

(Research/Review) Article

Visual Literacy in Elementary English Learning: Using Picture Book to Foster Language Development

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the use of picture books as a visual literacy medium in teaching English at the elementary school level, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This research employed a qualitative descriptive literature review by analyzing relevant national and international journal articles published within the last five years. The findings indicate that the integration of visual and verbal elements in picture books contributes significantly to students' language development, especially in vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and meaning construction. From an affective perspective, the use of picture books enhances students' motivation, learning interest, classroom participation, and reduces language learning anxiety. The effectiveness of visual media is theoretically supported by Dual Coding Theory, which explains that information processed through both verbal and visual channels strengthens memory retention and comprehension. However, several challenges remain, including the selection of appropriate picture books and teachers' limited competence in visual literacy. Therefore, systematic instructional planning and professional development for teachers are essential to optimize the use of picture books in EFL classrooms at the elementary level.

Keywords: EFL Learning; Elementary School; Picture Books; Student Motivation; Visual Literacy.

1. Introduction

Visual literacy is the ability to read, understand and interpret visual messages in the context of communication and learning, which is increasingly recognized as a key component in language education in the 21st century. In the context of English learning in elementary schools, picture books not only function as reading sources, but also as visual media that integrate text and illustrations, making it easier for students to understand the linguistic and cultural context (Al Fauzi et al., 2024).

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Learning English in Elementary Schools (SD) faces complex challenges, especially in the Indonesian context where English is often positioned as a Foreign Language (English as a Foreign Language EFL) for students who are still developing cognitively and linguistically. Visual literacy, an individual's ability to understand, analyze and interpret information conveyed through visual symbols, has been identified as an important component in supporting the development of language skills, especially when traditional textbooks are often less effective in bridging children's initial understanding (Kurniawati et al., 2025).

Various previous studies have assessed the role of visual literacy and picture books in education. Qualitative studies in inclusive classroom environments show that picture storybooks help students associate vocabulary with pictures and increase active engagement in English learning. Other research on Norwegian students indicates that intensive reading of picture books can strengthen writing skills and interest in reading, although further research is still needed to confirm these results more widely (Nurafiani & Iftidiani, 2021).

The power of visual integration lies in its ability to link vocabulary, context and narrative together, so that learning becomes more meaningful and adaptive to various student learning styles. as well as bridging differences in ability levels in diverse English classes (Al Fauzi et al., 2024). However, limitations include a focus that is often narrow on one skill only reading or vocabulary. There is a lack of quantification of the impact on language skills as a whole, and there are no standardized visual indicators of literacy for the elementary English context.

Thus, the main problem of this research is how the use of picture books as a visual literacy medium in English language learning in elementary schools has been studied in various studies, and to what extent do these findings show their effectiveness in developing students' language skills? So this approach aims to explain the relationship between visual literacy and the development of language skills conceptually and comparatively based on the results of previous research, so that a more systematic and comprehensive picture of its effectiveness is obtained.

2. Method

The method used in this study is a literature review with a qualitative descriptive approach. The research was conducted through the process of reviewing and analyzing various scientific sources relevant to visual literacy, picture books, and English learning in Elementary Schools in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Data sources were obtained from national and international journals, scientific articles, as well as relevant and credible reference books focusing on the research. Then, the data were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques through the stages of identification,

classification, and synthesis of research findings to examine patterns, similarities, and differences in previous study results. This analysis aims to conceptually explain the relationship between the use of picture books as a visual literacy medium and the development of language skills in elementary school students.

3. Results And Discussion

Visual Literacy Concepts in Elementary School English Learning

a. Understanding visual literacy in the context of language learning

In general, visual literacy can be understood as an individual's ability to understand, interpret, and use visual images or symbols in communication and learning. This involves understanding visual elements such as images, graphs, diagrams, photos, illustrations, and graphic design. Visual literacy also includes the ability to recognize messages, meaning and context conveyed through visual elements. Visual literacy also includes the ability to recognize messages, meaning and context conveyed through visual elements. People who have good visual literacy can be more effective in communicating, analyzing information, and making decisions based on visual elements. Visual literacy is also closely related to critical skills, such as the ability to recognize image manipulation or data visualization commonly used in widely distributed media and information. Visual literacy is included in the list of 21st century skills, namely that a learner must have the ability to interpret, recognize, appreciate and understand information presented through visible actions, objects and symbols, natural or man-made (Septiani Lubis et al., 2024)

In the context of Indonesian and foreign language learning, visual literacy assists students in the interpretation of visual representations that are in harmony with vocabulary and language structure, thereby expanding the way they read, write and understand language material. According to (Hatima, 2025) the visual literacy program in elementary school shows that visual literacy is not just seeing pictures, but the ability to interpret messages conveyed through pictures, symbols, graphs and illustrations that are relevant to the language learning context.

Visual literacy in English learning refers to the ability to find, interpret, evaluate, create and use images and visual media effectively to communicate and understand language contexts. In the context of ELT (English Language Teaching), this is not just looking at pictures, but rather a cognitive and social competency that allows students to understand visual "language" and relate it to English vocabulary and structure. Visual literacy includes the competency to interpret visual messages, connect visual meaning with verbal language, and communicate ideas using visual-verbal combinations so that it becomes an important part of the language learning process.

b. Visual and verbal integration in the language acquisition process

According to Benjamin Carcamo & Bernardo Pino (2025), integrating text with visuals in the form of infographics can improve students' reading comprehension skills in English as a foreign language. Infographics combine visual and verbal elements so that students can connect the meaning of words and language structures with visuals that are immediately understood, strengthening linguistic meaning with visual information support. Meanwhile, according to (Asiwisata et al., 2025), the integration of visual elements in reading material helps EFL students understand texts better than text material alone. Visuals increase literal understanding and engagement, because visuals work in conjunction with verbal text so that the meaning of language transmission is easier to construct.

c. The role of pictures as scaffolding in helping students' understanding

According to Lukman Hakim & Anas Ahmadi (2025), images function as a concrete epistemological base, helping students obtain important details and narrative structures that are difficult to obtain from verbal alone. Pictures help students build cognitive representations of text structures so that the burden on working memory is reduced, and students more easily organize ideas in written text. Meanwhile, according to Rattana Yawiloeng (2022), the use of scaffolding in the form of visual text, photos and images can expand language understanding through multimodal combinations that provide additional context and help students make sense of complex language input. Students look at pictures first to start activating vocabulary and structure before focusing on verbal text.

d. The relationship between Allan Paivio's dual coding theory and Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development concept

The Dual Coding theory developed by Allan Paivio explains that information is processed through two different but related cognitive systems, namely the verbal system and the nonverbal (visual) system. Words and sentences are usually only processed in the verbal system (except for concrete material), while images are processed through the image system as well as verbal systems. So the presence of images in text can improve memory because of dual coding in memory. According to Paivio (1986), when language text is accompanied by relevant images, the two systems work simultaneously, thereby strengthening retention and understanding of meaning.

In language learning, images function as concrete representations of vocabulary or sentence structure. When students read a descriptive text about "a tall tree with green leaves" accompanied by a corresponding tree illustration, the verbal system processes the words, while the visual system processes the image. The interconnection of these two systems creates multiple associative pathways that strengthen language acquisition. This finding is in line with research by Carcamo & Pino (2025) which shows that the integration

of infographics (visual + text) improves EFL students' multimodal literacy because students construct meaning through two representation channels simultaneously.

The role of picture books in developing elementary school students' language skills

Picture books are an important learning medium to help elementary school students' language development. This media not only attracts students' attention, but also helps them build vocabulary, reading skills, and construct meaning through visual-verbal relationships between images and text. Educational studies show that picture books are effective in improving Indonesian language skills, especially in reading and understanding texts.

a. Characteristics of effective picture books for EFL learning

An effective picture book as a language learning medium must meet several criteria:

- 1) Attractive and informative illustrations, which are able to stimulate students' interest in reading.
- 2) The text is communicative and appropriate to the language development level of elementary school students, so it is easy to understand based on visual references.
- 3) Integration between images and text that support each other, making picture books not just entertainment but a meaningful learning resource.

According to Prastowo (in Wijaya 2022:462), "Characteristics of picture books as teaching materials include: 1) having attractive physical appearance, 2) contains concise and clear knowledge, 3) gives rise to motivate children to read, and 4) use language that is easy for children to understand".

According to Rina Purwani (2024), it is stated that the picture story books developed have attractive pictures and clear sentences, making it easier for students to understand the contents of the book during the reading process. Meanwhile, according to (Paramita 2022) states that picture books that are developed must consider aspects of communicative visual media as well as text layout that is appropriate to children's development in order to increase students' understanding of language material.

b. Contribute to vocabulary mastery

Picture books greatly contribute to the development of students' vocabulary because pictures provide a concrete visual context. When students see illustrations that match words in the text, they more easily associate the meaning of those words, resulting in increased vocabulary retention.

According to Nuralifah et al., (2023) show that the use of picture story books in Indonesian language learning is considered relevant to learning objectives, easy to use, and helps students understand the relationship between words and pictures, so that picture books are the right media to enrich students' vocabulary. The research results collected also

show that picture books are effective and suitable for use in teaching reading and vocabulary because the illustrations support understanding words in a wider context.

c. Support for reading comprehension and meaning construction

Picture books help students' reading skills because they provide visual support that makes it easier for them to construct meaning from what they read. According to Ardiana Primasari & Muhamad Taufik Hidayat (2020) also shows that the use of picture story books as a medium for learning reading literacy contributes to increasing reading comprehension or reading comprehension for elementary school students.

Meanwhile, according to (Dwiyasari 2023) concluded that picture story books containing character education are also effective in improving students' reading abilities. This shows a positive relationship between visual illustrations and a more meaningful reading learning process.

Affective Impact and Student Engagement in Visual-Based Learning

a. The Influence on Motivation and Learning Interest

Visual-based learning through picture books has a positive impact on elementary school students' learning motivation. When texts are combined with illustrations, students do not merely read words but also see concrete representations of the story's content. This integration helps them understand meaning more easily and makes the learning process more enjoyable.

Visual literacy in English language learning helps students comprehend linguistic contexts more concretely, leading to more positive perceptions of the subject. Visual elements simplify materials that initially seem difficult and reduce students' feelings of intimidation. Similarly, Salsabila and Megawati (2024) found that the use of visual media enhances students' learning interest by making instruction more dynamic and less monotonous. In the EFL context, students often struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary. Through illustrations, they can infer word meanings from visual cues, which increases their confidence in understanding texts.

Furthermore, Harefa et al. (2025) report that regular reading of picture storybooks not only improves language skills but also fosters emotional engagement with the story. When students feel connected to the characters and plot, they become more enthusiastic in participating in learning activities. These findings indicate that visual media influence not only cognitive development but also affective aspects such as interest, enjoyment, and motivation.

b. Enhancement of Classroom Participation and Interaction

Picture books also play a significant role in increasing classroom participation. Illustrations serve as stimuli that encourage students to speak, ask questions, and engage in discussions. When teachers present images from a story, students share a common visual

reference, which makes it easier for them to express ideas despite limited language proficiency.

Idris and Luluatul (2026) found that the use of picture storybooks in English instruction promotes active student involvement, as learners can directly associate words with images. Activities such as retelling stories based on illustrations allow students to practice speaking without feeling overwhelmed by textual demands.

Dewi et al. (2025) explain that integrating visual and verbal elements enables students to construct meaning through dual channels—verbal and visual. This dual processing strengthens comprehension and encourages students to participate more confidently in classroom discussions. Additionally, Izzati et al. (2025) demonstrate that visual information supports deeper reading comprehension, including inferential understanding. Thus, visuals not only facilitate vocabulary comprehension but also enhance interaction and collaborative learning.

c. The Role of Visuals in Reducing Language Learning Anxiety

Language learning anxiety is common among EFL students, often caused by fear of making mistakes or misunderstanding sentences. Picture books help reduce such anxiety by providing visual support that assists comprehension.

Tahmida (2025) states that multimodal texts with visual support function as scaffolding, offering temporary assistance that facilitates students' understanding. With illustrations, students do not rely solely on written text, which makes them feel more secure when interpreting meaning.

Sharma and Rai (2025) further argue that the use of picture books creates a more comfortable and less intimidating learning environment. Students can guess word meanings through visual context, reducing their fear of making errors. Therefore, visuals serve not only as cognitive tools but also as psychological support that enhances students' confidence in learning English.

Implications and Challenges of Using Picture Books in Elementary Schools

a. Challenges in Selecting and Using Picture Books

Despite their benefits, the use of picture books presents several challenges. One major issue is selecting books appropriate to students' developmental levels.

Melani and Prahastiwi (2025) argue that books with overly complex vocabulary or illustrations may hinder comprehension rather than support it. Therefore, teachers must carefully choose materials with simple language and clear visuals. Also importance of cultural relevance in selecting picture books. If the story context is too distant from students' real-life experiences, comprehension and engagement may decline. Moreover, limited access to high-quality picture books in some schools remains a practical obstacle.

b. Teachers' Limited Competence in Visual Literacy

The effectiveness of visual-based learning largely depends on teachers' competence in utilizing visual media. Without adequate understanding of visual literacy, picture books may be treated merely as ordinary reading materials without deeper exploration.

Dewi (2025) highlights the need to develop clear visual literacy indicators to guide teachers in systematically integrating visual media into instruction. Teachers should be able to guide students in observing, interpreting, and discussing the meanings embedded in illustrations.

Lubis et al. (2024) also state that visual literacy requires the ability to analyze symbols and connect them to instructional contexts. Therefore, teacher training and professional development are essential to ensure effective implementation of visual-based learning.

c. Strategies for Optimizing the Use of Picture Books in EFL Learning

To maximize the benefits of picture books, teachers can apply interactive and multimodal instructional strategies. These include picture walks (observing illustrations before reading the text), image-based discussions, guided reading, and creative writing activities based on illustrations.

Carcamo and Pino (2025) recommend integrating visual and verbal elements simultaneously to strengthen memory retention and language comprehension. Additionally, Harefa et al. (2025) emphasize that consistent and structured use of picture storybooks contributes to continuous language development. Visual elements should not function merely as supplementary materials but as integral components of the English language learning process at the elementary level.

4. Conclusion

Based on the literature review, picture books are effective visual literacy media that support English language learning at the elementary school level. The integration of text and illustrations enables students to construct meaning through both visual and verbal channels, thereby strengthening vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. Visual support also functions as scaffolding, assisting students in understanding language structures and narrative contexts.

Beyond cognitive development, the use of picture books positively influences students' affective dimensions. Visual media enhance motivation and learning interest, promote active classroom participation, and reduce language learning anxiety. Thus, picture books serve not only as reading materials but also as multimodal instructional tools that facilitate comprehensive language acquisition.

However, their effectiveness depends on appropriate book selection and teachers' competence in managing visual literacy. Therefore, systematic instructional planning, culturally and linguistically relevant material selection, and professional development for teachers are necessary to ensure that picture books become an integral part of EFL instruction in elementary schools.

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