

# Enhancing Picture Book Reading for EFL Young Learners

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**Abstract:** The rapid development of globalization is increasingly attaching significance to English usage and enlightenment worldwide. Following the law of language learning, more and more countries are making efforts to help their citizens become literate in English since early years. Picture books have played a crucial part in developing children's emergent literacy skills. They provide children with fascinating illustrations, advancement in vocabularies, and meaningful sentence structures that go beyond the present contexts. However, picture book reading can be difficult for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) young learners due to the lack of English-speaking environment and language accumulation. With regard to this situation, this article analyzes and discusses the common debates on the print concept, phonological awareness, and vocabularies within an EFL early picture book reading setting to shed light on the practical direction in this field. Following this, this article coins relevant supporting strategies to ensure effective English picture book reading among children by developing supplementary activities, encouraging parent-child interaction, and applying multimedia materials. This article ends with a brief conclusion and questions that may need further exploration and research.

**Keywords:** Early literacy; EFL young learners; Picture book; Reading strategies

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## 1. Context and rationale

Reading is a complex and crucial activity for language learners, which involves both language-related and code-related skills<sup>[1]</sup>. Children's emergent literacy skills are decisive for their future reading and writing development as well as school readiness within an early childhood education setting. According to Kennedy<sup>[2]</sup>, many countries are now paying more attention to developing children's English reading skills. However, this task can be quite complicated. Learning to read in a foreign language context can be even more challenging because children lack both culture-related knowledge and language-related skills. According to Liu and Jackson<sup>[3]</sup>, more than one-third of EFL learners suffer from foreign language anxiety and are unwilling to use the language as a tool to communicate when it comes to English learning.

With their multifunctional features, picture books can be a good choice among English primers for EFL young learners. According to a study conducted by Shi<sup>[4]</sup>, the linguistic values, cognitive values, and culture awareness values of picture books can help teachers establish a safe and engaging environment. Even children without previous English learning experience are keen on exploring the story embedded in the words and pictures. According to Hsiu-Chih<sup>[5]</sup>, stories are a rich resource for EFL young learners to access various vocabularies and sentence structures in a memorable and meaningful context. It has been proven that children who receive reading input during their preschool years are often able to make faster progress in their reading and language development during school years<sup>[6]</sup>. Picture storybooks provide

children with the functional and communicative aspects of language learning and help EFL young learners read efficiently and confidently.

## 2. Key issues

There have been debates about picture book reading in the early years. In order to initiate practical strategies in leading EFL children to read picture books, three subject matters are discussed in this section.

- (1) Print concept: whether e-readers can replace picture books.
- (2) Phonological awareness (PA): the possible solution to addressing EFL young learners' reading difficulty.
- (3) Vocabularies: how can EFL children learn words effectively and reasonably.

### 2.1. Print Concept

With the rapid development of science and technology, the application of digital media in EFL early reading is becoming more extensive. Online websites and different applications provide EFL early readers with a variety of e-book resources that are both instructive and attractive. This brings about the debate of whether e-readers can replace picture books, creating a situation where EFL young learners would face screens instead of printed paper.

People may turn to digital display when searching for particular information. Digital display has its advantages in terms of information update and its ability to show motion graphics compared with fixed information on printed paper <sup>[7]</sup>. However, people generally prefer paper over digital display when they need to carry out in-depth reading as it allows them to turn the pages, adjust their position, or trace the text. Such habits or behaviors are relevant to print concepts fostered during reading in the early years.

Experiences with picture books immerse children in a setting where the print is a part of life. They will learn that words carry practical meaning in that they should read from left to right, and from up to down; that there are spaces between letters and words for people to read and comprehend; and that books should be open and their pages turned properly. Chang *et al.* <sup>[8]</sup> have demonstrated through their research that the knowledge of books and print organization, the understanding of print as a communication device, and the ability to make sense of words are all vital skills for young learners to become fluent readers. Print knowledge plays an essential part in children's reading and correlates with various aspects of emergent literacy skills. A better understanding of print concept during the preschool stage predicts an advantage in word recognition, spelling, and reading comprehension when children attend school.

Print referencing skills are determined by both the frequency of reading activities and attitudinal variables. Hence, early reading is closely relevant to young children's interest and preference, which are influenced by their parents to a large extent. Furthermore, researchers have proven a significant correlation between children's literacy interest and their print knowledge, suggesting that parents' attitudes are of initial importance and might influence children's attitudes and acquisition of print knowledge at this young age <sup>[9]</sup>.

### 2.2. Phonological awareness

While reading, children are expected to become familiar with alphabets and their sounds, read aloud consonants in initial positions and vowels in both initial and medial positions, as well as compare words for similar sounds. PA is the metalinguistic awareness of sound units in the speech stream, playing a crucial role in children's literacy development <sup>[10]</sup>. Another similar concept within this area is phonemic awareness. However, phonemic awareness is commonly considered a subset of phonological awareness as it stresses the awareness of individual sound at the word level.

A positive correlation between PA and children's ability to spell has been observed. According to Yang <sup>[11]</sup>, picture books help improve EFL young readers' PA and reading ability by drawing connections

between words, sounds, and meaning. Through constant reading, children become more sensitive to sounds and composition of sounds by virtue of PA, thus enhancing their word recognition skills. Sound units include rhyming word tasks, syllables, onset and rime segments, and individual phonemes. By acquiring PA, young learners are capable of sensing sounds at the word level. They learn to divide vocabularies into individual sounds and blend or manipulate each sound in a word.

PA also helps children in learning phonics successfully. Phonics connect sounds with written words and help children “break the code” to draw meaningful correlations between oral language and their written representations. Therefore, PA lays a foundation for learning phonics and code-related language, which is crucial for EFL learners to develop English reading skills successfully.

As a prerequisite, PA alone is not sufficient to nurture a fluent English reader. Moreover, PA has no significant contribution to measures of reading once a reader is able to read with fluency <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **2.3. Vocabularies**

Picture books are crucial in EFL classrooms to stimulate students’ reading interest and enhance students’ vocabulary acquisition. The significance of word knowledge development through reading has been explored in first language studies. It has also been proven that reading is a fundamental need for foreign language learners to build vocabularies. However, one problem EFL learners have is that they lack practical English usage scenarios and language input. More efforts need to be made by them to cultivate good reading habits and expand their vocabulary quantitatively.

Methods have been studied to help EFL young learners acquire vocabularies, including setting homework for children to copy or repeat words numerous times to memorize them. However, as people’s linguistic knowledge and understanding of children’s cognitive development expand, these methods have been criticized for being too mechanically repetitive and lacking cultural and linguistic context. People usually acquire language from the perspectives of meaning, form, and pronunciation. Copying vocabularies primarily deals with form. In order to acquire breadth and depth as well as receptive and productive knowledge of words and store them in long term memory, mechanical training, such as repeating and copying, is insufficient <sup>[13]</sup>.

Children need to learn vocabularies with a clear idea of when and how they are used, and picture books provide such an opportunity for EFL young learners to acquire word knowledge through reading. Research has proven that EFL learners need to read extensively in order to become independent vocabulary learners. In this process, it is crucial that learners make function-form connections from meaningful and contextualized input. According to the dual coding theory <sup>[14]</sup>, when children read picture books, accessing pictures and text simultaneously, they process information through both visual and verbal channels. The abundant illustrations in picture books add visual assistance to printed information, supporting EFL young learners’ comprehension through both textual and illustrated content as well as reinforcing the meanings of certain vocabularies. This process enables learners to gain initiative and autonomy in exploring new vocabularies and remembering them for future use.

## **3. Supporting strategies**

### **3.1. Developing supplementary activities**

As discussed above, the most evident obstacle for EFL young learners to become fluent and skillful in picture book reading is their lack of language accumulation and vocabulary knowledge. According to Sun <sup>[15]</sup>, reading picture books is necessary but inadequate to help build new vocabularies, implying that reading itself is not sufficient for learners to acquire vocabularies. The understanding of a story is dependent on what the learner does with a picture book and its vocabularies and sentences. A study <sup>[16]</sup> has shown that in order to gain fluency in English reading and better word acquisition and retention, EFL young learners need

to learn the essential vocabularies in an enhanced condition. This means that supplementary exercises and activities combined with picture book reading can be more effective than reading alone. According to Laufer and Rozovski-Roitblat <sup>[17]</sup>, the word-focused enhancement that supports EFL learners' picture book reading includes referring to dictionaries, doing word exercises, and having vocabulary instructions. In order to ensure successful EFL early reading, it is necessary and crucial to develop supplementary activities that are either vocabulary-focused or comprehension-focused to help children gain relevant language support.

Games, songs, and stories can also be incorporated into supplementary activities to stimulate EFL young learners' motivation and interest in reading. According to Chou <sup>[18]</sup>, unlike many English as first language (L1) and second language (L2) learners, EFL learners have limited opportunities to practice English outside classroom and find little immediate need or strong initiative to use English. Therefore, when teaching EFL young learners, their cognitive and emotional status should also be taken into consideration. According to McKay <sup>[19]</sup>, the attention span of early childhood learners is about 10 to 15 minutes. Therefore, auditory and visual stimuli are effective forms of language to attract and help EFL early learners maintain concentration during picture book reading.

Besides, given that physical games attract children's attention, language-rich activities that encourage doing, thinking, and moving would encourage children to guess and comprehend the context, use the language to express, and engage in interactions. In addition, activities such as games and songs benefit children's language learning and cultural understanding when they are integrated with the themes and backgrounds of the targeted picture books.

### **3.2. Encouraging parent-child interaction**

Parental involvement and parent-child interaction in a home environment may be more significant for children's language development compared to teaching within a school setting <sup>[20]</sup>. Children's learning and development are significantly influenced by their parents, given the intimate ties and time spent with their children within an attachment relationship. According to Vygotsky <sup>[21]</sup>, parents act as the "more knowledgeable others" ("MKO") during their interaction with their children and as scaffolds to guide their children's behaviors. This process is more evident and frequent in children's early years because children tend to internalize what their parents do before becoming independent.

Picture book reading in the early years is often interest-based learning. During this period, the learning outcome would be better when children are interested in the topic. Therefore, what can be more critical than nurturing their fluency in the language is to help them foster a positive attitude and keep them interested in picture books so that they will mature into lifelong readers in the long run. The three main factors – parent, children, and picture book –make up the basis for picture book reading. Parent-child interaction plays a significant role in boosting children's interest and motivation. Besides, the process of interaction questioning, answering, and paying attention deepens children's thoughts and comprehension of the content and encourages them to think critically.

During picture book reading, parent-child interaction also promotes children's language development from different perspectives, including word recognition, narrative skills, and oral expression. Evidence has shown that parent-child picture book reading experience enhances children's vocabulary acquisition and oral narrative skills <sup>[22]</sup>. It has also been shown that parents' behaviors such as talking about books, letting children choose their own books, and giving positive feedback can enhance children's language development. According to Häggström <sup>[23]</sup>, parents can integrate visual narratives in picture books by pointing to the corresponding elements in the picture. This helps children make sense of the meanings of vocabularies and texts.

When reading aloud or narrating stories to children, parents should use different voices, speed, and intonation. This encourages children to mimic and attempt to express their thoughts and feelings or tell a story in a similar way in the future. According to Greenhoot *et al.* [24], parents play a role not only in reading aloud the verbal narrative of a picture book, but also in supporting children's attention and understanding of the pictures. Parents who are fluent and experienced readers should help their children retell or comment on the narrative of the text or story as this will improve children's story-processing skills.

However, the promotion of parent-child interaction in EFL early picture book reading faces difficulties and obstacles. In many non-English-speaking countries, most parents do not have good English literacy due to social, educational, and economic reasons. Considering the tremendous impact of parents on children's language development, the English literacy development of EFL parents should be taken into special consideration. Kindergartens and schools should also pay more attention to giving parents lectures and meetings to help them keep them up with their children's English education and boost home-school collaboration.

### **3.3. Applying multimedia materials**

Based on the features of EFL readers and the non-English-speaking context, young learners need further assistance in picture book reading. Multimedia materials may be helpful to children's literacy development when combined with classic picture books. Not only do these materials attract learners' attention, but they also stimulate learners' motivation and interest in learning. Multimedia materials support children's effort to build connections between form, sound, and meaning in addition to facilitating children's acquisition and application of reading skills and strategies.

Digital pen is one of the most popular tools among the various technological devices developed to aid children's picture book reading by linking text with pronunciation. According to Choi *et al.* [25], some EFL parents prefer using digital pens with native speakers' recorded voices rather than their own when exposing their children to English because they are not fluent enough to provide proper guidance to their children in terms of pronunciation. The hybrid paper-digital interfaces through digital pens connect pens and picture books with the processing, memory, and multimodal capabilities of computers and supply multimedia materials that are attractive to young children. When the digital pen is tapped on a particular area of a picture book, the child has to read the vocabulary, text, or song. This can be especially beneficial to EFL early readers who are not yet fluent in reading. Children who use digital pens while reading English picture books tend to have higher levels of motivation and fluency compared with those who do not use them.

Oral reading fluency refers to the ability to read aloud a text accurately and quickly with the appropriate pacing and intonation [26]. With good oral fluency, readers can build a bridge between word recognition and text comprehension. However, oral reading frequency may be challenging for EFL readers to achieve without the help of digital devices when they come up with new words or phrases. Web-based or computer-based reading materials solve the problem by transferring reading scenarios from printed papers to screens and playing oral reading demonstration of texts or stories. The visual-audio resources offered by e-books also play an important part in keeping young readers interested by increasing human-technology interaction. However, although digital technology provides a flexible, portable, and convenient way for readers to develop interest and fluency in reading, it often causes concern among young readers. In view of their age, they have not fully developed the skills and self-discipline to cope with technology. According to a study conducted by Schugar *et al.* [27], children spend 43% of their e-book engagement time playing games rather than reading the targeted picture books or stories. Therefore, the application of digital technology like digital pens and e-readers should be guided, and parents should accompany their children during reading or at least at the very first stage of reading.

#### 4. Conclusion

During pre-school years, picture book reading is a promising learning activity for children to develop their language and literacy skills. Picture books assist EFL young readers in fostering their print concept and phonological awareness as well as expanding their vocabulary bank through interesting stories with explicit contexts for language use. However, there are obstacles that prevent EFL young learners from becoming fluent English readers. The non-English-speaking context is the cause for the lack of language accumulation and use scenarios. Moreover, their parents, who play a significant role in guiding early literacy, are also EFL speakers with limited language knowledge and poor pronunciation. Therefore, the following strategies are put forward to better support EFL young readers in picture book reading:

- (1) supplementary activities should be incorporated in the teaching process to attract children's attention and familiarize them with texts and vocabularies;
- (2) parent-child interaction should be encouraged during picture book reading to guide children's narration skills and critical thinking;
- (3) multimedia materials such as digital pens and e-books should be used to assist both parents and children in picture book reading and literacy development.

Through the discussion and analysis, more specific questions, such as how to enhance EFL parents' literacy skills and to what extent should digital devices be combined with printed picture books to develop children's literacy more effectively, are coined. These issues may need future studies to improve the current state of EFL young learners' picture book reading.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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