illustrate the evolution of the discussion.

#### 3.2. Data collection tools

##### 3.2.1. Questionnaire

Table 1. Mean scores Level

Mean scores Level	
1 - 1.8	Very negative
1.8 - 2.6	Negative
2.6 - 3.4	Average
3.4 - 4.2	Positive
4.2 - 5	Very positive

A questionnaire was designed to examine the learners' attitudes toward using VTS in speaking classes. The questionnaire included 10 statements for participants to respond to using a 5-point Likert scale: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree. The level of learners' attitudes was defined using the criteria based on Pimentel (2019). Then,

#### IV. Findings and discussion

##### 4.1. Questionnaire

Mean scores and standard deviations were analyzed in the data from the questionnaire. The results are shown in Table 2

*Table 2. Students' perceptions of VTS*

No.	Items	n	M	SD	Level
1	VTS boosts my learning engagement.	70	4.34	0.796	Very Positive
2	VTS encourages me to express my thoughts, thereby promoting self-expression.	70	3.96	1.233	Positive
3	VT-inspired activities are suitable for my competence.	70	3.94	1.048	Positive
4	VTS increases my English fluency, thereby boosting my confidence in speaking.	70	3.21	1.166	Average
5	VTS requires me to be active and cooperative in the classroom.	70	4.07	1.121	Positive
6	VTS inspires discussions in critical ways.	70	4.16	0.973	Positive
7	VTS helps me organize and present information more creatively.	70	3.01	1.245	Average
8	VTS makes learning more memorable.	70	3.99	1.186	Positive
9	The teacher accepts all learners' comments without judgment.	70	3.99	1.28	Positive
10	VT-inspired activities should be incorporated more in speaking lessons.	70	4.24	0.842	Very Positive
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>3.89</b>	<b>1.09</b>	<b>Positive</b>

The students' attitudes toward learning to speak through VTS were very positive, as shown by the highest mean scores: 4.34 for item 1 and 4.24 for item 10. These show that the students found VTS extremely engaging and felt encouraged enough to get involved in their own learning. VTS can effectively promote students' ease in speaking situations, thereby resulting in a willingness to practice frequently in the future.

Item 2, item 3, item 5, item 6, item 8, and item 9 recorded the second-highest mean scores from 3.94 to 4.16. They show

the collected data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics.

##### 3.2.2. Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to understand the attitudes of the learners more deeply. For this investigation, interviews were conducted with five volunteer learners from each group.

that students' attitudes were positive, with benefits brought out by VTS. To be specific, VTS offers chances to communicate ideas, thereby encouraging self-expression; VTS calls for full participation and cooperation in the classroom; VTS helps students interact more fully with the content, aiding comprehension and memory. Moreover, the students found the visual thinking-inspired activities suitable for their levels, and the teacher received all students' comments without judgment.

Although two statements received the lowest scores compared to other



statements, the mean scores were still at an average level. These statements were: “VTS increases my English fluency, thereby boosting my confidence in speaking” ( $M = 3.21$ ) and “VTS supports me to organize and present information more creatively” ( $M = 3.01$ ). These statements show that the students have a neutral idea of VTS’s effectiveness in enhancing their speaking competence.

#### ***4.2. Semi-structured interview***

The interview results corroborated the outcomes of the questionnaire. The specifics are as follows:

VTS stimulated and inspired the learners to communicate in English. The results reveal that all ten (100%) interviewees considered VT-inspired activities engaging. The students indicated that incorporating a picture, emoji, or diagram into their discourse improves the engagement of their communication. Moreover, a principal objective of the English-speaking classes is to include students in English dialogue. Eight learners (80%) reported that mind maps, diagrams, and visual organizers effectively promote discussions engagingly. Similar to Liu’s research (2022), VTS facilitated the establishment of an engaging atmosphere. Consequently, students found the learning speaking engaging via VTS.

Images can enhance critical thinking. The interviews with students reveal that all participants (100%) utilized the term “because” in their statements to support their analyses of images. The findings corresponded with O’Leary’s (2010) research, which demonstrated that learners quickly developed the capacity to substantiate their claims with evidence via the VTS approach, often utilizing “because” statements in their

responses. Also, the learners expressed satisfaction with collaborative group work. Consistent with the perspectives of Cappello and Walker (2016), VTS created a secure environment for learners. This study encouraged learners to engage in creativity and cooperation to enhance knowledge acquisition, aligning with the ideas presented by Hess et al. (2019). In this study, 80% of students preferred collaborating with peers to brainstorm and categorize food vocabulary.

Additionally, images improve information retention. Seventy percent of the interviewed students indicated a greater likelihood of retaining essential information when it is paired with visual associations. Some students reported that they could identify patterns and relationships in grammatical or lexical topics. For example, developing a timeline to depict the differences between the past perfect and past simple tenses facilitated their understanding and retention of the distinctions in usage.

All ten learners (100%) reported enjoyment in discussing images and responding to questions formulated by the teachers. The participants preferred engaging with external materials over studying textbook content, which is frequently challenging to comprehend. Nine learners, representing 90%, appreciated inferring details from images. All ten learners (100%) indicated their readiness to engage in classroom activities using VTS, as they experienced comfort while learning to speak through this approach. The results align with Saengmontri’s study (2015), which demonstrated that instruction on VTS was effective and appropriate for learners with diverse knowledge and ability levels.

More importantly, the learners' responses were not evaluated as correct or incorrect, which fostered their confidence. The interview results indicated that a majority of students initially experienced apprehension and fear concerning oral presentations, demonstrating a lack of enthusiasm for this activity. As the sessions progressed and participants engaged in increased practice, all interviewees indicated that they developed confidence and a sense of security, improving their oral presentations. According to Moeller et al. (2013), learners may exchange ideas autonomously and without the influence of teacher evaluation. The emphasis on a secure learning environment in VTS is evident.

The analysis of the questionnaire and interview findings indicated that the students had positive perceptions regarding acquiring English-speaking skills through VTS. The data demonstrate that the approach provided the learners with a secured and active learning environment, which increased their motivation in the speaking class and thereby improved their performance in English-speaking.

## V. Conclusion

This study provided evidence that VTS can serve as an alternative teaching method to enhance EFL learners' English speaking skills, as it renders the learning process engaging and dynamic. This study further illustrated the benefits of VTS in promoting and inspiring learners to participate in class activities, ultimately guiding them toward success in their English-speaking competence. It will provide valuable insights for educators aiming to implement VTS, fostering a comfortable and dynamic learning environment that enhances English

language instruction. Despite the numerous benefits of VTS, the teacher remains the principal factor in persuading learners to engage in speaking. Nonetheless, employing VTS in the classroom presents challenges for teachers, as they must be inventive and adaptable in sourcing visual elements necessary for a VTS classroom, such as photographs, maps, graphs, posters, cartoons, or picture books pertinent to speaking topics.

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, this study focused exclusively on first-year and second-year learners. Consequently, the results might not apply to other levels or institutions. Secondly, this investigation was carried out with two experimental groups. This indicates the absence of a control group for comparison. Last but not least, additional research is necessary to find out whether other English skills, including listening, reading, and writing, can be effectively taught through VTS. Given that this study spanned 5 weeks, it would be beneficial for future investigations to extend the duration to validate the findings.

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# TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA CHIẾN LƯỢC TƯ DUY TRỰC QUAN LÊN NĂNG LỰC GIAO TIẾP TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH NGÔN NGỮ ANH

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**Tóm tắt:** Tư duy trực quan có thể được xem như một nỗ lực của việc “siêu kết hợp hình ảnh và ngôn ngữ”, nó liên quan đến việc diễn đạt bằng lời những suy nghĩ của người học, và được kích thích bởi một tác nhân trực quan. Mục tiêu là nâng cao khả năng của cá nhân trong việc giải thích, mô tả và phân tích hình ảnh thông qua việc quan sát chủ động và thảo luận hợp tác. Nghiên cứu này nhằm làm rõ cách thức mà chiến lược suy nghĩ trực quan được áp dụng trong các bài học để giải quyết những khó khăn khi học nói tiếng Anh của sinh viên đại học. Mẫu nghiên cứu bao gồm 70 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai, bao gồm 35 sinh viên năm nhất và 35 sinh viên năm hai. Việc khảo sát qua bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc chỉ ra tính hiệu quả của các hoạt động lấy cảm hứng từ tư duy trực quan trong việc giúp sinh viên dễ dàng tham gia vào các tình huống thuyết trình, từ đó cải thiện việc thực hành và kỹ năng giao tiếp bằng tiếng Anh. Điều này gợi ý rằng tư duy trực quan có thể là một phương pháp hiệu quả trong việc cung cấp cho sinh viên đại học một môi trường học tiếng Anh năng động. Tuy nhiên, có vẻ như khái niệm tư duy trực quan và lợi ích của các hoạt động lấy cảm hứng từ tư duy này vẫn còn khá lạ lẫm trong lĩnh vực giáo dục tiếng Anh. Do đó, cần có thêm các nghiên cứu để xây dựng những bài giảng tích hợp chiến lược tư duy trực quan cho người học tiếng Anh.

**Từ khóa:** chiến lược tư duy trực quan; kỹ năng giao tiếp tiếng Anh; những thách thức khi nói tiếng Anh.

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