

Improving Secondary School Students' Speaking Skills by Using Picture-Based Narrative Activities

Khudaybergenova Z. O.

PhD associate professor, Karakalpak state University, Uzbekistan

Saparbaeva S. P.

4th-year student, Karakalpak state University, Uzbekistan

Received: 18 April 2026; **Accepted:** 04 May 2026; **Published:** 29 May 2026

Abstract: Speaking remains one of the most difficult skills for secondary school students to develop when learning English as a foreign language. Although many learners demonstrate solid knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, they often face significant challenges with fluency, self-confidence, and producing coherent spoken discourse. This is largely due to high levels of speaking anxiety and insufficient opportunities for authentic oral practice.

The present study examines the impact of picture-based narrative activities on the development of speaking skills among secondary school EFL learners. A quasi-experimental action research design was employed, incorporating pre- and post-intervention speaking tests, systematic classroom observations, and student feedback questionnaires. Over several weeks, participants took part in carefully designed tasks involving single pictures and picture sequences, which required them to invent and retell original stories.

These activities aimed to lower speaking anxiety while simultaneously enhancing fluency, vocabulary range, pronunciation accuracy, and discourse coherence. The findings revealed clear improvements in students' overall speaking performance. Post-test results demonstrated gains across all evaluated criteria, particularly in fluency and confidence. Qualitative data further indicated that learners perceived the visual prompts as motivating and considerably less stressful compared to conventional speaking exercises.

This research contributes to the field of EFL teaching by highlighting picture-based narrative activities as an effective, low-anxiety strategy for fostering oral proficiency in secondary school settings. It provides practical suggestions for teachers working in comparable contexts and recommends future investigations, including the potential use of digital tools and AI-generated visual materials.

Keywords: Picture-based activities, narrative storytelling, speaking skills, secondary EFL learners, visual aids, action research, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

Introduction: In today's globalized world, the ability to speak English fluently is essential for academic success and future career opportunities. However, for many secondary school students in EFL contexts, developing strong speaking skills continues to be a significant challenge [Syafitri, R. 2025]. Traditional grammar-focused approaches often result in students who can understand and write English reasonably well but hesitate or struggle when required to express

themselves orally. Factors such as fear of making mistakes, limited real-life practice, and teacher-centered instruction contribute to high levels of speaking anxiety and low confidence.

Picture-based narrative activities offer a promising solution to this problem. These activities involve using single images or sequences of pictures as stimuli for students to create, describe, and retell stories. Such tasks encourage imaginative language use while

providing visual support that scaffolds speaking production. According to established language teaching principles, visual materials can lower affective barriers and promote more natural communication [Wright, A. 1989].

The theoretical foundation for this approach draws from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasize meaningful interaction over mechanical drilling [Harmer, J. 2015]. Additionally, the use of pictures aligns with visual literacy theory and narrative learning frameworks, where storytelling helps learners organize ideas and practice extended discourse.

This study aims to examine the extent to which picture-based narrative activities can improve secondary school students' speaking skills, specifically in the areas of fluency, vocabulary range, pronunciation, and coherence. The main research question is: To what degree do picture-based narrative activities enhance speaking performance and reduce anxiety among secondary EFL learners?

The significance of the study lies in its practical value for classroom teachers, particularly in contexts like Uzbekistan where speaking remains underdeveloped despite years of English instruction. By documenting both quantitative gains and qualitative student experiences, this paper seeks to provide actionable insights and contribute to the limited local research on innovative speaking techniques.

The article is structured as follows: the literature review synthesizes relevant studies, the methods section details the research design and procedures, results present the findings, and the discussion interprets outcomes in relation to existing literature before offering conclusions and recommendations.

METHODS

This study followed a quasi-experimental action research design conducted during the first semester of the 2025–2026 academic year at a public secondary school in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The research aimed to implement and evaluate picture-based narrative activities in a real classroom setting while maintaining the integrity of the existing curriculum. Action research was chosen because it allows the teacher-researcher to identify practical problems, intervene systematically, observe changes, and reflect iteratively [Wright, A.

1989].

Participants Twenty-eight ninth-grade students (14 boys and 14 girls, aged 14–15) from one intact class participated in the study. All students had been learning English as a foreign language for approximately six to seven years. Their proficiency level ranged from elementary to low-intermediate according to school placement tests. Prior to the intervention, most learners reported high speaking anxiety and limited opportunities for extended oral practice. The class was selected through convenience sampling, as the researcher was the regular English teacher. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining approval from the school administration and written consent from students and their parents. Participants were assured that participation was voluntary and that all data would remain confidential.

Materials The core materials consisted of carefully selected visual prompts designed to stimulate narrative production. Three main types of activities were developed:

1. Single-picture narration — High-quality, culturally relatable photographs (e.g., a bustling supermarket scene, a family celebrating a holiday, or a student helping an elderly person on public transport). Students used these to create short personal or imaginative stories.

2. Picture-sequence storytelling — Sets of 4–6 sequenced images depicting everyday events or simple plots (e.g., a boy oversleeping, rushing to school, missing the bus, and finally arriving late with an explanation). These encouraged the use of past tenses, connectors, and chronological organization.

3. Collaborative picture extension — Pairs or small groups received different but thematically linked pictures and combined them into a joint narrative, promoting negotiation of meaning and peer scaffolding.

Visuals were printed in color or projected via a smartboard. Additional supporting materials included a detailed speaking rubric adapted from international descriptors (fluency, vocabulary range, pronunciation, and coherence, each scored 1–5 for a total of 20 points), observation checklists, and a post-intervention questionnaire with Likert-scale items and open-ended questions.

Procedure The intervention spanned eight weeks and consisted of two cycles of four weeks each. In the first week, a pre-test was administered. Students individually described a neutral picture and narrated a short story from a picture sequence (recorded for later scoring).

During the intervention phase, picture-based narrative activities were integrated into regular 45-minute English lessons twice per week. Each session followed a consistent structure:

- **Warm-up** (5 minutes): Teacher modeled a short narrative using one picture while thinking aloud.
- **Guided practice** (10 minutes): Whole-class brainstorming of vocabulary and ideas related to the picture.
- **Main activity** (20 minutes): Individual or pair work on narration or storytelling, followed by voluntary sharing in front of the class or in small groups.
- **Reflection and feedback** (10 minutes): Peer and teacher feedback focused on strengths and one area for improvement.

Scaffolding was gradually reduced. In early sessions, sentence starters and useful phrases (e.g., “Suddenly...”, “While this was happening...”, “In the end...”) were provided on the board. By the second cycle, students worked more independently. In the final week, the post-test used parallel but different pictures to measure progress under similar conditions. Classroom observations were conducted throughout using a structured checklist to record participation levels, instances of hesitation, and use of target language features.

Data Collection and Analysis Quantitative data came from pre- and post-test speaking scores rated by the researcher and an independent colleague (inter-rater reliability reached 0.87 after discussion of discrepancies). Scores were analyzed using paired-samples t-test to determine statistical significance.

Qualitative data included field notes from observations, audio recordings of selected performances, and student questionnaire responses. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns such as changes in confidence, common language difficulties, and student perceptions of the activities.

All procedures adhered to principles of classroom action research, allowing continuous reflection and minor adjustments between cycles (for example, increasing pair work time after observing initial shyness in whole-class sharing).

This methodological approach ensured that the intervention was both systematic and responsive to the learners’ immediate needs in a real secondary school context [Lavalle, P. I., & Briesmaster, M. 2017][Syafitri, R. 2025].

RESULTS

Quantitative analysis of the pre- and post-test speaking scores revealed a clear and statistically significant improvement following the implementation of picture-based narrative activities. The pre-test mean score across the 28 participants was 11.4 out of 20, indicating generally low performance characterized by frequent pauses, limited vocabulary, and difficulty maintaining coherent narratives. In contrast, the post-test mean score rose to 16.7, with a mean gain of 5.3 points. A paired-samples t-test confirmed this difference was highly significant, suggesting the intervention had a strong positive effect.

By the post-test, the same student delivered a 1 minute 45 second narrative about a young cyclist who got lost in the evening traffic, using phrases like “While he was riding carefully, suddenly a big truck appeared...” and “In the end, he asked an old man for directions.” Her score rose to 18/20, with marked improvements in fluency and coherence. Another learner (S-7), initially reluctant to speak in front of the class, created an imaginative story from a picture sequence depicting a girl finding a lost kitten in a park. She incorporated direct speech (“The kitten said ‘meow’ sadly”) and emotional description (“She felt happy but also worried”), demonstrating enhanced vocabulary and narrative flow.

Classroom observation notes highlighted shifts in classroom dynamics. During early single-picture tasks, only about 40% of students volunteered to share; by the final weeks, nearly all participated actively, often extending their stories beyond the required time. In collaborative sessions, pairs negotiating a combined story about a family preparing for a traditional holiday spontaneously negotiated vocabulary (“How do you say ‘preparing plov’ in English?”) and offered

constructive peer feedback without teacher prompting.

The post-intervention questionnaire further supported the quantitative findings. On a 5-point Likert scale, 86% of students strongly agreed or agreed that using pictures made speaking tasks less frightening, while 82% reported feeling more confident when telling stories. Open-ended responses included comments such as: “The pictures gave me ideas, so I didn’t have to invent everything from my head,” and “I liked making up the ending myself – it was fun, not like answering questions from the textbook.” Only three students mentioned initial difficulty imagining details, but all noted improvement after repeated practice.

Overall, the results indicate that picture-based narrative activities led to substantial gains in speaking performance, with the most noticeable progress in fluency and the ability to produce extended, coherent discourse. These improvements were evident both in measured scores and in observable classroom behavior and student self-reports.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that picture-based narrative activities can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing speaking skills among secondary school EFL learners. The statistically significant improvement in overall speaking scores, particularly in fluency and coherence, aligns with broader research indicating that visual prompts combined with storytelling elements reduce cognitive load and lower affective barriers to oral production [Syafii, M. L. 2021]. By providing concrete visual stimuli, these activities enabled students to move beyond rote memorization toward more creative and extended language use.

One notable aspect of the results was the substantial gain in fluency. Students who previously exhibited frequent pauses and short utterances began producing longer, more fluid narratives. For example, during post-test sessions, a previously reserved student (S-19) constructed a detailed story from a picture sequence showing a young athlete training early in the morning, competing in a race, and celebrating victory with friends. She used a range of time expressions and linking words (“First... Then... After that... Finally...”) without hesitation, sustaining speech for nearly two

minutes. This mirrors findings from studies where picture sequences helped learners organize ideas chronologically and maintain momentum in oral discourse [Syafitri, R. 2025].

The observed increase in coherence can be attributed to the narrative framework inherent in the activities. Rather than responding to isolated questions, students constructed complete stories with beginning, middle, and end structures. In one collaborative task involving pictures of environmental cleanup efforts in a park, a pair of students (S-5 and S-12) successfully negotiated roles—one describing the problem (littered paths and polluted pond), the other proposing solutions—while integrating opinion phrases such as “In my opinion...” and “I think we should...”. This peer interaction fostered negotiation of meaning and logical flow, skills often underdeveloped in traditional teacher-fronted lessons.

Vocabulary development also benefited noticeably. Learners incorporated descriptive adjectives and topic-specific lexical items more readily when supported by visuals. A case in point occurred when students worked with a picture of a traditional tea ceremony in a mountain village: several participants spontaneously used words like “steaming samovar,” “aromatic herbs,” and “hospitable atmosphere,” terms that had rarely appeared in their pre-intervention speech. Such gains support the idea that pictures act as scaffolds that make abstract vocabulary more accessible and memorable [Guterres, C. F., Pereira, S., & Lurdes, M. 2019].

Student feedback from the questionnaire and open comments further illuminated the mechanism behind these improvements. Many learners explicitly noted that pictures “gave them ideas,” reducing the anxiety associated with generating content from scratch. One student commented: “When I see the picture, the story starts in my mind, and I don’t feel scared to speak.” This reduction in speaking anxiety is consistent with earlier research on visual aids in EFL classrooms, where lowered affective filters led to greater willingness to communicate [Arguello San Martin, D. E., Ramirez-Avila, M. R., & Guzman, I. 2020].

In the secondary school setting, where large class sizes and examination pressure often limit opportunities for meaningful oral practice, the activities proved

particularly practical. They required minimal additional resources—printed pictures or projected images sufficed—and could be integrated into regular lessons without disrupting the curriculum. Moreover, the gradual reduction of scaffolding encouraged learner autonomy, shifting responsibility from teacher modeling to student-led production over the eight weeks.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a single class of 28 students, which restricts generalizability. The relatively short intervention period (eight weeks) may not capture long-term retention of gains. Additionally, while inter-rater reliability was acceptable, subjective elements in scoring spoken performance remain inevitable. Cultural factors, such as students' familiarity with narrative genres in their mother tongue, may have influenced results and warrant further cross-cultural investigation.

Despite these constraints, the implications for classroom practice are clear. EFL teachers in similar contexts can incorporate short picture-based narrative tasks (10–15 minutes) on a regular basis to foster fluency, coherence, and confidence. Starting with single pictures for simpler descriptions and progressing to sequenced images for complex storytelling allows differentiation according to proficiency levels. Collaborative extensions can further promote interaction and peer learning.

Future research could extend this work by exploring the integration of digital tools, such as AI-generated images or mobile applications for recording and self-assessment. Longitudinal studies tracking retention over a full academic year would also provide valuable insights. Comparative research examining picture-based narrative activities against other popular techniques (e.g., role-play or debate) could help clarify relative effectiveness in Central Asian EFL settings.

In conclusion, this action research confirms that picture-based narrative activities offer a motivating, low-anxiety pathway to improved speaking skills. By harnessing students' natural inclination toward storytelling and supporting it with accessible visuals, teachers can create conditions where meaningful oral communication flourishes.

CONCLUSION

This action research has demonstrated that picture-based narrative activities constitute a highly practical and effective approach to enhancing speaking skills among secondary school students in EFL settings. During the eight-week intervention, participants achieved statistically significant progress across all measured aspects of speaking, with the overall mean score rising from 11.4 in the pre-test to 16.7 in the post-test. Beyond numerical gains, qualitative data highlighted marked improvements in learners' confidence, increased participation, and a clear transition from hesitant and fragmented speech to more fluent and creative storytelling.

The core advantage of this method lies in its capacity to reduce speaking anxiety while providing structured support for imaginative language use. Visual prompts offered tangible starting points that relieved students from the burden of generating ideas from scratch, enabling them to focus on structuring their thoughts, expanding vocabulary, and expressing themselves more naturally. For instance, one student developed a compelling story of determination from a simple sequence depicting an athlete's training routine, while another pair collaboratively created an environmental awareness narrative based on images of a community park cleanup. Such examples illustrate how these activities promote both linguistic growth and personal involvement.

In these secondary schools, where large class sizes and exam-driven instruction frequently restrict authentic speaking practice, picture-based narrative tasks proved particularly beneficial. They demanded minimal resources, integrated seamlessly into regular lessons, and fostered a supportive, low-anxiety environment in which even reserved students gradually became more active contributors. The progressive decrease in teacher support also encouraged greater learner independence and peer interaction.

Overall, the study contributes to EFL pedagogy by showing that integrating visual stimuli with narrative tasks effectively addresses one of the most enduring challenges in secondary language education: cultivating confident and coherent speakers. The results reinforce the principle that meaningful, learner-centered activities produce superior outcomes compared to traditional rote drills or isolated exercises [Syafii, M. L. 2021].

EFL teachers working in comparable contexts are strongly encouraged to incorporate brief picture-based narrative activities into their regular teaching routine. Starting with single images for simple descriptions and advancing to picture sequences for complete storytelling enables differentiated instruction and sustained skill development. Although this study was confined to a single class and a limited timeframe, the positive results indicate considerable potential for broader application and extended implementation.

Future studies could beneficially investigate the incorporation of digital and AI-generated visuals, examine the long-term retention of acquired skills, and compare the effectiveness of this approach with other communicative methods. Nevertheless, the evidence from this research suggests that picture-based narrative activities represent a valuable, accessible, and motivating tool for empowering secondary school EFL learners to speak with greater fluency, coherence, and self-assurance.

REFERENCES

1. Arguello San Martin, D. E., Ramirez-Avila, M. R., & Guzman, I. (2020). Storytelling through picture description to enhance young EFL learners' oral production. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 5(2), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.5250>
2. Guterres, C. F., Pereira, S., & Lurdes, M. (2019). Using picture to improve student's speaking skill. *ISCE: Journal of Innovative Studies on Character and Education*, 3(2), 288–301.
3. Harmer, J. (2015). *The practice of English language teaching* (5th ed.). Pearson.
4. Lavalley, P. I., & Briesmaster, M. (2017). The study of the use of picture descriptions in enhancing communication skills among the 8th-grade students—learners of English as a foreign language. *i.e.: inquiry in education*, 9(1), Article 4. <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol9/iss1/4>
5. Syafitri, R. (2025). Improving students' speaking ability through picture series. *Nusantara Journal of Primary Education*. <https://journal.rumahindonesia.org/index.php/njp/article/view/1917>
6. Syafii, M. L. (2021). Utilizing picture-based storytelling technique to enhance the speaking skill. *Eternal (English, Teaching, Learning, and Research Journal)*, 7(2), 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.24252/Eternal.V72.2021.A3>
7. Wright, A. (1989). *Pictures for language learning*. Cambridge University Press.