

Seeing to Speak: Teachers' Perspectives on Visual Thinking Strategies in Vocational English Classrooms in Makassar

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ABSTRACT

This study explores teachers' perceptions of the use of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to teach speaking at SMKN 8 Makassar, a vocational high school in Indonesia. Originally developed for arts education, VTS encourages observation, reasoning, and communication through guided discussions about visual images. Although previous studies have highlighted its benefits for engagement and critical thinking, little is known about teachers' perceptions of its application in a vocational English context. Drawing on Robbins and Judge's (2013) perception theory and a constructivist learning framework, this study interprets teachers' perceptions as subjective processes of interpreting and responding to pedagogical experiences. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from three English teachers through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings indicate that teachers perceive VTS as a student-centered and engaging method that increases speaking confidence and participation. However, they also reported challenges related to limited experience, time constraints, and the selection of context-appropriate visuals. Overall, the adapted study suggests that VTS offers significant potential for fostering communicative competence in vocational English classrooms when supported by professional and contextual collaboration.

Keywords: *Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), speaking instruction, teachers' perceptions, vocational high school*

1) INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most important but difficult aspects of learning English, particularly in vocational high schools where students must be able to communicate effectively in professional settings. When utilizing English in real-world contexts, many vocational learners experience anxiety, low confidence, and a limited vocabulary (Oktalia, Pratiwi, & Sari, 2024). These challenges frequently lead to poor communication skills and little classroom engagement. Traditional teaching methods often fail to give students meaningful opportunities for expression and introspection. As a result, creative, student-centered approaches are required to support students in actively creating meaning and confidently expressing their thoughts (Richards, 2008).

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One such method is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a discussion-based teaching method initially developed in art education by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine. VTS encourages learners to observe visual images, describe what they see, and support their interpretations with evidence (Yenawine, 2013). The method revolves around three open-ended questions: “What’s going on in this picture?”, “What do you see that makes you say that?”, and “What more can we find?” (Yenawine, 2013). In language learning contexts, VTS fosters verbal reasoning, visual literacy, and communication skills by encouraging students to express their ideas freely (Yeom, 2018). Research suggests that VTS can promote confidence, speaking fluency, and active participation in English classrooms (Yeom, 2018).

The Vocational High School English Teachers’ Forum (MGMP) hosted professional development sessions at SMKN 8 Makassar that introduced a number of English teachers to VTS. Inspired by this experience, they started experimenting with VTS to enhance speaking exercises in their classrooms. However, their use of VTS was still in its infancy and was frequently restricted to informal adaptation and pilot projects. Because perceptions affect how teachers interpret, apply, and maintain new pedagogical innovations, it is essential to understand how teachers view this approach (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Teachers are more likely to successfully incorporate a method into their teaching practices when they believe it to be practical and beneficial.

Robbins and Judge's (2013) theory of perception, which views perception as the process by which people arrange and interpret experiences to give meaning to their surroundings, serves as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. Due to its subjective nature, perception is influenced by contextual realities, past experiences, and prior knowledge. Teachers' perceptions influence how they assess instructional strategies, recognize obstacles, and implement pedagogical changes in the classroom. The constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996), which sees teaching and learning as interactive processes of meaning-making, also informs the study. In this framework, understanding is created by both educators and learners via discussion, introspection, and observation. These are ideas that are directly related to VTS's design.

Therefore, this study aims to explore teachers’ perceptions of using VTS in teaching speaking at SMKN 8 Makassar. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- a) How do teachers perceive the pedagogical value of VTS in speaking instruction?
- b) What benefits and challenges do they experience in implementing VTS?

c) How do teachers adapt VTS to the vocational classroom context?

These questions correspond to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of perception (Robbins & Judge, 2013), enabling a comprehensive exploration of how teachers interpret, experience, and act upon their understanding of VTS in real classroom settings.

2) METHODS

This study used a qualitative case study design to investigate how English teachers at SMKN 8 Makassar perceived the use of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in speaking instruction. Because it enables a thorough comprehension of people's experiences and interpretations within their actual contexts, a qualitative approach was selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Teachers who had just learned about VTS through professional sharing sessions led by the Vocational High School English Teachers' Forum (MGMP) were the subject of the case study. These instructors were appropriate subjects for investigating early-stage perceptions of VTS in a vocational setting because they had used the strategy for a single semester.

The study was carried out at SMKN 8 Makassar, a public vocational high school with courses in culinary arts, fashion design, and hospitality. All programs require English as a subject, with a focus on communicative competence that is pertinent to professional communication. Purposive sampling was used to choose three English teachers to participate. They were picked because of their willingness to share their perspectives on the pedagogical application of VTS and their experience using it in speaking instruction. Different viewpoints on how VTS fits in the context of vocational classrooms were made possible by the participants' varied teaching experiences, which ranged from four to ten years.

Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were used to gather data. The main source of data was the interviews, which offered detailed accounts of teachers' opinions, sentiments, and thoughts regarding the use of VTS. In order to promote candor, each interview was held in a casual environment and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. According to Robbins and Judge (2013), the questions were created to capture the behavioral, affective, and cognitive aspects of perception. In order to corroborate the interview data, classroom observations were made to document how teachers used VTS in the classroom, how they led discussions, and how students interacted with the visuals. Aspects like student participation, questioning strategies, and

teacher-student interaction were highlighted in the observation notes. In order to provide contextual evidence of how VTS principles were incorporated into instructional planning and classroom activities, lesson plans (RPP), instructional materials, and specific student worksheets were also examined.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting was used to analyze the gathered data thematically. Because the analysis was interpretive and iterative, patterns that represented teachers' knowledge and experiences with VTS were able to surface. A framework for creating themes that addressed the research questions was provided by the organization of codes based on the three perceptual dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioral). The researcher used triangulation across data sources and member checking sharing summaries of interpretations with participants for comments and confirmation to ensure the validity and reliability of the results. Additionally, ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process, with participants' identities kept private and their consent obtained before data collection.

The study sought to understand how teachers understood VTS as a pedagogical innovation, how they encountered its advantages and difficulties, and how their interpretations translated into classroom modifications using this qualitative narrative approach. The researcher was able to obtain a comprehensive picture of teachers' perspectives as both reflective and context-dependent by combining observations, interviews, and documents.

3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes emerged from the examination of teaching documents, classroom observations, and interview transcripts. These themes collectively show how teachers view, use, and modify Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in their vocational English classrooms. According to Robbins and Judge (2013), these themes reflect the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of perception: comprehending the educational value of VTS, encountering its advantages and difficulties, and modifying it for the workplace.

Every participating teacher saw VTS as an interesting and cutting-edge method that complemented their objective of boosting students' confidence when speaking. They defined it as a student-centered approach that promotes critical thinking, attention to detail, and idea communication through visual cues. "Students think before they speak, they observe the picture and explain what they see using their own words," according to one teacher. This is a reflection of the cognitive stage of

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perception (Robbins & Judge, 2013), in which educators use their teaching goals and beliefs to interpret the pedagogical meaning of VTS.

From a constructivist standpoint, the teachers' comprehension of VTS showed a change in the emphasis of instruction, from learner-driven meaning-making to teacher-led explanation. Teachers encouraged peer interaction and asked insightful questions to facilitate student dialogue instead of giving direct language input. This method is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that knowledge is acquired through guided participation and social interaction. Teachers' cognitive reinterpretation of their teaching role as facilitators rather than information transmitters is highlighted by their recognition of this pedagogical shift.

The teachers' affective perceptions showed that they were enthusiastic about using VTS but also found it challenging. Regarding student participation and engagement, they conveyed positive feelings. Vocational learners who were typically reluctant to speak were found to be less anxious and more curious when given visual cues. "Even the shy students start to talk when I show pictures related to hotel or restaurant settings," one teacher observed. The classroom environment became more relaxed and interactive as a result of the visual focus, which allowed students to respond in meaningful ways without feeling pressured to produce flawless English.

But difficulties were also apparent. Teachers brought up time constraints because it occasionally took longer than anticipated to facilitate open-ended discussions. Additionally, they had trouble finding pertinent visual materials related to the vocational themes, such as contexts related to hospitality, fashion, or cooking. Additionally, the teachers admitted that they were not very familiar with VTS because they had learned the technique informally through MGMP sharing sessions rather than through formal training. This led to ambiguity regarding the methods of facilitation and the extent to which students' responses should be probed. These conflicting experiences highlight the affective dimension of perception (Robbins & Judge, 2013), where teachers' assessments of a method's practicality are influenced by their feelings, self-assurance, and situational realities.

The teachers' emotional reactions were generally positive in spite of these difficulties, indicating a sense of curiosity and professional development. They valued how VTS promoted a contemplative environment where students' opinions were respected. This emotional involvement implies that instructors not only thought VTS was beneficial but also found satisfaction in seeing students participate more, an affective bond that can keep them motivated to keep using the technique.

The last theme pertains to the behavioral aspect of perception and how educators applied what they had learned by adapting VTS to fit their teaching environments. Instead of using VTS in a strict, textbook-like way, teachers made contextual adjustments to make it applicable to vocational learners. To improve comprehension, some combined VTS talks with vocabulary pre-teaching or used simplified visual cues. Others extended speaking practice by incorporating brief role-plays following image discussions. Teachers' interpretations of VTS influenced how they implemented it in the classroom, demonstrating how perception affects behavior.

Collaboration among teachers also played an important role in adaptation. Participants mentioned sharing visual materials and lesson ideas through their MGMP network. This collective sharing reflects a constructivist process, where teachers co-construct understanding through interaction and reflection. As one teacher said, "We exchange pictures and ideas in the group it helps us make VTS more relevant to our majors." Through this social exchange, teachers not only adapted materials but also strengthened their own professional learning communities.

Overall, the results show that teachers' perspectives of VTS are complex and dynamic, involving action, emotion, and interpretation. Teachers were cognitively aware of VTS's pedagogical value as a communicative, learner-centered method. As they navigated the practical realities of implementation, they felt both tension and satisfaction. By modifying the approach to fit their teaching environment, they exhibited behavioral agency. Robbins and Judge's (2013) theory that perception entails organizing and interpreting experiences to direct behavior is supported by these three interconnected dimensions.

Additionally, the findings support important constructivist learning theory tenets. Similar to how students create meaning during VTS discussions, teachers' reflective practices and peer collaboration show that professional understanding is created through social interaction. Constructivist principles extend beyond the learner to include the teacher's professional development process, as demonstrated by this dual layer of meaning-making by both teachers and students.

These results are especially important when it comes to vocational education. By connecting visual interpretation with communicative language use, VTS provides a useful way to address the language anxiety and low speaking confidence that vocational learners frequently display (Oktalia, Pratiwi, & Sari, 2024). According to the teachers' favorable opinions, VTS can improve speaking performance and classroom engagement when used adaptably and contextually. Simultaneously, the

documented difficulties underscore the necessity of continuous teacher assistance and professional development to bolster educators' self-assurance in leading visual-based conversations.

In conclusion, SMKN 8 Makassar teachers' opinions of VTS show a significant shift toward reflective, student-centered pedagogy. Their experiences show that perception is dynamic and changes through practice, teamwork, and contextual adaptation a result that is in line with constructivist learning principles and the theoretical underpinnings of Robbins and Judge (2013).

4) CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated how three vocational English teachers at SMKN 8 Makassar perceived the application of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) following their first introduction through the MGMP forum. The results show that by linking visual observation with oral expression, VTS fosters engagement, reflective thinking, and confidence among vocational students. However, curriculum alignment, context-appropriate materials, and sufficient teacher training are necessary for successful implementation. Peer collaboration can propel pedagogical change in resource-constrained environments, as demonstrated by the MGMP teacher-sharing platform's effectiveness in sparking innovation.

This study could be expanded upon in future research to look at students' viewpoints, gauge the improvement of speaking abilities, or investigate VTS integration with digital media like video and augmented reality. In the end, VTS shows promise as an innovative method for assisting vocational students in "seeing to speak" through observation as a means of communication.

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